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# Counselling Psychologists' Lived Experiences of Engaging with Social Justice

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Counselling Psychologists' Lived Experiences of Engaging with Social Justice

by

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## **Abstract**

It has been emphasized repeatedly in the counselling psychology literature that the profession needs to re-commit to addressing the needs of the more vulnerable members of society and search for ways to action that include systemic and social change (Arthur & Collins, 2010). As such, counselling psychologists have been urged to integrate social justice into their professional identities and practice. The current study utilized descriptive phenomenological methodology to explore six counselling psychologists' lived experiences of engaging in social justice, in an effort to guide a professional identity for counselling psychology that embraces social justice and expand the definition of counselling psychology practice to explicitly include social justice action.

The results from this research highlight the profound calling and commitment that these counselling psychologists have for promoting and working towards social justice. Participants shared the many ways that this identification with social justice shapes their professional and personal lives, offering examples of how social justice oriented practice can look like within clinical, educational, and research roles. In exploring the experiences of these social justice leaders, it became clear that they have benefited greatly from this professional identification with social justice in the form of increased motivation, satisfaction, and meaning within their work. In order for counselling psychology to more fully embrace a social justice orientation, further research is needed that strengthens the connections between the work of counselling psychologists and issues of oppression, investigates the effectiveness of incorporating social justice practices, and exemplifies more concrete ways of integrating social justice within counselling psychology's professional identity and roles.

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## **Chapter One – Introduction**

Efforts to maintain best practices within a climate of continuous evolution and change are evident throughout the counselling psychology literature. Recurring themes include ensuring ethical practice, addressing social justice and diversity issues in counselling, and strengthening the professional identity of counselling psychologists (Herlihy & Dufrene, 2011). Experts in the field have emphasized that social justice is the most important emerging ethical issue in counselling that will need to be addressed over the next five years (Herlihy & Dufrene, 2011). Concerns about our demographically changing society, the effects of discrimination against various groups of people, and the potential for greater value clashes within our systems and organizations have prompted many psychologists to become more involved in advocacy efforts and social justice initiatives.

Scholars have also highlighted that social justice has been central to Canadian counselling psychology since the profession's inception (Palmer & Parish, 2008). There has been a call for counselling psychologists to reconnect to their roots in a more integrated way by fully infusing a social justice perspective into counselling psychology's theories, professional identity, and practice (Arthur & Collins, 2010; Sinacore, 2011). Support for this emphasis on social justice has been provided by several professional organizations and associations within the field, such as the Social Justice Chapter of the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association (CCPA), although not without controversy and debate. Social justice has quickly become a major movement within counselling psychology (Hunsaker, 2011). This dissertation explores the social justice movement within counselling psychology, the challenges to infusing social justice into the identity and work of counselling psychologists in Canada, and the ways leaders in the field have successfully adopted social justice as a central part of their professional identity and roles.

Although an introduction to this topic is provided here, a more thorough review of the relevant literature is provided in Chapter Two.

### **The Social Justice Movement**

The term social justice has been increasingly used in both the American and Canadian counselling psychology literature, although with multiple meanings and with reference to multiple practices. Although social justice is not a new concept in either country, its definition within the counselling psychology context remains unclear. In speaking about social justice, what is meant is not simply an equal distribution of material goods or social positions (Young, 1990). Instead, social justice is about taking a broad macro-view on society's major social positions and how these positions are systematically interconnected in creating vulnerabilities for domination and deprivation of groups of people (Young, 2011). Of particular relevance are issues of decision-making power, division of labour, and culture that are maintained through marginalization, exploitation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence (Young, 1990).

Most often, in the Canadian context, social justice refers to practices that help clients to challenge institutional and social barriers that impede personal, social, academic, or vocational development (Arthur & Collins, 2010). This kind of counselling practice can include advocacy with or on behalf of clients, collaboration, empowerment, and activism for social change. The overall aim is to minimize oppression and injustice in favour of equality, accessibility, and optimal developmental opportunities for all members of society. Social justice is about the elimination of any aspect of social organization and practice that contributes to domination or oppression (Young, 1990).

**Historical roots of social justice.** Historically, counselling psychology (especially in Canada) has distinguished itself from other specialty areas by focusing on activities that promote

the optimal development for individuals, groups, and systems (Young & Lalande, 2011). Our profession has also demonstrated a strong commitment to addressing major societal needs and the needs of those undergoing life transitions as a result of social changes (Sinacore, 2011). Counselling psychologists have taken an active leadership role in the areas of multicultural issues and prevention. This has led to the emergence of a multicultural approach to counselling that is grounded in a social and cultural context, and emphasizes prevention, advocacy, and social change (e.g., Sue, 2001; Vera & Speight, 2003).

Canadian scholars in particular have worked to establish culturally sensitive counselling services that are better suited for Canada's multicultural landscape (e.g., Arthur & Stewart, 2001; Collins & Arthur, 2010; Peavy, 2004). Several guidelines and models have been proposed for multicultural counselling (e.g., Arthur & Collins, 2010; Collins & Arthur, 2007), based on the multicultural competencies endorsed by American associations (Roysircar, Arredondo, Fuentes, Ponterotto, & Toporek, 2003; Sue, 2001; Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992). The multiculturalism movement in counselling, however, has been criticized for its lack of attention to issues of power, racism, sexism, homophobia, social injustice, and economic oppression (Moodley, 2007). In response, counselling psychologists have begun to embrace a social justice orientation to counselling, moving beyond the multicultural movement to ensure the voices and needs of historically marginalized groups are attended to in the research literature, within therapeutic practice, and in society at large (Arthur & Collins, 2013; Moodley, 2009; Sinacore et al., 2011).

**Social justice within Canada.** As highlighted in a recent special issue of the journal *Canadian Psychology*, counselling psychology in Canada holds a particular value base which includes attention to diversity, social justice, and advocacy, in addition to a commitment to

human development across the life span and an emphasis on wellness and prevention (Sinacore, 2011). Counselling psychology in Canada also includes a focus on how psychological concerns and challenges are situated in social contexts (Arthur & Collins, 2010; Sinacore, 2011). Despite overlapping theoretical boundaries and broadening scopes of practice, a focus on: a) multiculturalism, social justice, and advocacy, and b) health, wellness, and prevention continue to be central to the counselling psychology specialization in Canada (Sinacore, 2011).

This historical preference for strengths-based approaches and commitment to optimal human functioning through personal growth, mental wellness, and life-span development were essential to the establishment of a common definition of counselling psychology in Canada (Beatch et al., 2009). The definition aims to be inclusive of our emphasis on diversity, social justice, wellness, person-environment fit, psycho-education, addressing practical problems, navigating developmental life transitions, individual strengths, brief interventions, applied research, and a conceptualization of concerns in a context of growth and development (Bedi et al., 2011). However, while the official Canadian definition of counselling psychology (Beatch et al., 2009) refers explicitly to advocacy and the need to attend to the social and cultural contexts of counselling and clients' lives, it does not explicitly use the term 'social justice.' This is concerning, given that social justice is prevalent in Canadian counselling psychology literature (Arthur, Collins, McMahon, & Marshall, 2009; Young & Lalande, 2011), and has been recognized as an important characteristic of counselling psychology in Canada since its inception (Bedi et al., 2011).

**Fueling the social justice movement.** Mounting support for the social justice movement in counselling psychology has been provided by professional counselling associations (especially in the United States; US), prominent scholarly journals, and key leaders in the field (Hunsaker,

2011). Professional competencies have been proposed, special issues of counselling journals have been dedicated, and numerous presentations and formal keynote addresses have emphasized the importance of social justice within counselling psychology (Hunsaker, 2011). Leaders in our field have recently implored counselling psychologists to “value a social justice orientation and integrate it into every aspect of training, research, and practice” (Sinacore, 2011, p. 246). This recent focus on a social justice counselling perspective challenges counselling psychologists of all theoretical orientations to reconsider how the profession is viewed and practiced (Ratts, 2009). Counselling psychologists have been strongly encouraged to consider the role that the profession plays within the dominant culture (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2003), to reconcile the role of helper with that of social-change agent (Vera & Speight, 2003), and to advocate for macro-level, pro-social systemic change on behalf of clients and those suffering oppression and marginalization (Herlihy & Dufrene, 2011; Moe, Perera-Dilts, & Sepulveda, 2010; Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2003; Roysircar, 2009). Furthermore, social justice has been repeatedly proposed as the overarching umbrella that should define counselling psychology’s professional identity and guide future developments in the profession (Sue & Sue, 2008; Young & Lalande, 2011).

### **Rationale for Social Justice in Counselling Psychology**

As discussed, counselling psychology has historically been committed to prevention, multiculturalism, and social justice, with many counselling psychologists still embracing these attitudes and values (Sinacore, 2011; Vera & Speight, 2003). Social justice is well-aligned with the multiculturalism movement that has made great strides in the counselling psychology profession, as it takes a clear position on society’s injustices related to such cultural dimensions as race, sexuality, gender, and religion (D’Andrea & Heckman, 2008; Vera & Speight, 2003).

More recently, there has been a focus on the intersections of people's cultural identities and how people are positioned in Canadian society (Collins, 2010). For example, gender, race, and social class may all be salient dimensions of how someone is socially and economically positioned. Multiculturally competent counselling psychologists are often more aware that those with less power in society experience a greater quantity of life's difficulties, and therefore may be more predisposed to mental health concerns than those from the dominant race, ethnicity, age, level of ability, sexual orientation, gender, or social class (Eriksen & Kress, 2006). This awareness extends to realizing that those from non-dominant cultural groups have access to fewer of society's resources, often leading to delays in acquiring help; this delay in turn may allow problems to more frequently develop into full-blown mental health diagnoses with greater intensity (Eriksen & Kress, 2006).

**Contextual influences on mental health.** As highlighted in the American literature, issues of social justice are integral to counselling psychology because of the reality that clients do not exist as individuals independent of society, culture, and context (Crethar & Ratts, 2008). This movement towards incorporating social justice into counselling psychology identity and practice is a response to growing awareness of the connections between experiences of oppression and mental health (Chang, Crethar, & Ratts, 2010). Several large-scale studies have documented the connection between psychological disorders and environmental stressors such as unemployment, poverty, poor living conditions, and minority status (Jackson, 2011; Poteat, Mereish, DiGiovanni, & Koenig, 2011). Counsellors' relational, multicultural, and social justice competencies need to be grounded in this awareness and knowledge of the ways cultural oppression, marginalization, and social injustices lead to feelings of isolation, shame, and humiliation amongst persons from devalued groups (Comstock et al., 2008). Several scholars and

researchers in the field have also highlighted the way relational disconnections – often experienced by marginalized groups due to power differentials, gender role socialization, racism, cultural oppression, health disparities, and heterosexism – can lead to a sense of condemned isolation (Hartling, Rosen, Walker, & Jordan, 2000; Jordan 2000; Miller & Striver, 1997). Notably, these ongoing experiences of isolation can lead not only to the disempowerment of many members of oppressed groups, but also to a higher risk of physical, emotional and psychological difficulties (Comstock et al., 2008; Miller & Striver, 1997). Counselling psychologists need to understand the ways political, social, and economic forces contribute to many of the mental health concerns experienced by clients.

### **Role of Social Justice in Counselling Psychology**

Embracing a social justice perspective and integrating it into counselling psychology's professional identity and practices is an acknowledgement of these issues of power, privilege, and oppression (Fouad, Gerstein, & Toporek, 2006). A social justice counselling approach includes the use of social advocacy and activism as a means to address inequitable social, political, and economic conditions that impede on the academic, career, social, and personal development of individuals, families, and communities (Ratts, 2009). A commitment to infusing social justice into counselling may be the best option for counselling psychologists, given the fact that traditional mental health systems have struggled to effectively reduce the effects of debilitating social and emotional distress within diverse populations (Hage, 2003).

The sense of disconnection, isolation, and disempowerment many clients experience can be exacerbated when counsellors fail to acknowledge the contextual and social factors that contribute to clients' problems (Hartling et al., 2000). Social justice activists emphasize that counselling from any perspective that places all responsibility for change on the individual lacks



sufficient cultural sensitivity (Chang et al., 2010, p. 83) since it functions from the presumption that change occurs within the individual regardless of environment. As such, there is increasing understanding that helping approaches focused entirely on individuals without regard for environmental factors may not be in the best interest of clients served (Chang et al., 2010; Prilleltensky, 1989). This growing perspective has further highlighted the tensions between a desire for the profession to continue to align with the philosophical orientation of human development, prevention, and wellness, and the outside pressures to increase knowledge of the medical model that focuses on pathology and remedial interventions (Gale & Austin, 2003; Mellin, Hunt, & Nichols, 2011).

In order for the work of counselling psychologists to be fully effective, they must address the sources of psychological distress at the cultural and institutional levels (Baluch, Pieterse, & Bolden, 2004). Counsellors cannot continue to focus their attention and energies exclusively on the individual internal self while ignoring systemic, institutional, and cultural patterns and influences. Researchers have found that students graduating from counselling psychology programs, along with practicing professionals in the field, are increasingly realizing that counselling and social justice are vitally linked (Beer, Spanierman, Greene, & Todd, 2012; Chang et al., 2010). Counselling psychologists are being urged to view both individuals and social systems as clients, and to reconceptualise offices to include clients' homes, schools, neighbourhoods, and larger communities (Ratts, 2009).

**Critiques of the social justice movement.** Although strong arguments have been made to support the incorporation of social justice into counselling psychology, a relative lack of critical appraisal of this movement has caused many professionals in the field to hesitate. Professionals in the counselling psychology field have raised concerns about the lack of

empirical support for the effectiveness of multicultural and social justice approaches to counselling. Some have also asserted that there is little research evidence for the claims that a culture and social justice infused counselling approach is in the best interest of clients (Hunsaker, 2011; Smith, Reynolds, & Rovnak, 2009). Moreover, some scholars have expressed that a focus on social conditions rather than on individuals places entire minority groups as the central concern of counselling psychology (Hunsaker, 2011). It has been argued that the social justice movement is in need of in-depth examination, as little critical feedback has been provided to inform the adoption of social justice within counselling psychology (Smith et al., 2009).

Overall, these criticisms raise important points that require clarification from social justice activists. Specifically, promoters of the social justice movement need to clarify what social justice engagement can look like in counselling education, practice, and research to address concerns about narrow political allegiances and requirements of activism. More research that investigates the effectiveness of multicultural and social justice perspectives in counselling is warranted. Moreover, there needs to be greater acknowledgement of the “critical, controversial, [and] political” (Speight & Vera, 2004, p. 110) nature of a social justice agenda, which may be a major departure from traditional counselling psychology identity and practice. Further exploration of how social justice can be infused into the professional identity of counselling psychologists could provide the profession with a way of achieving integrity between professional identity, roles, and practices that include social justice. Nonetheless, while these criticisms are valuable for informing the future of social justice in counselling psychology, they have been insufficient in dissuading the profession from exploring a social justice agenda.

## **Barriers to Social Justice Practice**

Despite a strong rationale for infusing social justice into counselling psychology and the potential for enhancing psychological practice, there appears to be resistance to addressing social justice as an issue relevant to the profession of counselling psychology (Arredondo, Tovar-Blank, & Parham, 2008; Hays, Dean, & Chang, 2007; Hunsaker, 2011). Professionals have expressed a desire to have proponents of social justice explain in greater detail how to implement advocacy into counselling psychologists' counselling practice, education, and research more regularly (Moe et al., 2010; Nelson-Jones, 2002; Weinrach & Thomas, 2004). It may be challenging for counselling psychologists to embrace a professional identity infused with social justice, since few practical models for implementing this orientation into counselling practice have been developed (Mellin et al., 2011). The challenge for counselling psychology, then, is to move past the political arguments of the left or right that sometimes come with the social justice discourse.

Instead, counselling psychology in Canada needs to find the conceptual and methodological grounding for the principles that underline social justice (Young & Lalonde, 2011). Counselling psychologists need to embrace a more holistic perspective on client problems and the change process, engage in research initiatives that give voice to marginalized groups of people, and commit to equipping future professionals with the necessary skills, knowledge, and attitudes for addressing social justice issues.

## **The Aims of the Current Study**

As previously discussed, there is some resistance to addressing social justice as an issue relevant to the profession of counselling psychology (Arredondo et al., 2008; Hays et al., 2007). There is also a desire to have proponents of social justice and multicultural theory explain in

greater detail how to infuse social justice into counselling psychologists' regular counselling practice (Nelson-Jones, 2002; Moe et al., 2010; Weinrach & Thomas, 2004). By illustrating examples of how social justice can be infused into our Canadian professional identity and practice, we can provide Canadian counselling psychology practitioners, educators, researchers, and students with a broadened view of counselling psychology and a model for integrating social justice into their counselling work.

In order to provide these much-needed examples of how social justice can be successfully integrated into counselling psychology's professional identity and professional practice, the current research project has been guided by the following research question: *What is counselling psychologists' lived experience of actively engaging in social justice?* More specifically, this study has investigated how Canada's counselling psychology social justice leaders first became interested and engaged in social justice, the process of incorporating social justice into counselling psychologists' professional identity, what meaning is made of social justice, what emotionality social justice has for these counselling psychologists, and what social justice engagement looks like in counselling psychology practice. Providing such insights offers important implications for research, practice, and training within the Canadian field of counselling psychology by equipping our profession to use such knowledge to positively impact communities and larger social systems. Perhaps more importantly, by identifying basic processes associated with the development of social justice interest and commitment, we can begin to clarify the ways in which social justice can guide the formation of a cohesive and unique professional identity for counselling psychologists in Canada.

## **Phenomenological Methodology**

The qualitative research paradigm offers researchers an opportunity to develop an idiographic understanding of participants, uncovering what it means to them, within their social reality, to live within a particular condition or situation (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). The current study is grounded in this paradigm and informed by the philosophical and methodological considerations of phenomenology. The central concern of phenomenological research is a return to embodied, experiential meaning, and to seek fresh, complex, vivid descriptions of a human experience in all its complexities as it is concretely lived (Finlay, 2009). Phenomenologists aim to offer an account of space, time, and the world as we *live* them, giving a direct description of our experience without accounting for psychological origins or causal explanations often provided by scientists, historians, or sociologists (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). In other words, phenomenological research aims to capture subjective “insider” meaning and the world as directly and subjectively experienced in everyday life, as distinguished from the objective physical world of the natural sciences (Finlay, 2009).

Descriptive phenomenology, a specific type of phenomenological research, is said to stimulate our perception of lived experience while emphasizing the richness, breadth, and depth of those experiences (Spiegelberg, 1975). Although there are several specific step-by-step guidelines available for conducting phenomenological research, the methods of descriptive phenomenology proposed by Giorgi were used in the current study. Giorgi’s (1997) descriptive method can be summarized as involving three interlocking components: a) the phenomenological reduction; b) description; and c) the search for essences (Finlay, 2009). An important part of Giorgi’s methodology involves the adoption of an open and active attitude, with particular attention towards restraining pre-understandings (Finlay, 2008). This modified form of

bracketing is about adopting an attitude of empathic openness (Finlay, 2008) and is central in Giorgi's research approach and informing all of his specific steps to conducting descriptive phenomenological research. Further discussion of phenomenology, Giorgi's methodology, and the steps and procedures utilized in this study are discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three.

### **Summary**

As the Canadian field of counselling psychology works to establish a unique and coherent professional identity grounded in counselling psychology's core values and official Canadian Psychological Association (CPA) definition, it is important that researchers investigate the ways in which social justice can be integrated as a central aspect of counselling psychology's unique professional identity and can be applied in counselling psychology practice. In order to contribute to this effort for Canadian counselling psychology to embrace its traditional roots in prevention and social justice, the proposed study will address the following research question:

*What is counselling psychologists' lived experience of actively engaging with social justice?*

The results of this descriptive phenomenological research project are outlined in detail in Chapter Four, where the common themes and features of active engagement in social justice are highlighted and described. Further, Chapter Five offers a thorough discussion of the limitations of these results, along with an exploration of how these results challenge and add to the current literature on this topic. Finally, the implications for education, research and clinical practice are also discussed, in an effort to contribute to the continued development of the counselling psychology profession in Canada.

By providing examples of how counselling psychologists successfully integrate social justice into their professional identities and engage in social justice work within their counselling roles, the path of social justice can be further illuminated, allowing counselling psychology in

Canada to more comfortably and confidently walk this path. It is hoped that this research study will significantly add to the growing Canadian body of theoretical literature on social justice, provide some evidence to guide a professional identity for counselling psychology that embraces social justice, and expand the definition of counselling psychology practice to explicitly include social justice work.

## **Chapter Two – Literature Review**

### **The Identity of Counselling Psychology**

Numerous studies over the past half-century have examined the distinctiveness of counselling psychology and the services offered by counselling psychologists, with much of this research completed in the US (e.g., Fitzgerald & Osipow, 1986; Fretz, 1977, 1982; Goldschmitt, Tipton, & Wiggins, 1981; Krauskopf, Thoreson, & McAleer, 1973; Samler, 1964; Watkins, Lopez, Campbell, & Himmell, 1986; Yamamoto, 1963). The professional identity of counselling psychologists has long been a topic of discussion as the field has continued to evolve (Calley & Hawley, 2008; Gale & Austin, 2003; Leinbaugh, Hazier, Bradley, & Hill, 2003; Ramsey, Cavallaro, Kiselica, & Zila, 2002). As such, the primarily American counselling psychology literature is full of different perspectives that have advised, challenged, predicted, and introspected on the identity of counselling psychologists (Baluch et al., 2004; Carter, 2003; Fretz, 1980; Howard, 1992; Lent, 1990; Neimeyer & Diamond, 2001). More recently, efforts have been made in Canada to clearly define the profession, its members, and the services offered by counselling psychologists (Beatch et al., 2009). While these ongoing American and Canadian discussions have helped to further unify the profession in each country, discerning a distinct and coherent professional identity for counselling psychologists in the Canadian context continues to be a challenge.

In order to better understand the complexity that currently exists within the professional identity of counselling psychologists in Canada, we need to discuss the challenges to discerning a unified identity, the range of professional identities that are attributed to counselling professionals, and the factors influencing the professional identity development of counselling psychology in particular. Particular attention will be given to the CPA accepted definition of



counselling psychology (Bedi et al., 2011), and the struggle of trying to generate a clear, cohesive and unique definition of counselling psychology in Canada. The main purpose of this discussion will be to highlight the need for further integration of social justice into the definition, professional identity, and practice of counselling psychology in Canada. Finally, a proposed research study will be outlined, aimed at exploring how counselling psychologists can further ground their professional identity and practice in social justice.

### **Challenges in Defining our Identity**

As a distinct entity, counselling psychology in Canada has historical roots in the United States (US), where changes and new developments in professional identity may have originated and been more influential. It is important to recognize that our Canadian counselling psychology profession continues to be influenced by developments in infrastructure and professional identity occurring in the US. However, Canadian counselling psychology is developing within a unique cultural context, which differentiates our evolutionary process from our American counterparts.

In general, professional identity has been attributed to a number of different factors, including the values held by individuals within the profession, historical factors influencing the profession, theoretical orientations, differentiating features that separate one profession from other mental health professions, the focus of research efforts, and the scope of professional activities (Calley & Hawley, 2008). Unfortunately, there have been many changes within the larger counselling field, both in the US and in Canada, that have contributed to confusion about the unique role of counselling psychologists in each country. In the US, these changes include the variety of places in which counselling psychologists offer services, the decline of traditional fee-for-service activities, the influence of accountability in managed care systems, and the emphasis on training and licensure of Master's level counselling professionals (Hage, 2003). In

our discussion, we will take a closer look at changes relevant to the developmental process of counselling psychology in Canada.

**Counselling versus counselling psychology.** The challenge of establishing a clear and cohesive professional identity for counselling psychology in Canada may be in part because of the shared knowledge base with other branches of psychology, social work, family therapy, psychiatry, and in particular, professional counselling. Often professionals with training in these various disciplines can hold similar job titles (such as “mental health therapist”), fill equivalent roles, and offer overlapping services, making it difficult to distinguish between their respective areas of expertise. Additionally, many consumers of mental health services are not fully aware of their helper’s specialty (Gazzola & Smith, 2007).

Historically, this blurring of professional lines has been particularly problematic when distinguishing between counselling psychology professionals and counselling professionals. It seems that in comparison to our American counterparts, there has been greater overlap between counsellors and counselling psychologists in Canada (Young, 2009). Shared historical roots, professional values, roles, theories, and areas of practice have made it difficult to differentiate between these two disciplines in Canada. This confusion is evident in many practical settings, where professionals with identical training may have differing professional affiliations, or where professionals with dissimilar training may have identical job titles and descriptions (Gazzola & Smith, 2007).

Currently, there are two major national organizations that influence the counselling psychology profession in Canada: the CPA and the CCPA. Counselling psychologists in Canada can be affiliated with either or both of these organization, with those who identify more with psychology having membership in CPA and those who identify more with counselling having

membership in CCPA (Lalande, 2004). It could be argued, however, that membership alone is not always reflective of professional identity, as many counselling psychologists are members of both organizations. This situation suggests that there continues to be a need to reaffirm the unique essence of counselling psychology in Canada and better align our identity and practices with a coherent view.

This confusion is also evident in the research literature. Often authors have used terms such as “counsellor,” “professional counsellor,” and “counselling psychologist” interchangeably to describe practitioners trained in different programs and belonging to a range of professional organizations. As such, it can be difficult to tease apart literature that pertains specifically to counselling psychology from literature discussing counselling psychologists under a larger umbrella of “professional counselling.” Further, since the majority of counselling psychology and/or social justice journals are based in the US, many Canadian and international authors end up publishing in American journals, making it difficult to discern which articles pertain specifically to a Canadian context. Given this intertwined research literature, I will distinguish as thoroughly as possible between literature specific to Canadian counselling psychology and literature that combines counselling psychologists with other counselling professionals within a broader international context.

In addition, tension between a unified larger counselling professional identity and identity based on area of specialization or training is also evident within the larger Canadian counselling field (Mellin et al., 2011). Many professional counsellors both in the US and in Canada, including some counselling psychologists, identify themselves primarily by their specialization, and as a result, embrace an identity focused on their role (e.g., career counselling), the population served (e.g., addictions, clinical mental health, rehabilitation), or the setting in which counselling

occurs (e.g., universities, schools) (Myers, Sweeney & White, 2002). Although it is seemingly impossible to characterize “the typical counsellor” and instead, it appears as if diversity itself has become a defining characteristic of the larger counselling profession (Gazzola & Smith, 2007), this is not necessarily the case for counselling psychology specifically. Whether the larger group of counselling professions is viewed as one unified profession with a singular professional identity, or as a group of independent professions with separate identities categorized under a counselling “umbrella” was until recently an unresolved philosophical debate underlying the discussions of professional identity (Mellin et al., 2011).

The issue of counsellor identity has been vigorously debated in the American literature in the past five years, with the nature of the professions making it difficult to agree on the precise identity factors that distinguish counselling psychologists from counsellors and other helping professionals (Hansen, 2010). In Canada, it seems reasonable to speculate that in a large and diverse “umbrella” counselling profession, where members assume so many different roles and hold varying training backgrounds, it can be challenging to develop a shared sense of who we are, what we do, and how we do it (Gazzola & Smith, 2007). Rather, it may be easier for counselling psychologists to identify themselves based on a clear professional definition and specialization than to try to adopt an unclear and divided overarching counselling professional identity. These various factors, along with the range of social, economic, and professional changes that we are currently experiencing, present a significant challenge to the counselling psychology profession in Canada.

**Searching for a place of specialty.** In addition to the blurring of professional boundaries between counselling psychologists and counsellors, other factors have also contributed to greater confusion about counselling psychologists’ professional identity in

Canada. One such factor has been disagreement with regards to the defining values and guiding principles for counselling psychology. As highlighted in the American literature, there has been a clear tension between a desire for the profession to continue to align with the philosophical orientation of human development, prevention, and wellness, and the practice realities that indicate a need to increase knowledge of the medical model and a focus on pathology (Gale & Austin, 2003; Mellin et al., 2011). In recent years, the identity of counselling psychologists in the US has focused less on issues of health and adaptation with social systems and concerned itself more with the etiology of pathology (Hage, 2003). As this tension grew, there appeared to be two proposed paths: a one-on-one, remedial, and medically oriented approach largely circumscribed by the growing managed care environment, and an approach grounded in the social and cultural context emphasizing prevention, advocacy, and social change (e.g., Sue, 2001; Vera & Speight, 2003). Independent of counselling psychology's roots in holism, prevention, and a developmental perspective, the American counselling psychology profession has increasingly been experiencing pressure on various fronts to embrace the medical practice model (Chwalisz, 2003). These tensions are discussed here in recognition of their influence on the development of counselling psychology in Canada.

Within the Canadian medical model, services are conceptualized as remedial and presenting issues are described in pathological terms, both of which are generally considered antithetical to counselling psychology's traditional practice model (Gazzola & Smith, 2007). Mrdjenovich and Moore (2004) found that counselling psychologists working in health care settings show a decrease in identification with more traditional counselling psychology values and, instead, tend to adopt some of the professional values of members of other disciplines with which they practice. While in some ways, this versatility is a defining feature of the profession

both in Canada and the US, it also exposes a fundamental weakness: counselling psychologists are drifting away from some of their core professional values (Gazzola, Smith, King-Andrews, & Kearney, 2010).

While one path privileges the immediate health care needs of individuals, the other path advocates for social change and has the potential to catalyze the counselling psychology profession into new areas of research and practice (Gazzola et al., 2010). In many ways, perhaps especially in the US, the first path was the path of least resistance since the field of counselling psychology had already started moving in this medical direction, and continued advancement towards a medical model of practice would mean closer alliances with both the medical establishment and clinical psychology, along with a perceived increase in status for the field of counselling psychology (Hage, 2003). The second path, or the “road less traveled by” (Hage, 2003, p. 556), would involve the more difficult task of confronting pressures from funding agencies and the larger health care system in order to challenge the status quo, rather than simply adapting to the medical model of service provision. This is true for counselling psychologists both in Canada and the US. This resistance also would require facing the enormous complexity surrounding issues of oppression and discrimination, as well as the demands of tailoring our intervention strategies to diverse issues and cultural contexts.

Ultimately, further integration of science and practice has allowed counselling psychology to strengthen our training, research, and interventions, allowing for better implementation of the scientist-practitioner model. A swing too far towards the evidence-based worldview, however, has the potential to move both American and Canadian counselling psychology fields further away from its respective roots as a specialty (Hage, 2003). In Canada, these roots include a particular commitment to prevention, multiculturalism, social justice, and a

developmental perspective. In order to find a place of specialty within the Canadian mental health system, counselling psychology in Canada needed to be defined from within in order to establish a unique and coherent professional identity for counselling psychologists.

### **The Evolution of our Professional Identity**

The identity of counselling psychology in Canada has evolved through a number of defining moments over time. One of the first steps in this evolution was the establishment of the Counselling Psychology section (SCP) of the CPA in 1987 (Young & Lalande, 2011).

Membership in the SCP has grown to 391 members, which is reflected in the increased number of counselling psychologists who are partaking in the CPA annual conventions (CPA, 2012). The SCP has been integral in shaping the identity of the counselling psychology profession in Canada due to its membership, accreditation activities, and provision of meetings that create opportunities for counselling psychologists and counselling psychology students to come together.

Another important aspect of counselling psychology's evolution in Canada has been the accreditation of doctoral training programs, which began in 2000. Throughout the process of establishing accreditation, specific procedures and criteria for counselling psychology training programs and internships have been adopted. Most recently, revised accreditation criteria that reflect issues and developments specific to counselling psychology were launched in June 2011, helping to align standards of training with the newly adopted definition of counselling psychology (Young & Lalande, 2011). These accreditation developments provide a basis for high quality doctoral training and facilitate the recognition of counselling psychology as a unique profession in Canada. Unfortunately, there are only five doctoral programs accredited in counselling psychology in Canada, and only three accredited doctoral internships available to

doctoral counselling students (Haverkamp, Robertson, Cairns, & Bedi, 2011). This lack of accredited training opportunities for counselling psychologists can make it difficult to develop students' Canadian counselling psychology identity, as there can be gaps between their training programs or internship placements and the values included in the definition or accreditation standards for counselling psychology.

Peer-reviewed publication outlets for counselling psychology are also greatly lacking (Sinacore, 2011). Counselling psychology researchers and scholars are left to publish in journals that are not specific to counselling psychology or in international journals, which obscure the profile and visibility of our profession in Canada. Without a unified place for counselling psychologists to have a voice in shaping and furthering the profession, establishing a coherent and unique professional identity will continue to be a challenge.

**Defining counselling psychology.** Generating a common definition for counselling psychology in Canada was seen as an important step towards clarifying our professional identity for several reasons. As highlighted by Beatch et al. (2009), a common definition would reduce the confusion between counselling psychology and other helping professions, guide the information clients receive when consenting to counselling with a counselling psychologist, inform the competencies and training of counselling psychologists, and ensure the preservation of counselling psychology's professional scope of practice. With an uncertain professional definition and identity, there was growing interest from within the profession to establish a clear and unique definition for counselling psychology in Canada (Young & Lalande, 2011).

An examination of 30 years of counselling psychology literature by an Executive Committee for a Canadian Understanding of Counselling Psychology yielded diverse definitions reflective of a dynamic and still-evolving discipline (Beatch et al., 2009; Bedi et al., 2011). The



work completed by this task force reinforced the notion that many counselling psychologists remain committed to a strong theoretical orientation towards growth and wellness, rather than disorder or disease (Bedi et al., 2011). Counselling psychology in Canada holds a particular value base, which includes a commitment to human development across the life span, attention to diversity, social justice, and advocacy, and an emphasis on wellness and prevention (Sinacore, 2011). Additionally, Canada's counselling psychology also includes a focus on how psychological concerns and challenges are situated in social contexts, and an awareness of the psychological and existential role of career and work in individuals' lives (Sinacore, 2011).

As such, despite overlapping boundaries and broadening practice, three domains continue to be considered central to the counselling psychology specialization: a) multiculturalism, social justice, and advocacy, b) health, wellness, and prevention, and c) career development (Sinacore, 2011). This historical preference for strengths-based approaches and commitment to optimal human functioning through personal growth, mental wellness, and life-span development were central to establishment of a common definition of counselling psychology in Canada. In 2009, the Executive Committee generated the following definition of counselling psychology in Canada, which was then endorsed by the Counselling Psychology section of the CPA and the CPA Board of Directors (Bedi et al., 2011, p. 130):

Counselling psychology is a broad specialization within professional psychology concerned with using psychological principles to enhance and promote the positive growth, well-being, and mental health of individuals, families, groups, and the broader community. Counselling psychologists bring a collaborative, developmental, multicultural and wellness perspective to their research and practice. They work with many types of individuals, including those experiencing distress and difficulties associated with life events and transitions, decision making, work/career/education, family and social relationships, and mental health and physical health concerns. In addition to remediation, counselling psychologists engage in prevention, psycho-education and advocacy. The research and professional domain of counselling psychology overlaps with that of other professions such as clinical psychology, industrial/organisational psychology, and mental health counselling.

Counselling psychology adheres to an integrated set of core values: (a) counselling psychologists view individuals as agents of their own change and regard an individual's pre-existing strengths and resourcefulness and the therapeutic relationship as central mechanisms of change; (b) the counselling psychology approach to assessment, diagnosis, and case conceptualisation is holistic and client-centred; and it directs attention to social context and culture when considering internal factors, individual differences, and familial/systemic influences; and (c) the counselling process is pursued with sensitivity to diverse sociocultural factors unique to each individual.

Counselling psychologists practice in diverse settings and employ a variety of evidence-based and theoretical approaches grounded in psychological knowledge. In public agencies, independent practices, schools, universities, health care settings, and corporations, counselling psychologists work in collaboration with individuals to ameliorate distress, facilitate well-being, and maximize effective life functioning. Research and practice are viewed as mutually informative and counselling psychologists conduct research in a wide range of areas, including those of the counselling relationship and other psychotherapeutic processes, the multicultural dimensions of psychology, and the roles of work and mental health in optimal functioning. Canadian counselling psychologists are especially concerned with culturally appropriate methods suitable for investigating both emic and etic perspectives on human behaviour, and promote the use of research methods drawn from diverse epistemological perspectives, including innovative developments in qualitative and quantitative research.

The definition of counselling psychology in Canada cited above is presented (Beatch et al., 2009; Bedi et al., 2011) as being reflective of the history of counselling psychology in Canada. The members of the task-force assert that the definition is inclusive of our emphasis on diversity, social justice, wellness, person-environment fit, psycho-education, addressing practical problems, navigating developmental life transitions, individual strengths, brief interventions, applied research, and a conceptualization of concerns in a context of growth and development (Bedi et al., 2011). It should be noted, however, that while the establishment of an official CPA definition of counselling psychology is seen as solidifying the foundation of the profession in Canada (Sinacore, 2011), it is only one of several necessary steps towards establishing a coherent professional identity for counselling psychologists.

**Furthering our professional identity.** In continuing efforts to establish a counselling psychology professional identity, the Inaugural Canadian Counselling Psychology Conference was held in Montreal, Quebec in November of 2010, which marked an important state of our profession's evolution. In reflecting on the state of counselling psychology in Canada, participants were encouraged to consider directions for growth. The suggested areas for consideration were: a) professional identity, b) research and scientific issues, c) career development, d) multicultural counselling, social justice, and advocacy, d) training and supervision, and e) wellness and prevention (Young & Lalande, 2011). It was recognized that the future of counselling psychology in Canada will be shaped by efforts to expand and address these relevant topics.

It is clear from the current state of counselling psychology in Canada that while we have come a long way in establishing our profession and professional identity, there is still some way to go. The importance of continued efforts towards developing and solidifying an infrastructure wherein Canadian counselling psychology can continue to thrive and grow is undeniable (Sinacore, 2011). This development would need to occur not only in terms of training and internship opportunities, but also in publication outlets and conferences. Furthermore, while the official definition of counselling psychology helps to set a stage of professional identity development, many of the values unique to counselling psychology continue to be under-emphasized in various aspects of our research, education, and practice. In particular, social justice – a core aspect of counselling psychology in Canada – appears to be requiring more attention if we are to ground our professional identity in the values that define us.

While the official CPA definition of counselling psychology (Beatch et al., 2009) refers explicitly to advocacy and the need to attend to the social and cultural contexts of counselling

and clients' lives, it does not explicitly use the term 'social justice.' This is concerning, given that social justice is prevalent in Canadian counselling psychology literature (Young & Lalande, 2011), and has been recognized as an important characteristic of counselling psychology in Canada since its inception (Bedi et al., 2011). As highlighted in the recent special issue of *Canadian Psychology*, while social justice has not yet been uniformly defined, it does push counselling psychology to be more explicit about its values and political ideologies (Young & Lalande, 2011). The challenge for counselling psychology, however, is not to get mired in the political arguments of the left or right that sometimes come with the social justice discourse. Instead, counselling psychology in Canada needs to find the conceptual and methodological grounding for the principles that underline social justice (Young & Lalande, 2011) and to continue to elaborate how social justice might become "the overarching umbrella" that guides our profession. In establishing a coherent and unique professional identity for counselling psychology in Canada, we must be aware of our own prejudices, advocate with and on behalf of our clients, and take steps to facilitate social change. Leaders in our field have recently implored counselling psychologists to "value a social justice orientation and integrate it into every aspect of training, research, and practice" (Sinacore, 2011, p. 246).

### **Understanding the Social Justice Practice Model**

The professional identity of counselling psychologists in Canada needs to be expanded and refined to better integrate social justice and advocacy. Once again, this discussion needs to include an understanding of the American context, which preceded and influences the push for social justice in Canada. The term social justice has been increasingly used in the American and Canadian counselling psychology literature, although with multiple meanings and with reference to multiple practices. While social justice is not a new concept, both in the US and in Canada, its

definition within the counselling psychology context remains unclear. Most often in the Canadian context, social justice refers to practices that help clients to challenge institutional and social barriers that are impeding personal, social, academic, or vocational development (Arthur & Collins, 2010). This kind of counselling practice can include, for example, advocacy with or on behalf of clients, collaboration, empowerment, and activism for social change. The overall aim is to minimize oppression and injustice in favour of equality, accessibility and optimal developmental opportunities for all members of society.

This recent focus on a social justice counselling perspective challenges both Canadian and American counselling psychologists of all orientations to reconsider how our professions are viewed and practiced (Ratts, 2009). Indeed, counselling psychology in Canada has historically been committed to prevention, multiculturalism, and social justice, with many counselling psychologists still embracing these attitudes and values, favouring prevention, promoting social justice and a multicultural understanding of persons, and being guided by the person-environment interaction (Sinacore, 2011; Vera & Speight, 2003). More generally, as highlighted in the American literature, issues of social justice are integral to counselling psychology because of the reality that clients do not exist as individuals independent of society, culture, and context (Crethar & Ratts, 2008). Counselling from any perspective that places all responsibility for change on the individual is “relatively culturally impositional” since it functions from the presumption that change occurs within the individual regardless of environment (Chang et al., 2010, p. 83). Furthermore, several large-scale American studies have documented the connection between psychological disorders and environmental stressors like unemployment, poverty, poor living conditions, and minority status (Jackson, 2011).

Numerous empirical neurological, biological, and psychological studies have found that: (a) the pain of exclusion follows the same neural pathways created by physical injuries (e.g., Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2004; MacDonald & Leary, 2005); (b) that lack of connection and social support results in brain dysfunctions (e.g., Baldwin & Taylor, 2010; Chugani et al., 2001); and (c) that growth-fostering, supportive relationships can help heal destructive neural patterns (Jordan, 2010) and diminish the psychological effects of both social and physical pain (Riva, Wirth, & Williams, 2011). Experiences of isolation, shame, humiliation, oppression, marginalization, and aggression are forms of relational violations that appear to be at the core of human suffering (Birrell & Freyd, 2006; Comstock et al., 2008; Hartling et al., 2000). Various forms of cultural oppression, social exclusion, and other social injustices underlie the pain and trauma that individuals from marginalized groups routinely experience in their everyday lives (Birrell & Freyd, 2006; Jordan, 2010).

This movement in the US towards incorporating social justice into counselling psychology identity and practice is a response to growing awareness of the connection between experiences of oppression and mental health (Chang et al., 2010). There is increasing understanding that helping approaches focused entirely on individuals without regard for environmental factors may not be in the best interest of those we serve (Chang et al., 2010; Prilleltensky, 1989).

Additionally, American social justice pedagogy is well-aligned with the multiculturalism movement that has made great strides in the counselling psychology profession, as it takes a clear position on society's injustices related to such cultural dimensions as race, sexuality, gender, and religion (D'Andrea & Heckman, 2008; Vera & Speight, 2003). Multiculturally competent counselling psychologists are often more aware that those with less power in society

experience greater quantity of life's difficulties, and therefore are predisposed to mental health concerns more frequently than those from the dominant race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, gender, or social-economic-status (Eriksen & Kress, 2006). This awareness also extends to realizing that those from non-dominant cultural groups have access to fewer of society's resources, leading to delays in acquiring help, which may in turn allow problems to more frequently develop into full-blown mental health diagnoses with greater intensity (Eriksen & Kress, 2006).

Political scientists have further contributed to our understanding of social justice by sharing their concerns over the way governments and organizations are increasingly drowning out the voices of citizens, prioritizing instead the voices of investors and consumers (e.g., Reich, 2007). These scholars have highlighted the ways systemic policies, socio-cultural shifts, and a focus on economics has led to an "inequality of conditions, of wealth, and of opportunity" (Reich, 2007, p. 163). As would be expected, especially in a capitalist society, the purpose of businesses is to generate profits. The role of government, however, is to serve its citizens. Unfortunately, in the last several decades, our consumer and investor voices have compelled our governments to serve the interests of corporations rather than those of citizens (Reich, 2007). As a result, "everyday politics within legislatures, committees, departments, and agencies of government have become dominated by corporations seeking a competitive edge" (Reich, 2007, p. 210), at the expense of the larger population. In turn, citizens are left with a growing sense of powerlessness.

Along with this sense of powerlessness is an increasingly individualistic view on social issues such as poverty, drug addiction, and homelessness (Young, 2011). The arguments perpetuated through this worldview are that individuals struggling with certain issues (e.g.,

poverty, discrimination, abuse, homelessness) have not taken personal responsibility for their own lives, choosing instead to engage in deviant or self-destructive behaviour. Moreover, these kinds of arguments are incompatible with support for public services, as they place causation solely on individual choices, assume background contextual conditions are fair, and that only those struggling have a responsibility for ameliorating their own conditions (Young, 2011). This perspective is much more fitting within a medical model of remedial intervention than with a broader health promotion and preventative model of care.

Unfortunately, this is a narrow view of social reality, as both personal choices and structural factors contribute to social problems, contextual background conditions are not fair, and all citizens (even those who are not currently struggling with social issues) have a level of personal responsibility to (at minimum) consider the effect of their actions on others (Young, 2011). Although individuals make up social structures, citizens have a shared responsibility for monitoring political institutions and ensuring structural injustices are prevented and ameliorated (Young, 2011). In other words, citizens have a collective responsibility to ensure justice, as social issues (including mental health problems) are a function of complex institutional factors that leave many people behind.

Some Canadian authors have begun to explore the ways that marginalized populations find themselves only fitting “outside” of the traditional therapy structures, expectations, and language (e.g., Moodley, 2009). It is important that we explore how multicultural approaches in counselling can further pathologize diverse cultures or groups of clients by differentiating the needs of “those clients” as beyond the reach of traditional counselling psychology practices. Furthermore, by enlisting members of majority groups to speak for social justice and cultural sensitivity, we may be inadvertently further marginalizing and disempowering various groups. It



should be noted, however, that although closely connected to the American multicultural movement in counselling psychology, the social justice counselling pedagogy is set apart by its emphasis on community engagement (Brubaker, Puig, Reese, & Young, 2010; Constantine, Hage, Kindaichl, & Bryant, 2007; D'Andrea & Heckman, 2008; Vera & Speight, 2003).

As Canadian counselling psychology continues to embrace and adopt the tenets of multicultural counselling, our frameworks for competent counselling practice need to be further expanded to include a stronger integration of social justice. Terms that have traditionally been used to describe counselling professionals such as 'therapist,' 'psychologist,' or 'counsellor' are now being substituted with terms such as 'social change agent,' 'activist,' 'consultant,' or 'social advocates' with increased frequency in both American and Canadian literature (Ratts, 2009). These new descriptors of counselling psychologists (as well as professional counsellors) imply a social justice mindset, leading counselling psychologists to reflect on whether our profession in its current state aligns with their values and beliefs (Ratts, 2009). This applies to both the American and Canadian contexts. As has been strongly encouraged in the US (Sue & Sue, 2008), Canadian counselling psychologists need to further consider what it means to be a social-justice-oriented psychologist, to explore their commitment to social justice, and to re-examine the means by which client change occurs.

This kind of continued reflection is increasingly needed if Canadian counselling psychology is to establish a unique and coherent professional identity grounded in our traditional values and in line with the official CPA definition of counselling psychology. As counselling psychologists in Canada and abroad begin to confront their own participation in wider socially accepted aspects of privilege and systems of oppression, professional behaviour and our very identities and understandings of the world will begin to change (Baluch et al., 2004). As

highlighted in the American literature, to some, it seems, the incorporation of social justice into our professional identity and practice as counselling psychologists feels like an additional responsibility at a time when we are already feeling overburdened (Baluch et al., 2004).

**The recalibration of our professional identity.** As has been described, Canadian counselling psychology is currently still evolving and establishing its identity as a unique specialty. The official CPA definition has outlined many of the values, perspectives, and practices that are central to a Canadian counselling psychology. There continues to be, however, a call for Canadian counselling psychologists to reconnect to their roots in a more integrated way by infusing a social justice perspective into counselling psychology's theories, paradigms, professional identity and practices (Sinacore, 2011). More recently, counselling psychologists in the US have begun to play a major role in advancing a social justice agenda by articulating ways in which research, training, practice, and professional identities can be transformed through the lens of social justice (Blustein, McWhirter, & Perry, 2005; Goodman et al. 2004; Hage et al., 2007; Miller et al., 2009; Vera & Speight, 2003). Given our close ties to the American context, we would expect Canadian counselling psychologists to also be at the leading edge of providing the culturally sensitive services that are increasingly required to help those in need; instead, counselling psychologists in Canada continue to struggle to find a clear professional identity to guide the direction of their social justice efforts. While prevention, advocacy, and multiculturalism have been ensured a place within the scope of Canadian counselling psychology (as described in the CPA definition), understanding of how social justice can be incorporated to advance our practice is lacking. In response, as is happening in the US, some counselling psychologists may resign to taking a non-questioning stance and operate as the market dictates,

solely because the market demands it and because they see themselves as having few other choices (Eriksen & Kress, 2006).

As we continue to go down the road to establishing a clear and cohesive professional identity for counselling psychology in Canada, we need a stronger commitment to integrating social justice in all aspects of our profession. Counselling psychologists are continuously addressing some of the most complex social issues that can exacerbate concerns such as school dropout, poverty, discrimination, substance abuse, and chronic illnesses; we must recognize that no single profession can effectively address all these issues in isolation. Aspiring to find a place of specialty and respect within the mental health care system in Canada, the identity of counselling psychology is requiring greater attention. Now that we have conceptualized and negotiated those distinct aspects that are primary to our profession's definition, we must begin to integrate our core values into our identity and practice. What is critical to the definition of our Canadian professional identity at this point is to develop a clear understanding for *how* to integrate some of our under-explored core values, particularly social justice, into the way we see ourselves and the way we provide services.

### **Integrating Social Justice into Counselling Psychology**

Proactive strides have been made towards the goal of transforming and defining the identity of counselling psychology in Canada with the acceptance of the CPA definition and the widespread integration of multicultural competencies (Baluch et al., 2004; Bedi et al., 2011). Social justice, however, has not yet become a central guiding aspect of our professional identity and practice. The Canadian profession of counselling psychology appears to still be experiencing internal tensions regarding its vision and direction, as our identity and practice does not fully match the way we have defined ourselves.

As previously discussed, Canadian counselling psychology has historically distinguished itself from other specialty areas by focusing on activities that promote the optimal development for individuals, groups, and systems (Young & Lalande, 2011). Our profession has also demonstrated a strong commitment to addressing major societal needs and those undergoing life transitions as a result of social changes (Sinacore, 2011). More recently, counselling psychologists have also taken an active leadership role in the areas of multicultural issues and prevention. As in the US, it is evident that the inclusion of social action and social justice is an integral aspect of how counselling psychology has conceptualized our work, rather than a new area of emphasis (Baluch et al., 2004). Together, these values and current directions of growth have equipped us to more effectively integrate social justice into our cohesive professional identity and our practices. It is the social-developmental-contextual perspective – as found within the scientist-practitioner framework – that we must continue to embrace if we are to remain true to our roots and definition in establishing a unique identity for counselling psychology in Canada.

Counselling psychologists in the US and in Canada have been strongly encouraged to consider the role that our profession plays within the dominant culture (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2003), to reconcile the role of helper with that of social-change agent (Vera & Speight, 2003), and to advocate for macro-level, pro-social systemic change on behalf of our clients and those suffering oppression and marginalization (Moe et al., 2010; Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2003; Roysircar, 2009). Embracing a social justice perspective and integrating this into our professional identity and practice is an acknowledgement of issues of power, privilege, and oppression (Fouad et al., 2006). Moreover, a social justice counselling approach, as described in the primarily American literature, includes the use of social advocacy and activism

as a means to address inequitable social, political, and economic conditions that impede on the academic, career, and personal/social development of individuals, families, and communities (Ratts, 2009). It has been emphasized repeatedly in this literature that our work as counselling psychologists “will be an endless and losing venture unless the true sources of the problem (unequal access to resources, stereotypes, prejudice, discrimination, and oppression) are changed” (Sue, 1995, p. 476).

In order for the work of counselling psychologists to be fully effective, we must address the sources of psychological distress at the cultural and institutional levels (Baluch et al., 2004). We cannot continue to focus our attention and energies exclusively on the individual, internal self whilst ignoring systemic, institutional, and cultural patterns and influences. In the US, and likely also in Canada, students graduating from counselling psychology programs, along with practicing professionals in the field, are realizing that counselling and social justice are vitally linked (Chang et al., 2010). American counselling psychologists are being urged to view both the individuals and the systems as clients, and to reconceptualise offices to include clients’ homes, schools, neighbourhoods, and larger communities (Ratts, 2009). This incorporation of community-based approaches in counselling psychology is also important in Canada, given research that suggests that successful work with marginalized populations requires alternative helping roles and out-of-office interventions (Bailey, Getch, & Chen-Hayes, 2007).

As Canadian counselling psychology continues the difficult task of clarifying the roles and identity of its members, we must move towards a deeper affirmation of the commitment to prevention, multiculturalism, and social justice. As Michael Hutchins affirmed, “social justice work and advocacy is not about what we do, it’s about who we are” (Browne & Craft, 2009, p. 29). Although the audience for his statement was the larger profession of counselling in the US,

it is equally relevant to Canadian counselling psychology currently. Such a commitment appears to be the best option for counselling psychologists, given the fact that traditional mental health systems have failed to significantly reduce the effects of debilitating social and emotional distress within diverse population similar to our own (Hage, 2003). We need to recommit ourselves to addressing the needs of the more vulnerable and search for ways to collaborate with government and community organizations, not just at the level of providing individuals with life skills or better coping mechanisms for dealing with existing problems, but at the level of systemic change (Arthur & Collins, 2010; 2013).

**Illuminating the path of social justice.** It is evident that counselling psychology must continue to work to establish a cohesive professional identity (Young & Lalande, 2011). Despite defining the profession, greater efforts are needed to reconnect counselling psychologists to their roots in prevention and social justice. Researchers have not yet investigated the ways in which these traditional values can be integrated into the professional identity and practice of counselling psychologists (Mellin et al., 2011). As a result, a shared identity for the counselling psychology in both the US and in Canada remains somewhat elusive, making it difficult for many counselling psychologists to articulate a clear professional identity and describe overlapping and distinct practice characteristics of our profession (Calley & Hawley, 2008; Cashwell, Kleist, & Scofield, 2009; Gale & Austin, 2003; Sinacore, 2011; Young & Lalande, 2011).

Establishing such a clear and cohesive identity for counselling psychology in Canada is very important. It has been purported that professional identity is both a cognitive process and a psychological resource that enables individuals within a profession to sustain motivation and make meaning of their work, linking the personal and professional selves through contexts,

thoughts, feelings, and experiences (Luke & Goodrich, 2010; Solomon, 2007). Furthermore, a strong sense of professional identity and the ability to identify knowledge and skills that are both shared with and unique to each discipline is a necessary prerequisite for implementing best practice strategies (Bronstein, 2003; Mellin et al., 2011). For example, in order for counselling psychologists to effectively engage in interprofessional collaboration and make significant contributions within the mental health care system, counselling psychologists must be able to articulate their professional identity and illustrate an understanding of the shared and unique assets between counselling psychology and related helping professions (Mellin et al., 2011). Finally, this process of clarifying a cohesive and collective professional identity for Canadian counselling psychologists needs to be consistent with the CPA definition of counselling psychology while also further integrating core counselling values, such as social justice.

Although not a new idea, and despite its relative benefits, the social justice perspective has not yet permeated throughout all aspects of Canadian counselling psychology (Young & Lalande, 2011). Even though countless American and Canadian scholars have argued that counselling psychology can be distinguished from related helping professions by its developmental, prevention, and wellness orientation towards helping, there appears to be resistance from within the counselling psychology profession towards integrating social justice into our professional identity and practice. It may be challenging for counselling psychologists to embrace an identity grounded in social justice, since few practical models for implementing this orientation into counselling practice have been developed (Mellin et al., 2011). As expressed by Kiselica, “one of the shortcomings of the social justice literature is that it tends to create the erroneous impression that you must be extremely vocal to be an effective advocacy counsellor,” even though “some counsellors advocate in very quiet yet persistent ways to make a positive

difference” (Ward, 2006, p.147). As a result, while there has been a rise in social justice counselling literature and recognition of its importance within Canadian counselling psychology, there continues to be a discrepancy between social justice rhetoric and counselling psychologists’ practice.

**The current study.** Although social justice has been part of counselling psychology since its inception, with advocacy and preventative practice being included in the CPA definition, more research is needed to determine best practices. Scholarly research is needed that articulates how social justice can be integrated into the core areas of counselling psychology’s professional identity (Young & Lalande, 2011), and examines the utility of incorporating social justice principles into clinical work (Arredondo & Toporek, 2004). Much of the American and Canadian social justice literature in the field of counselling psychology has a theoretical basis and lacks critical inquiry into the integration of social justice principles into counselling psychologists’ professional identity and practice (Odegard & Vereen, 2010). Along with the lack of data-driven scholarship pertaining to social justice advocacy in the literature, there is some evidence that American counselling psychology practitioners and students have mixed or conflicting reactions to addressing issues of social power and privilege within the counselling context (Bemak & Chung, 2008; Hays et al., 2007; Weinrach & Thomas, 2004). This is likely echoed in the Canadian context, and appears to be in part due to counselling psychology’s resistance to addressing social privilege as an issue relevant to the profession of counselling psychology (Arredondo et al., 2008; Hays et al., 2007), and a desire within to have proponents of social justice and multicultural theory explain in greater detail how to implement advocacy into counselling psychologists’ regular counselling practice (Moe et al., 2010; Nelson-Jones, 2002; Weinrach & Thomas, 2004). By illustrating examples of how social justice can be infused into



our Canadian professional identity and practice, we can provide Canadian counselling psychology practitioners, educators, and students with a broadened view of counselling psychology and a model for integrating social justice into their counselling work.

In order to provide these much-needed examples of how social justice can be successfully integrated into counselling psychology's professional identity and professional practice, the current research project will be guided by the following research question: *What is counselling psychologists' lived experience of actively engaging in social justice?* More specifically, this study will investigate how Canada's counselling psychology social justice leaders first become interested and engaged in social justice; the process of incorporating social justice into counselling psychologists' professional identity; what meaning is made of social justice; what emotionality does social justice have for these counselling psychologists; and what social justice engagement looks like in counselling psychology practice. Providing such insights can offer important implications for research, practice, and training within the Canadian field of counselling psychology by equipping our profession to use such knowledge to positively impact communities and larger social systems. Perhaps more importantly, by identifying basic processes associated with the development of social justice interest and commitment, we can begin to clarify the ways in which social justice can guide the formation of a cohesive and unique professional identity for counselling psychologists in Canada.

### Chapter Three – Methodology

In the late 1800s, several philosophers were exploring the notion of *intentionality* – the idea that “consciousness is always conscious of something” (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007, p. 78). Influenced by this movement, German philosopher Edmund Husserl founded phenomenology with the goal of grounding the foundations of knowledge in experience and returning “to the things themselves” (Smith, 2008, p. 11). This philosophical phenomenology has since come to inform human science research within various professional disciplines, including nursing, psychology, education, medicine and law (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008; Earle, 2010). Often, a phenomenological approach to research is adopted within health research because it can bring feelings and experiences to life, enabling others to catch a glimpse of the otherwise unknown human experience (Vivilaki & Johnson, 2008). Psychology researchers, such as I, use phenomenology in the search for the psychological meanings that constitute a phenomenon, investigating and analysing lived examples of the phenomenon within the context of participants’ lives (Smith, 2008). Phenomenologists aim to offer an account of space, time, and the world as we *live* them, giving a direct description of our experience as it is, without taking into account its psychological origins or the causal explanations that may be provided by scientists, historians, or sociologists (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Speziale & Carpenter, 2007).

In the previous chapter, the background to this study was outlined and the gaps in the literature were highlighted. Based on this review of the literature, there is a need for research that explores the relationship between counselling psychologists’ professional identity and social justice, along with research that exemplifies ways that social justice can be enacted within counselling psychologists’ professional roles. Specifically, the need for descriptive examples of how leaders in the field have incorporated social justice into their identities and practices has

been emphasized. In order to address this gap in the research literature and address the specific research question posed, a descriptive phenomenological study was conducted. This chapter provides an overview of phenomenology, a discussion of descriptive phenomenological research methodology, and a description of the specific research methods utilized in the current study. Finally, this chapter concludes with a critical exploration of strategies for establishing rigour in descriptive phenomenological research and a description of steps taken to ensure rigour in the current study.

### **Understanding Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is primarily a philosophy, rather than a scientific research method (Giorgi, 1997; Norlyk & Harder, 2010). The term “phenomenology” is a synthetic word derived from “phenomenon” and “logos,” meaning the logical interpretation of the phenomenon (Vivilaki & Johnson, 2008). Phenomenon encompasses everything that can be revealed to our sphere of understanding, and the logical interpretation of a phenomenon can happen through the use of logos – a human ability to think and articulate thoughts through language in addition to the inner sensations of a phenomenon (Vivilaki & Johnson, 2008). Ultimately, the inner interpretation of a phenomenon is the reason attributed to each of our experiences, and informs the meanings we give to the experiences and actions of others. Our logos is our personal theory or philosophy about life that is applied to all of our experiences (Vivilaki & Johnson, 2008).

Phenomenology is a “transcendental philosophy which places in abeyance the assertions arising out of the natural attitude,” but it is also a philosophy for which “the world is always ‘already there’ before reflection begins” (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007, p. 76). Phenomenologists aim to offer an account of space, time, and the world as we *live* them, giving a direct description of our experience without accounting for psychological origins or causal explanations often

provided by scientists, historians, or sociologists (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). Although phenomenological research appears straightforward, it requires the researcher to fully understand its philosophical roots and actively adopt a phenomenological posture. As such, it is helpful to gain a sense of how the phenomenological movement developed historically.

**The roots of the phenomenological approach.** The stage for phenomenology was set in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by philosophers such as Franz Brentano and Carl Stumpf who worked to clarify the concept of intentionality (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). These philosophers affirmed that “a person does not hear without hearing something or believe without believing something” (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007, p. 78). They explained that interior perception is impossible without exterior perception. Phenomenology was born out of this concept of intentionality, and its development was led primarily by E. Husserl, followed later by M. Heidegger, M. Merleau-Ponty, and other philosophers around the world.

The contributions made by each of these philosophers to phenomenology is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Thus, the focus hereafter will be on the historical development of *descriptive* phenomenology. In descriptive phenomenology, the aim is to capture as closely as possible the way a phenomenon is experienced within the context in which the experience takes place. Descriptive phenomenological analysis attempts to discern the psychological essences of the phenomenon (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008) and involves “direct exploration, analysis, and description of a particular phenomenon, as free as possible from unexamined presuppositions aiming at maximum intuitive presentation” (Spiegelberg, 1975, p. 57).

**E. Husserl’s phenomenology.** Phenomenology, as a philosophy, was initiated by Edmund Husserl at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. To build a secure basis for knowledge, Husserl decided to start with the problem of how objects and events appear to consciousness,

believing nothing could be spoken of or witnessed if it did not come through someone's consciousness (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). Husserl believed that philosophy should become a rigorous science that would restore contact with deeper human concerns, and that phenomenology should become the foundation for all philosophy and science (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). According to Husserlian concepts, things are not factual or individual objects, but are immediately intuited as essential elements of consciousness, and viewed not as psychological processes, but in terms of their essential structures involved in all understanding (Mortari, 2008).

An important tenet of Husserl's philosophy was the *lifeworld* (Husserl, 1983) or "lived experience," which refers to the way a phenomenon is experienced in everyday life. Further, while a person's awareness is connected to these experiences, he or she is hardly ever totally synchronized to what is being experienced (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). In other words, usually the capacity to live through events or respond to different situations greatly exceeds the capacity to know exactly what we do or why we do what we do. Husserl emphasized that the key to the study of a phenomenon is consciousness and an intentional grasping of the basic units of common understanding of the unique experience. Husserl argued that while people live in the *natural attitude* – a description of our ordinary, everyday experience – this is not immediately accessible because we take for granted most things in everyday life and fail to notice them (Bradbury-Jones, Irvine, & Sambrook, 2010). Therefore, Husserl believed phenomenological study is required in order to really see what surrounds us.

In order to realize this direct access to lived experiences, Husserl suggested the epistemic move of the *epoche* (Mortari, 2008). Doing the *epoche* means suspending, bracketing, or putting aside the natural attitude towards the mental acts that tend to give validity to our habitual

knowledge and drawing back our attention to the unprejudiced sources of experiences (Mortari, 2008). For Husserl, the focus of the phenomenological project was on managing pre-understandings, such as scientific theories, by suspending or bracketing them (Finlay, 2008). This phenomenological reduction, or bracketing, refers to a setting aside of all previous habits of thought and seeing through the mental barriers created by these habits, allowing us to learn to see what stands before our eyes (Tan, Wilson, & Oliver, 2009). The phenomenological reduction is meant to remove distortion of perception by enabling a refraining from judgment.

Although Husserl's phenomenology focused on description of the meanings of phenomenon experienced using some type of bracketing to identify essences (Giorgi, 1997; 2006b), he did not give detailed instructions on how to accomplish this phenomenological reduction. Husserl claimed he was uncertain about how to put the epoche into practice and unsure of how one can put one's mind in the conditions of working out the cognitive strategies required by this reduction (Mortari, 2008). Nevertheless, Husserl was convinced that this epistemic move is inescapable, as he saw the act of suspending the natural attitude as the only way to allow the inquiring mind to apprehend the essences of phenomena (Mortari, 2008). Though Husserl's phenomenology was strictly philosophical in nature, phenomenological researchers who followed him have developed specific guidelines for conducting descriptive phenomenological research in the field of human science.

***A. Giorgi's phenomenology.*** Amedeo Giorgi led the emergence of descriptive phenomenological research from within the Duquesne Circle in the 1970s (Wertz, 2005). His methodological framework is built on Husserl's philosophical phenomenology (Norlyk & Harder, 2010) and inspired by Husserlian ideas aimed at studying essences of phenomena as they appear in consciousness (Giorgi, 1985). Giorgi's project was to develop a rigorous scientific

phenomenological psychology (Finlay, 2009), and he has repeatedly distinguished between philosophical phenomenology and scientific phenomenology (Giorgi, 1997; 2000). While philosophical phenomenology aims at describing essential universal structures of a phenomenon based on reflections of experience from oneself, Giorgi's scientific phenomenology aims at describing a general or typical essential structure based on descriptions of experiences from others (Giorgi, 1997; Norlyk & Harder, 2010).

Part of Giorgi's methodology involves the adoption of an open and active attitude, with particular attention towards restraining pre-understandings, a stance that does not include a transcendental turn or pursuit (Finlay, 2008). This modified form of bracketing is referred to as the *scientific phenomenological reduction* (Giorgi 1997; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). Here, the phenomenological attitude is one of empathic openness (Finlay, 2008), central in Giorgi's research approach and informing all of his specific steps to conducting descriptive phenomenological research.

***P. F. Colaizzi's phenomenology.*** Paul Francis Colaizzi was also involved in the Dusquesne Circle in the 1970s and developed his own specific procedures for conducting descriptive phenomenological research while completing his 1973 doctoral dissertation in psychology (Dowling, 2007). Similar to Giorgi's phenomenology, Colaizzi's methodology is rooted primarily in Husserl's philosophical phenomenology, and researchers employing a descriptive phenomenological approach frequently choose to adopt his method. Colaizzi suggested researchers bracket assumptions and biases, although he recognized this can be a challenging process since researchers are themselves "at the world" (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 52). He recommended researchers begin their inquiry by uncovering their presuppositions about the phenomenon of interest, so that they may have a basis from which to formulate their research

questions (Beitz & Goldberg, 2005). This bracketing is a way to sensitize the researchers to “the expected” in the findings, allowing them to more easily see unexpected surprises (Beitz & Goldberg, 2005).

It is important to note, however, that some researchers have argued that there is an interpretive element to Colaizzi’s approach to data analysis (Dowling, 2007), though this is not explicit in Colaizzi’s explanation and discussion of his specific research steps (Colaizzi, 1978). Moreover, researchers’ continuing alliance to Colaizzi’s method is a bit puzzling, given Colaizzi’s lack of continued involvement in phenomenological scholarship. Only one publication by Colaizzi in the area of research methodology was found in addition to his doctoral dissertation, and the majority of researchers repeatedly cite this same 1978 book chapter in which he first outlined his method to phenomenological research. Given the dearth of publication exploring Colaizzi’s phenomenology, it seems discussion and critical appraisals of the philosophical underpinnings in his approach have been ignored. Instead, researchers appear to blindly adhere to his specific steps for conducting descriptive phenomenological research.

***M. van Manen’s phenomenology.*** In addition to the research procedures developed by Giorgi and Colaizzi, researchers claiming to have used descriptive phenomenology also frequently reference the specific research process developed by Max van Manen (1990). The use of this method by self-proclaimed descriptive phenomenologists is not well understood, however, since van Manen attempted to integrate Husserl’s phenomenology into the more interpretive phenomenological philosophies developed by Heidegger and Gadamer (Giorgi, 2006a). As such, van Manen’s methodology is primarily rooted in *hermeneutic* phenomenology (Giorgi, 2006a). van Manen described his phenomenology as an interpretation of experiences via a text or symbolic form, while clarifying that descriptive phenomenology is closer to a pure



description of lived experience (Earle, 2010). While van Manen used the term ‘description’ in explaining his approach, he meant this to include both interpretive and descriptive components (Earle, 2010). van Manen further described this approach as “action sensitive” and stressed a focus on improving pedagogy in a directly practical way (Earle, 2010). Given this departure from Husserl’s philosophical phenomenology, his approach should be classified as hermeneutic or interpretive, rather than descriptive phenomenology. Hence, a majority of researchers choosing to conduct descriptive phenomenology based on Husserl’s philosophical phenomenology follow the guidelines offered by Giorgi or Colaizzi, rather than procedures outlined by van Manen (Norlyk & Harder, 2010).

### **Conducting Descriptive Phenomenological Research**

Descriptive phenomenology is said to stimulate our perception of lived experience while emphasizing the richness, breadth, and depth of those experiences (Spiegelberg, 1975). By reviewing the procedures most commonly used in this kind of research, such as those by Giorgi or Colaizzi, Spiegelberg identified a three-step process for descriptive phenomenology, which includes: a) intuiting; b) analysing; and c) describing (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). Additionally, a recent review of 47 research articles that used descriptive phenomenology found that the terms most frequently used and seen by authors as central concepts in this type of research were ‘lived experience,’ ‘bracketing,’ ‘essences,’ and ‘phenomenon’ (Norlyk & Harder, 2010). Researchers considering descriptive phenomenology should become familiar with these major concepts, as they play a central role within the steps of descriptive phenomenological research.

**Step 1: Phenomenological intuiting.** In the first step of descriptive phenomenological research, the researcher begins to learn and know about the phenomenon of interest as described by participants. The phenomenon – “a thing as intended” with the totality of all its particulars

(Dahlberg, 2006, p. 12) – is the central focus of the intuiting process. This step of intuiting requires the researcher to become totally immersed in the phenomenon under investigation and avoid all criticism, evaluation, or opinion about the phenomenon (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). The researcher is to pay strict attention to the phenomenon under investigation as it is being described, free from bias and pre-understandings about the phenomenon. Important for intuiting is the phenomenological reduction introduced by Husserl and operationalized by phenomenological researchers.

Researchers relate Husserl's reduction to being open to hearing experiences in a new way, and see bracketing as a process of examining the phenomenon in a fresh way that enables new understandings to emerge (Finlay, 2008). By bracketing, researchers temporarily suspend what they think they already know, actively listening to a person's individual reality with a sense of curiosity (Hamill & Sinclair, 2010). Through performing this reduction, researchers are better able to grasp the essential invariant structures of a phenomenon – its essences (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2010). Although not without controversy, this deliberate examination of their own beliefs and the temporary suspension of these is an attempt by researchers to acknowledge and identify biases, avoiding influencing data collection and analysis (Vivilaki & Johnson, 2008). The ability to bracket is what enables researchers to intuit from the data.

Researchers often claim to use bracketing in various ways, ranging from a complete setting-aside of all pre-understandings, to the use of a critical attitude where they examine and question their pre-understandings to minimize its influence on understanding the phenomenon. It often involves engaging in a certain sense of wonder and openness to the world while also reflexively restraining prior ideas about the phenomenon (Finlay, 2008). Some researchers engage in continuous reflection and self-questioning to deal with pre-understandings and achieve

openness (Norlyk & Harder, 2010). This curious, open attitude, often called “attention-not-in-search,” is not like a sharp beam of light that investigates and strikes things, but is “the aurean radiance that allows the gradual self-revealing of the things’ profile” (Mortari, 2008, p. 8).

While the value of reflexivity is recognized by phenomenological researchers, it may not always be possible for researchers to become conscious of *all* their own biases. Researchers have argued that even knowledge generated from this open naive stance is founded in previous professional knowledge and cannot be fully bracketed out (Pringle, Hendry, & McLafferty, 2011). Though researchers should acknowledge these potential limitations to the bracketing process, this suspended attitude of openness is repeatedly stressed as the most important part of conducting descriptive phenomenological research (Norlyk & Harder, 2010).

**Step 2: Phenomenological analysing.** This second step of analysing involves identifying the essences of a phenomenon based on the data obtained and how the data was presented (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). Often, this includes an initial immersion in the entire data set in order to obtain a global sense of the whole phenomenon, prior to dividing the data into meaning units. As the researcher distinguishes the phenomenon with regards to elements or constituents, he or she explores its relationships and connections with adjacent phenomena (Spiegelberg, 1975). The researcher listens to descriptions of individuals’ lived experience of a phenomenon, and common themes or essences begin to emerge. Finally, the analysis generally concludes with a process of integrating the essences to illustrate the overarching structure of the phenomenon. The specific analysing procedures used by researchers vary depending on whose method of descriptive phenomenology is followed.

**Step 3: Phenomenological describing.** The aim of the phenomenological describing step is to communicate and describe distinct, critical elements of a phenomenon (Speziale &

Carpenter, 2007). The focus here is to describe *how* the phenomenon *is*, rather than what the informants said about the phenomenon (Norlyk & Harder, 2010). The description is based on a classification or grouping of the phenomenon, and often is occurring simultaneously with the intuiting and analysing steps (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). Phenomenological describing involves classifying and describing in detail all critical elements or essences that are common to the lived experience of a phenomenon. Critical essences are described individually, as well as in the context of their relationship to one another within the larger structure of the phenomenon (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). Lastly, a discussion of the essences and overall structure of a phenomenon often follows.

### **Current Research Methods**

Although there are several specific step-by-step guidelines available for conducting descriptive phenomenological research, the methods proposed by Giorgi are most often used. His phenomenological method (Giorgi, 1975) emphasizes quality of data rather than quantity. Giorgi views the research participant as someone of equal status from whom cooperation is sought, and believes the phenomenon can only be known through its manifestations as revealed through others (Flood, 2010). Therefore, the aim of his method is to arrive at meanings, with the focus not on determining reactions to situations or experiments, but to address the intentionality of the research (Flood, 2010). Giorgi's (1997) descriptive method can be summarized as involving three interlocking components: a) the phenomenological reduction; b) description; and c) the search for essences (Finlay, 2009). These critical elements of Giorgi's research approach are evident throughout his specific research steps.

**Orchestrating the study.** The aim of a phenomenological study of this kind is to understand the phenomenon – the professional identity and practice of counselling psychology's

social justice leaders – more deeply through adequate exposure to the qualities of the phenomenon that are described by those experiencing the phenomenon (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). Since what is key for descriptive phenomenology is how persons actually lived through and interpreted situations, the database for the current study will be retrospective descriptions collected from participant interviews (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). These descriptions of what an experience is like for participants proves to be an excellent database, since what drives the analysis is the search for psychological meaning as lived by the participants. It should be noted that prior to commencing this investigation, ethical approval was obtained from the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board. Careful considerations were made to minimize any potential risks to participants, and to ensure participant confidentiality.

**Recruitment.** Although few guidelines are provided in the phenomenological research literature with regards to specific sampling procedures, purposive sampling was used, as the most important factor is that participants have experiences relevant to the phenomenon of interest. As such, recruitment was conducted with the goal of obtaining 6 to 8 participants who are known within the Canadian counselling psychology community for their active and prolonged engagement with social justice. An email was sent to counselling psychologists through the list serves of Canadian counselling organizations (CCPA and CPA) and to faculty members of counselling psychology training programs, requesting nominations of Canadian counselling psychologists who are well known for their active and prolonged engagement in social justice through education, research, scholarship, and/or practice. In order to be invited to participate in the study, nominees were required to: a) be a leader in promoting social justice, b) be actively engaged in social justice education, research, scholarship, or practice, c) have a high impact factor within the social justice counselling community, and d) have graduated from a

counselling psychology graduate program. Snowball sampling was also used, as participants were asked to nominate other potential participants and to inform colleagues about the study. Potential participants were sent an email that included a consent form informing them about the purpose and scope of the current study and an invitation to participate.

Given that the phenomenon of interest is engagement in social justice, it is important to note that the participants sought were likely in positions of power and privilege, based on their training and qualifications, experience and seniority, and influence in the field. In contrast, however, I also expected that they would each have a unique lens through which they see the world and through which they understand or make meaning of their social justice engagement. While the perspective of these participants is important in understanding social justice engagement within the Canadian counselling psychology context, it is important to note that the perspective of Canadian counselling psychologists who are struggling to engage with social justice, or who are not recognized as being leaders in this area of practice despite including social justice in their counselling psychology work and professional identity are also important. The results of this study are not an objective description of all social justice engagement, but rather a description of the essences of only *one* perspective on the phenomenon.

***Participants.*** As a result of the call for nominations and snowball sampling, 17 nominations of social justice leaders were received, and an invitation to participate was sent to each of these nominees. Upon further communication with the nominees, it was discovered that four of the nominees did not have graduate degrees in counselling psychology, and thus were not eligible to participate in the research interview process. From the 13 nominated counselling psychologists who met the inclusion criteria and were invited to participate in the study, 9 counselling psychologists from around Canada agreed to participate. Three nominees declined to

participate due to their current workloads and availability, while one nominee did not respond to either email and phone invitations to participate. From the 9 nominees who agreed to participate, a total of 6 were able to complete the research interviews; after several attempts, interviews were not scheduled with three nominees due to scheduling constraints for the nominees.

All six of the participants reported that they currently engage in therapeutic practice and some form of counsellor education (through teaching in graduate programs or through providing clinical supervision to students), while all of them were also engaged in research and/or scholarship within counselling psychology to some extent. Additionally, all six participants shared experiences of serving on various kinds of committees or boards of directors as a part of their social justice engagement. Despite these similarities, some participants were primarily educators and researchers in university settings, while others were primarily in clinical practice in counselling centres or community mental health clinics. Further, differences were also observable in the particular social justice “causes” and initiatives that each participant spoke of (e.g., gender equality, violence, educational rights, poverty, unemployment, local community problems versus international concerns, etc.). Finally, while this was not a part of the inclusion criteria for this research study, all six participants had doctoral degrees in addition to their master’s degrees in counselling psychology. Five of the six participants agreed to have their names identified in connection with their participation in this study, while one participant chose to use a pseudonym. As such, the participants were as follows: Dr. Sandra Collins, Dr. Cristelle Audet, Dr. Susan Roger, Dr. Kathy Offet-Gartner, Dr. Vikki Reynolds, and Dr. Bill Smith (pseudonym). Interviews were conducted between November 2012 and February 2013.

***Adopting the phenomenological reduction.*** At the core of Giorgi’s phenomenological method is the process of intuiting previously described, in which the researcher attempts to be

open to meet the phenomenon in as fresh a way as possible, bracketing out habitual ways of perceiving the world (Finlay, 2009). For me, achieving this demanding operation required layers of reflection and critical concentration where I aimed to view the phenomenon with disciplined naiveté (Giorgi, 1985). To be fresh and maximally open to the concrete experiences being researched, Giorgi emphasises bracketing knowledge about the phenomenon (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). By bracketing, he does not mean to be unconscious of previous sources of information, but rather *not* to engage them, to minimize influence on the instance explored. In the current study, I was continuously working to bracket aside knowledge I have from other instances of counsellors' professional identity and my hypotheses for what participants may have to say. This process of identifying the ideas and reactions I had throughout the research process helped me to notice different nuances or dimension of the participants' experience of engaging with social justice in their professional roles (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008).

This process of bracketing described by Giorgi, based on key components of Husserl's phenomenology, resembles one of the fundamental conditions required to be an effective counselling psychologist: the ability to empathise. This empathising is a continuous process whereby counsellors lay aside their own ways of experiencing and perceiving reality, preferring to sense and respond to the experiences and perceptions of the client. This "laying aside" has similarities to the "suspension" required in the process of bracketing. Both processes require that counsellors or researchers physically and psychologically tune into the clients or participants respectively, setting aside their judgements and biases in order to "walk in their shoes" or "see through their eyes." I was able to draw on my ability to empathize with clients in my efforts to engage in bracketing during the research process. Empathy is manifested by the willingness and effort to perceive, capture, and understand the individual's current and potential world as exactly



as possible, with all its subjective meanings and feelings (Hamill & Sinclair, 2010), and this is exactly what I strived to do throughout the data collection and analysis phases of my research.

Bracketing is a process, as is empathy, and both are active rather than passive processes. While empathy aims to access the inner experiences and world of the client, bracketing aims to expose the essences of consciousness to access the lived experience (Hamill & Sinclair, 2010). By taking steps to prevent my assumptions and understandings to shape the data collection and analysis, I was better able to be openly exposed to the phenomenological reality of participants (Hamill & Sinclair, 2010), hearing and understanding the experiences from the lived perspective of the participants. Giorgi emphasized the importance of engaging in this process of bracketing throughout the entire research process (Pringle et al., 2011).

As part of engaging in the scientific phenomenological reduction or bracketing, I kept a journal of my assumptions, questions, beliefs, and previous understandings related to the phenomena of interest in an effort to heighten my awareness of personal biases or limitations to understanding that may influence the research process. More specifically, I reflected on my own history, ideas, culture, experiences and worldview prior to beginning the research in addition to engaging in continued reflection throughout each step of the research process. Before beginning, I was aware that I tend to take a constructionist epistemological stance, which sees meaning or knowledge as generated within an interactional process between a subject and an object that is already there, rather than assuming that knowledge or meaning is something that exist without human interaction and that is waiting to be discovered. In this sense, it has been my assumption that our cultures – including place of birth, gender, language, ethnic heritage, life experiences and everything in between – influence the meanings and understandings that we co-create in our world. However, I also take a critical lens, in the sense that while I see culture as what allows us

to create meaning out of the world in which we live, I also see culture as limiting the kinds of meanings or understandings that we are able to generate. For me, the process of bracketing has been about trying to step outside of these limitations in an attempt to see and understand this particular phenomenon of engaging with social justice within counselling psychology from the cultural perspective and limitations of the participants. Beyond these larger epistemological and theoretical perspectives that I hold, I have also been aware of my own history, culture, and experiences as not only a person who has been sufficiently privileged to engage in a doctoral program at a North American university, but also as a person who came from more humble beginnings and was surrounded by oppression and injustice.

My many life experiences have exposed me to a variety of cultures and people from all “walks of life,” for which I am very grateful. Having been born and raised in Brazil, during the first decade of my life, I was often confronted with the alarming conditions in which many Brazilians live. The gap between the rich and the poor is great in my home country, and the many injustices and economic problems that plague the lives of countless people were hard to ignore. Memories of my family engaging in charity work with under-privileged women and children have stuck with me throughout the years and shaped who I have become today. In Brazil, my family and I were in a position of privilege and had access to many opportunities and resources. Fortunately, I was taught that with these opportunities came responsibilities, such as caring for and advocating on behalf of those suffering.

In my early youth, my family immigrated to Canada, and in some ways, our access to opportunities and resources drastically changed. We faced barriers such as having English as a second language, adjusting to new cultural norms, and struggling to find our footing without the support of our network of family and friends. I watched as my mother struggled to find

employment in our new city. Although an accomplished architect in Brazil, her qualifications were not recognized in Canada which, combined with her mediocre English, left her feeling helpless. Fortunately, my father's education and training as an engineer kept us afloat during those initial adjustment years. As time passed, our English improved, and we eventually adjusted quite well. We became Canadian citizens and integrated into the multicultural fabric of Canada.

It was not until my years as an undergraduate student that I was able to look back and see that despite our hardship in immigration, we maintained certain privileges that made life easier for us, even in a new country. Firstly, although being enriched by some aboriginal Brazilian, Jewish, and Greek/Turkish heritage, we are primarily Caucasian, and thus were able to easily blend into the majority culture in Canada. My brother and I had attended private English-immersion programs before immigrating, making our integration into the school system a smoother process. My parents' post-secondary education meant they could provide for our family certain luxuries, such as annual family trips, after-school sports, and a few of the newest popular clothes or games. As I learned more about the people around me, I became very aware that many families do not have access to post-secondary education, stable financial resources, or what I considered small luxuries in life, even when born and raised in Canada. It was during this time that I also became aware of my natural inclination to help those around me, and chose to pursue a career in Counselling Psychology.

As I have engaged in my graduate training in Counselling Psychology, I have become further aware of the many social injustices and forms of oppression that affect a large proportion of people around the world. Considerations of individual difference, cultural beliefs, and social justice was infused into my graduate training, which created a new lens through which I heard and understood my clients and helped me to realize the ways in which the profession of

psychology plays a role in perpetuating many of the systems of oppression and injustice that affect everyone. With the awareness of psychology's participation in the environmental and social systems that exacerbate or lead to psychological suffering – such as stereotypes, unequal access to resources, prejudice, discrimination, and oppression – I have felt driven to change the way psychology understands and approaches clients' problems. Nonetheless, I am aware that I continue to waiver back and forth between identifying with those needing help and with those doing the helping, and wondering how these distinctions need to be transcended.

**Data collection.** Since what is key for descriptive phenomenology is how persons actually lived through and interpreted situations, the database often becomes retrospective descriptions collected from participant interviews (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). Semi-structured interviews of 60 to 90 minutes in duration were conducted with the 6 participants via Skype or telephone between November 2012 and February 2013. The aim of the interviews was to more deeply understand counselling psychologists' engagement with social justice through exposure to participants' description of their experiences. Demographic information about participants' counselling psychology practice and social justice involvement was also collected. The interviews were transcribed verbatim by a research assistant.

Prior to conducting the interviews, I spent time in reflection and critical concentration in order to ensure the stance of phenomenological reduction remained intact. This helped me to be open to meet the phenomenon in as fresh a way as possible, bracketing out my habitual ways of perceiving the world (Finlay, 2009). Upon engaging in this reduction, I began to search for examples of counselling psychologists' engagement with social justice by asking participants to describe concretely and in detail their process of engaging with social justice within their counselling roles. More specifically, I inquired about a) how participants first became involved

in social justice, b) what emotionality and meaning social justice has for them, c) their process of integrating social justice into their professional identity, and d) what social justice work looks like in their counselling roles. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim prior to data analysis. These descriptions of the professional identity and practice of social justice leaders in counselling psychology became an excellent database, since what drives a descriptive phenomenological analysis is the search for psychological meaning as *lived* by the participants.

**Combing through the data.** In order to analyse the data, as part of Giorgi's descriptive phenomenology, the researcher is instructed to imaginatively explore the meanings of the experienced phenomenon from different perspectives. This allows the researcher to distinguish essential features (which would be more generally experienced by people in relation to the phenomenon of interest) from those features that are incidental or particular to certain individuals (Finlay, 2009). The result is what Giorgi called the essential structures of experience (Finlay, 2009). Giorgi's model for data analysis consists of four stages: 1) obtain a global sense of the whole database; 2) identify meaning units; 3) search for essential aspects of the phenomenon; and 4) reveal the essential structure of the phenomenon (Ebensen, Swane, Hallberg, & Thome, 2008). To begin data analysis, the researcher must assume a psychological perspective, getting within the attitude of the scientific phenomenological reduction, and be mindful of the phenomenon being studied (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). This scientific reduction requires the "consideration of the given from the viewpoint of consciousness" (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008, p. 33), that is, a human consciousness that is engaged in the world. Within this scientific reduction is the fact that the objects or states being considered are taken to be presences, not absolute realities. In other words, the epistemological claim reaches only as far as presence, not to actual existence (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008).

**Data analysis.** In the first step, I read through the all six interview transcripts to get the sense of the whole set of experiences (Flood, 2010). The phenomenological perspective is a holistic one, according to Giorgi, and so I needed to obtain a global sense of the descriptions before proceeding further (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). This initial reading was done with maximum openness, without taking into account the specific aim of the study, and within the attitude of scientific phenomenological reduction (Ebensen et al., 2008).

The second step involved analysis to determine the natural ‘meaning units’ as expressed by the participants. This was achieved by reading and re-reading each transcript and then identifying areas of each interview that highlighted the participant’s experiences in relation to the professional identity of counselling psychology’s social justice leaders and their social justice practice or engagement (Flood, 2010). The constitution of parts is helpful because one can clarify implicit matters to an extent far beyond what would have been possible from a holistic perspective. These meaning units are separate entities, which together form the whole of the experience. Again, I engaged in the scientific phenomenological reduction (or bracketing) during this stage, in order to identify the meaning or idea that dominated each meaning unit from each of the transcripts. This allowed me to begin noting commonalities and grouping meaning units into categories of experience that were shared by participants.

The third step required that I ‘interrogate’ the units of data and the central themes or categories which emerged during the second step (Flood, 2010). Questions which are central to the research were “put to the data” in an ordered and systematic manner, as Giorgi emphasized that final themes are eventually generated from this questioning process (Flood, 2010). At this point, I returned to the central research questions and searched for the answers within the various categories of experience generated in step two. This step often requires a kind of transformation

of the raw data into richer descriptive themes (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). One goal is to transform what is implicit into the explicit, especially with respect to psychological meaning. It is this aspect of the transformation that allows the analysis to reveal meanings that are lived but not necessarily clearly articulated or in full awareness (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). By refining and combining various specific categories of experience and clarifying the intrinsic meaning within participants' descriptions, I was able to generate richer themes that more directly address the research questions posed. Another goal of this descriptive transformation process is to simplify the meaning units somewhat, so that the analyses are not so situation-specific. Where possible, I have described what took place in a psychologically sensitive way, clarifying the psychological by lifting it out of potentially confusing empirical details (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008) and highlighting the underlying meanings within common experiences described by participants.

Once the themes had been generated, the fourth step is the generation of a descriptive statement of the essential, non-redundant themes by describing them in relation to the specifics of the research situation (Flood, 2010). By continuously reviewing the research questions, I was able to condense the descriptive experiences of the participants into rich descriptions of *how* the experience of engaging with social justice is, rather than *what* participants' experiences have been. In other words, it was about generating detailed descriptions of the common meanings and implications embedded within participants' lived experience. These descriptions, rather than lengthy direct quotes from participants, are the desired product of a descriptive phenomenological investigation. An explanation of the "structure" or characteristics of the experience of engaging with social justice was gained by going over these last transformations of themes and attempting to determine what components are typical or essential in order to account for the concrete experiences reported by participants (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). A structure refers

not only to the key elements, but also to the relationships among them, and thus a holistic view is often required in order to appreciate these relationships (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008).

**Communicating the findings.** While Giorgi emphasized the importance of publishing the findings of phenomenological research, he did not offer specific guidelines for doing so. Instead, Giorgi simply asserted that, “the true closure of a research process is when the published material is read... [for] without the reading of a research report, the entire process becomes practically useless” (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008, p. 47). As in the presentation of any qualitative research findings, the most important question is often: how can the findings be most effectively communicated to make them useful to others? In addressing this question, one must consider the audience and the purpose of the report. Returning to the research focus has been essential, as I have had to carefully consider what needs to be conveyed from the voluminous amounts of data gathered and analyzed in order to address the specific purpose and questions of this research project.

In a descriptive phenomenological study, the primary focus is on the descriptions, and thus, less attention is paid to numerical analysis or forming interpretations. This is not to suggest that the raw data should be presented without analysis, but rather that the researcher holds the responsibility of digesting the narrative and distilling it into a meaningful representation of a phenomenon based on those whose experiences are shared (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). Accordingly, the use of many illustrative quotations and a lesser amount of description is not considered appropriate within a descriptive phenomenological framework. The description of the essential structures of the phenomenon under investigation should be the central focus in communicating the research findings. This kind of descriptive presentation of the results of this



investigation can be found in chapter four, where descriptive themes have been generated from the rich and detailed experiences shared by participants.

### **Establishing Rigour**

Establishing and evaluating rigour in qualitative research involves making a judgement about how well the research was carried out and whether the findings can be regarded as trustworthy and useful (Smith, 2008). In a paradigm where researchers believe each person has a different yet equally valid perspective on reality, however, it can be difficult to agree on common criteria to be applied to all types of qualitative studies. Arguments for conducting trustworthy and rigorous qualitative research often fall into two groups: a) arguments about objective scientific criteria to achieve trustworthiness and ensure rigour with reference to Lincoln and Guba (1985); and b) arguments with reference to consistency with philosophical underpinnings of the approach used (Norlyk & Harder, 2010). It is this second line of argument that best allows for the establishment of rigour in the current case of descriptive phenomenological research.

Giorgi stressed that at least three criteria must be implemented into the research process: a) adoption of the attitude of phenomenological reduction; b) description obtained from others from the perspective of the natural attitude; and c) imaginative variation (a search for invariant meaning or essences for a context) (Giorgi, 1997). Further, the identification of the philosophical assumptions on which the study is based must include an articulation of methodological keywords and, more importantly, how an open attitude is maintained throughout the research process (Norlyk & Harder, 2010).

**Loyalty to the ontological assumptions.** One of the challenges for researchers in the phenomenological tradition is to have ontological assumptions “alive and kicking” during the various phases of empirical lifeworld research. It can be challenging to apply the general

lifeworld ontology to empirical phenomenological research, since it is extensive and not developed for providing specific methodological guidance in research (Berndtsson, Claesson, Friberg, & Ohlen, 2007). Nevertheless, it was critically important that the researcher place the general phenomenological ontology in the context of the specific area of interest, reflexively inter-relating this ontology throughout the research process and using it to guide methodological procedures and decision-making (Berndtsson et al., 2007).

According to Giorgi, who spoke from the perspective of Husserl's philosophical phenomenology, no study can be truly considered phenomenological unless some sense of the phenomenological reduction is articulated and utilized (Giorgi, 1997). The empathy and openness that was used in the current descriptive phenomenological research approach is repeatedly emphasized as one of the most important ways to establish rigour (Finlay, 2008). It was not sufficient, however, for me to simply acknowledge and become aware of my own preunderstandings and to work towards bracketing these, as the process is more complicated, paradoxical and layered (Finlay, 2008). The phenomenological attitude is one of constant striving; as I worked to bracket my preconceptions, more continued to arise at the level of awareness (Valle, King, & Halling, 1989). In other words, the phenomenological reduction or bracketing needed to be considered and engaged in throughout the entire research process, rather than just the data collection or analysis phases (Hamill & Sinclair, 2010). Acknowledging the ongoing nature of bracketing, I purposefully engaged in this reflective process throughout all stages of the current research study.

**Minimizing researcher bias.** Given that most descriptive phenomenological research hinges on the observations and experiences of a single researcher, certain methodological procedures have been suggested to counteract that vulnerability. Firstly, if executed properly, the

phenomenological reduction in which I engaged works to minimize biases (Giorgi, 2006a). This adoption of the phenomenological attitude also means that no “reality” claims are being made, since the phenomenological posture speaks only to how the phenomenon presented itself to the persons who experienced it (Giorgi, 2006a). I acknowledged beforehand that the professional identity and practice of social justice leaders could be experienced other than the way it was being reported by this group of participants. Finally, the adoption of the phenomenological attitude includes the adoption of an inter-subjective perspective, where the researcher makes discriminations from a perspective that already takes the critical other into account (Giorgi, 2006a). In other words, because I was striving to see and understand participants’ experiences from their lived perspective, I am maintaining a critical stance towards any previous assumptions or hypotheses about the phenomenon. Giorgi argued that the greater trust in this inter-subjectivity, along with the safeguards the method and phenomenological attitude provide, minimize the influence of bias in descriptive phenomenological research (Giorgi, 2006a).

The challenge for myself as the research was to critically and reflexively evaluate how my pre-understandings could influence the research, and to devise ways of containing their seductive power (Finlay, 2008). To list assumptions independently of any other task is quite different from attempting to detect bias while in the process of analyzing data. According to Giorgi, the most effective way of doing this was for me to detect biases or assumptions as they played their role in the process of data collection and analysis itself, noting the presence of the biases as they function (Giorgi, 2006a). By being continuously aware and reflective - and journaling about my questions, ideas, biases, assumptions, and doubts – I strengthened engagement in the scientific phenomenological reduction and minimized biases. Please refer to Appendix A for a sample of my journal.

**Validity of the findings.** A final consideration in establishing rigour in phenomenological research is the validity of the findings. This is a point of contention amongst researchers within descriptive phenomenology. Spiegelberg (1975) argued that the phenomenologist can only ever *imagine* the participant's world, but is able to confirm this understanding through the member-checking strategy. Similarly, several researchers assert that participant feedback is a key feature of descriptive phenomenology (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2010). The belief here is that cooperative exploration of a phenomenon provides the researcher with an enlarged range of the phenomenon that only the "other" alone has direct access to (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2010). Even Colaizzi (1978) endorsed this methodological step of bringing the results of the analysis back to participants for their confirmation, as a way of establishing validity in the findings.

On the surface, member-checking (or participant feedback) may appear like a good strategy for establishing rigour in phenomenological research; but as Giorgi argued, it is wholly indefensible theoretically (Giorgi, 2006a). Firstly, participants describe their experience from the perspective of the lifeworld and the natural attitude, whereas the analysis is done from a psychological and phenomenological perspective (Giorgi, 2006a). In other words, the direct quotes provided by participants originate from a very different perspective than the one from which the final descriptions are generated. Thus, how can we check the results with participants and expect them to be equivalent, when the participants' perspective does not match the researcher's perspective? Secondly, there is a difference between the lived experience and the meaning of that experience (Giorgi, 2006a). The experiencer is not necessarily the best judge of the meaning of his or her experience within the context of the research questions, and thus cannot always act as the best judge of the validity of the findings. Finally, on a practical level,

member-checking introduces a problem rather than a solution. Should a discrepancy exist between the researcher's results and a participant's perspective, it can be very difficult to determine which perspective should take priority (Giorgi, 2006a). If the final word is to be given to the participant who underwent or is undergoing the experience of interest, then there appears to be no sense in conducting an analysis of the data in the first place (Norlyk & Harder, 2010). For these reasons, the member-checking strategy was not utilized in the current study, as it is seen as incompatible with descriptive phenomenological research.

Instead, as suggested by Giorgi, I grounded the validity of the research process and the findings in the transparency of the research methods, which allowed for the creation of an audit-trail. Since the "critical other" cannot directly share the phenomenological researcher's intuitions, meaning discriminations, and transformations, the researcher leaves as complete a track record of the research process as is possible (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). In collaboration with my research supervisor, I worked to show how I took the data from being simply a cluster of meaning units to meaningful themes that addressed the research questions. My supervisor was able to follow along as the meaning unit discriminations were made and to see that the transformations were correlated, keeping in mind that contextual factors also operate within each transformation (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). Also made visible were the final transformations for each meaning unit that become the basis for the articulation of the structure or key characteristics of the experience. Providing this kind of audit trail allows for another researcher who has adopted the psychological and phenomenological perspective to follow the process of data analysis from the collection of participants' accounts of experience to the process of generating descriptions of the essential meanings of that experience. Although Giorgi accepted that there are no guarantees in the audit-trail strategy, he claimed it provides the necessary checks-and-

balances that validate the research findings while also aligning with the phenomenological ontology (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008).

### **Summary**

In adhering to the specific procedures put forward by Giorgi, this descriptive phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of counselling psychologists in an effort to describe key elements of engaging with social justice within these professional roles. Six counselling psychologists described in detail their experiences of connecting to social justice, maintaining social justice as part of their professional identity, and enacting social justice in their professional practices. These experiences were then analyzed according to Giorgi's specific data analysis steps to generate rich themes that describe the essential characteristics of counselling psychologists' experience of engaging in social justice. The results of this process, which has been entirely conducted within the stance of the phenomenological reduction (or bracketing), are presented in the following chapter. Discussion of the implications of these results, limitations of the current study, and recommendations for future research can be found in Chapter Five.

## Chapter Four – Results of the Study

The primary aim of this study, as previously described, was to explore Canadian counselling psychologists' lived experience of engaging with social justice. It was hoped that through this descriptive phenomenological investigation, it would be possible to highlight key aspects of social justice engagement and to exemplify ways that counselling psychologists in this study incorporate social justice into their professional identity and roles. As described in Chapter Three, interviews were conducted with 6 Canadian counselling psychologists nominated as leaders in the area of social justice. Their interviews were transcribed verbatim and then analyzed according to Giorgi's (1997) steps for descriptive phenomenological analysis, as discussed in Chapter Three.

What follows is a detailed description of the findings from this descriptive phenomenological analysis. Three primary themes were identified from the data, each with its own set of subthemes that further enrich and clarify the experience of counselling psychologists' social justice engagement, as outlined in Table 1. The first theme is *A Social Justice Calling*, which is composed of three subthemes that describe in detail participants' interest and commitment to social justice. The second theme is *Integrity in Identities*, which is composed of five subthemes that illustrate the central place of social justice within the identities of the participants. Finally, the third theme is *Continuously Living Social Justice*, which is also composed of five subthemes that bring to life the various ways that social justice engagement can occur and exist within counselling psychologists' professional roles. A discussion of these findings with relation to previous literature within the field of counselling psychology is presented in Chapter Five.

Table 1

Summary of Themes and Subthemes of Participants' Engagement in Social Justice

Theme I: A Social Justice Calling Early Experiences Widespread Commitment Focused Way of Working
Theme II: Integrity in Identities Interconnected Identities Core Component Privilege and Responsibility Finding Meaning Integrity
Theme III: Continuously Living Social Justice The Never-Ending Story Striving for Balance Eyes Wide Open Spreading the Word Using Power

**Theme I: A Social Justice Calling**

Based on the descriptive phenomenological analysis conducted, it was clear from participants' interviews that their interest and commitment to social justice runs deep within them, coming from a profound personal place within their hearts and expressed in all circles of their lives. Participants described a pull or calling towards social justice awareness and advocacy work that was awakened by personal experiences with injustice, and then expanded through their professional roles. This interest and passion in social justice has helped them to focus their professional work and to understand learning experiences through the social justice lens. Within this theme there are three subthemes that further describe and clarify this calling towards social justice: *early experiences*, *widespread commitment*, and *focused ways of working*.

**Early experiences.** Interest and commitment to social justice begins with early experiences with social barriers, injustice, and oppression. Participants shared examples of when



they had witnessed others struggling with injustice and examples of their own direct experiences of facing unjust social barriers or discrimination. These examples were shared within the context of discussing participants' interest and commitment to social justice, which highlights the deep personal connection to social justice that participants developed early on in their lives.

Motivation for social justice engagement starts with recognizing one's personal connection to experiences of injustice, marginalization, and suffering, as described by Susan,

“So [my mother] was always my motivation behind doing this work, because I knew how smart she was and I knew how circumstances in her life had not allowed her to pursue education. And I knew that there were a lot of other women out there just like her.”

As clarified by Bill, “it's more about what draws people to this kind of work in the first place,” rather than about an acquired set of practice guidelines or concrete models of intervention. Social justice awareness often pre-dates specific professional training in social justice, most often emerging as a result of witnessing or experiencing injustice firsthand. With this early awareness, the personal connection to social justice grows into a professional connection as well. This was highlighted by Sandra as she explained, “I think there's multiple layers of meaning for me. I've experienced lots of injustice over my life, so there's that sort of personal-professional connection there that informs my views of social justice.” This message was echoed by Cristelle, “My interest started outside of my profession. It started as a personal interest. I really thought and felt that this work was very important for me and I knew I was going to do it on a personal level.” Counselling psychologists' connection to social justice seems to start at a personal level and is then infused into the realm of professional work.

Part of connecting to social justice as a professional begins with recognizing the ways one has already connected to social justice as a person out in the world prior to entering professional roles. There is a sense of ownership and pride in being involved in social justice

work that exists separately and outside of professional roles, as reflected in Vikki's statement, "I'm an activist that became a therapist. I'm not a therapist that became socially just."

Participants described being "raised with a social consciousness" (Kathy) and having experiences that made social justice relevant for them. In many ways, being committed and attuned to social justice issues was always a part of participants' lives. "I've never kind of not been part of that social movement" (Vikki).

**Widespread commitment.** Distinguishing between personal and professional interests or commitments to social justice is almost impossible. Participants found it very hard to tease apart their professional engagement with social justice and their personal engagement with social justice. This was evident in Cristelle's comment,

"I don't know if it's always been in me or if it's become me, or maybe a bit of both. But I feel it's very personal in the sense that it's how I would actively want to live my life. The personal and the professional are so interconnected."

A commitment to social justice is enacted in interconnected ways across multiple contexts, not just in the professional context, and thus the commitment to principles of social justice become evident in all aspects of one's life. As Bill explained it,

"Well, to me it's kind of everything. It's kind of like an attitude. It's like values. It's not a 'practice.' It's not something that could really easily be codified. It's more a way of being, and for me, I mean it's professional for sure, but it's more than that. It's deeply personal."

Commitment to social justice is very much tied to an overall attitude of being aware and conscientious about the interconnections between personal experiences and environmental and systemic factors at all levels of life. Given that this awareness cannot be "turned off" or activated in different settings, it inevitably informs decisions and choices made both within professional

roles and within personal roles. Sandra's statement emphasized how this professional pursuit of social justice is often also evident in personal situations,

“I think I've come to integrate social justice at multiple levels in my life. So from the day-to-day choices that I make, to thinking about how I impact the environment, thinking about how I impact global politics and economics, and social conditions that are resulting in social injustices.”

As described by the counselling psychologists in this study, a commitment to social justice is evident in multiple professional and personal contexts, being exercised in many realms of life.

**Focused ways of working.** Early social justice interest and engagement can be nurtured and expanded through training and experience in professional psychology. Although the personal interest may be dormant within both new and experienced counselling psychologists, focused education about social justice within the context of the profession can help to awaken this interest and provide direction for how to allow this interest to thrive within professional roles. Participants' training and work within the field of counselling psychology helped to provide the language, skills, and framework they needed to better understand the intricacies of social justice, while also providing an avenue for engaging in social justice work more explicitly and effectively. Recognizing and naming social justice came with learning and participation in social justice initiatives within psychology.

“I wasn't naming it as [social justice] throughout [my personal experiences]. And so, there might have been some smaller ways in which I was connecting to some social justice principles or that they were playing themselves out in my professional identity, but I just wasn't calling it social justice. But again, I think that framework or that perspective of social justice helped it all gel and come together in a way that really made sense. And sort of gave it a little extra support or structure to it” (Cristelle).

Counselling psychology training programs and continuing education workshops can also offer language and a framework for social justice commitment and activities that professionals may already be a part of, so that it feels less like an additional task to take on within professional

roles, and more like an opportunity to clarify and strengthen an important perspective that is already within. This was emphasized by Bill when he stated, “Yeah, it’s there. You don’t learn it later on. You learn maybe how to understand it, how to express it, but I think it’s there.”

It was clear from participants’ responses that their interest and commitment to social justice “did not come as a result of training or [their] education. It’s the other way around” (Kathy), where the training and education is pursued because of a deep connection to the basic underlying principles of social justice.

“All of my training and my education had to fit within the realm of the world that I was already in, which was about advocacy and addressing oppression and marginalization. And using education and training as a way to give voice and to provide services to those more marginalized and oppressed groups. So psychology, and counselling psychology in particular, was a fabulous educational or academic avenue by which I would carry on and in fact expand the services that just felt natural to me” (Kathy).

Acquiring the language, framework, and skills for engaging in social justice allows retrospective understanding of past experience, and facilitates further social justice engagement that is more focused, purposeful, and responsive. The benefits of acquiring these tools for understanding experiences of injustice, applying language to the systems that contribute to oppression, and developing a framework to guide social justice oriented practice was repeatedly echoed.

“So as I got more into the social justice literature, I developed more of a language and an understanding that I could apply retrospectively to my own experiences and perspective, and you know to my professional development over time. And over time, I think part of what shifted is I moved from a reactive to a proactive stance” (Sandra).

Focused education or training around social justice within the context of counselling psychology can allow psychologists to more easily own their social justice perspective and be more intentional in their social justice engagement within counselling psychology.

## Theme II: Integrity in Identities

The need for achieving or preserving integrity between their various identities and roles was highlighted as a very important part of participants' experience of engaging with social justice. From their responses emerged a clear theme about the interconnections and overlap that exists between personal and professional ties to social justice, and the desire to have consistency between the ways they attended to this commitment to social justice. Within this larger theme, there are five subthemes that further expand on this search for integrity between personal and professional identities: *interconnected identities*, *core component*, *privilege and responsibility*, *finding meaning*, and *integrity*.

**Interconnected identities.** Social justice weaves through and connects one's personal and professional identity at various points in time and across different contexts, rather than informing only professional identity within specific roles. As explained by Sandra,

“They really are simultaneously informing one another. Social justice informs my counselling practice and my practice informs the social justice in me, and it's more than just a professional identity. It's my identity. It's not personal or professional, it's my identity.” “I think there's a sense in which this theme of social justice carries through into the choices I make in all aspects of my life” (Sandra).

Social justice principles are simultaneously part of the ways one enacts professional and personal identity, informing not only professional decisions but also personal choices. Cristelle provided an example of this when she said,

“I'm sure it influences, you know, when I have to go vote for example. Like voting for the political party that's going to, in my view, best uphold the principles of social justice that are important to me...Attention to the environment is another thing for me. I'll make decisions on what I'm going to buy and where I'm going to buy it, depending on my understanding of how that purchase is going to affect groups in other parts of the world or even locally.”

It became clear within participants' responses that achieving and maintaining congruence between one's personal identity and one's professional identity is important. Although some

participants shared that they have at times felt pressured to conform to the professional status quo within psychology, it was also clear that they felt much more satisfied and fulfilled when the professional work they pursued was in line with their personal commitments and interests. This message was shared by Susan as she stated,

“I’ve done my time with trying to be one person in my personal life and another person in my professional life. And I realized a long time ago that there was no way that I could do that, and that it wasn’t what I wanted to do.”

Social justice becomes embedded in all the layers of one’s identity, not just within professional identity, and it becomes a way of being in the world, rather than a strategy or tool that is activated when needed. “It’s not just, ‘oh, I come to work and now I’m going to put on my social justice hat’. Because I’m like this in my personal life as well” (Kathy). Examples of this sentiment were provided by several participants, and exemplified in this quote by Vikki,

“For me it’s never individual. It’s never a personal thing I do, it’s embedded in my family, my culture, my relationships. So it’s a hard question for me to answer because it’s not something that I do sometimes. It’s a position I’m always in.”

Overall, the ways that social justice transcends the boundaries between personal and professional identity were emphasized in participants’ responses. It was clear from their experiences that social justice was conceptualized as part of their larger all-encompassing identities, rather than just understood within the context of either professional or personal identity.

**Core component.** Social justice was described as being at the core of participants’ identity, informing understanding of everything around them. Engagement with social justice is paved by the central foundational place that social justice principles have within one’s professional identity. As Cristelle explained, “I know for me personally, it is a large part of my professional identity. Such that it permeates everything that I do. I feel it is central to my professional identity.” This sense that social justice occupies a core place within one’s

professional identity was echoed by Susan as she stated, “I think that social justice, you know, plays a huge role and perhaps a defining role in my professionalism and my professional identity.”

In addition to it being a foundational piece, social justice is more than an element entirely acquired during the process of professional development. Instead, it is experienced as an extension of one’s overall identity as a person. As Kathy emphasized, “I mean, again, it is just a core. It’s a central part of my work. You can’t tease out that, it cannot be separated out as a piece of my identity. It is my identity.” This idea of social justice occupying such an important and critical role within both professional and personal identity was emphasized by several other participants, including Vikki and Sandra:

“I’d say it’s central. It’s a position without which I couldn’t work... So for me, it is what I do. It’s nothing that was added on. It’s an orientation without which I couldn’t work... It’s the core of what I do. It’s the center of what I’m doing” (Vikki).

“For me, it’s become a foundation. So it’s not an add-on, it’s not like it’s a component of what I pay attention to. It’s become the foundation for me, so that I view most situations through the lens of social justice” (Sandra).

Participants expressed that it is difficult to conceptualize their professional identity and practice without including social justice as a key component. Cristelle shared, “I’ve reached the stage where I find it really difficult to picture what being a professional would look like without having or at least applying or having an awareness of this social justice lens.” Again, this experience was echoed by Bill, who reported that,

“It’s just something so integral, it’s hard to even separate... It’s not like I do social justice some days and I don’t do it other days, you know? It’s just always there. So I guess it gets expressed as professional identity, but where it’s located is much deeper than that, much more personal. It comes out everywhere.”

All other components of one’s professional identity and work become filtered through a social justice lens, so that social justice informs all professional activities. It takes such a

prominent place in one's professional identity and way of working that it becomes an automatic part of engaging in the various professional roles one might have. For example, Vikki explained that,

“Practices are emergent from ethics, so for me, I have an ethics of justice doing, and then all practices come from that. I don't take practices and then try to graft a social justice orientation into them. It is always the ethical stance that shoulders up all the work I do.”

This was further highlighted by Sandra,

“Whether I'm sitting with an individual client, or I'm planning a workshop, or I'm doing consulting of some kind, I always have this lens in the back of my mind, you know? So it's almost like... a critical lens that I apply to everything else.”

Social justice serves as a central or foundational piece of how these counselling psychologists understand and experience their professional identity, informing all of their professional activities and being applied in an on-going manner across professional roles.

**Privilege and responsibility.** In describing their experiences of engaging with social justice, the participants repeatedly emphasized that with privilege comes responsibility. As professionals with graduate education, well-paying job opportunities, and the power to influence the decisions and behaviours of others, counselling psychologists hold a significant amount of privilege within North American society. In addition to the privileges associated with being a professional, counselling psychologists may also have privilege related to their ethnicity, language abilities, gender and sexuality, marital status, age, and numerous other factors. Social justice engagement seems to be tied to recognition of one's own privilege and a sense of personal and professional responsibility that comes with having privilege. This recognition of privilege and sense of responsibility was shared by Susan,

“For me, having access to a university and having an understanding of the great privilege that that afforded really compelled me to get involved in a more targeted way... Well, I think, first of all, it is my responsibility and one that I gladly take on, and one that I feel privileged to take.”



Participants expressed an awareness of their own power and influence, and the felt obligation to utilize this influence to better the lives of others. It was highlighted that “social justice is about using your power and privilege in a way to be in service to others” (Susan). Vikki elaborated on this by explaining that, “I think having a privileged position makes it possible for me to get heard. And to me, I feel that we have an ethical obligation as social change workers to take on the social context” (Vikki). This sense of having a responsibility for promoting justice, particularly when one is privileged and fortunate, was repeatedly emphasized by participants, as evident in the following two quotes:

“But it’s just another reminder of how fortunate I am and how fortunate many people are and how these fortunate people would do well to understand how it is for those who aren’t as fortunate. That’s what social justice is to me” (Bill).

“I mean, I think it’s my responsibility. I’m very privileged. I have a great deal of power. I have a lot of education, and I’m white, you know? I have stable employment, I make a very comfortable wage. I have a lovely family. I am so very, very privileged and blessed. And so I know that I have a responsibility to those who have not been accorded the same privilege as me. Who perhaps don’t have the same degree of power or privilege. As I say, I think that power and privilege come with responsibility, and I take mine very, very seriously” (Kathy).

In recognizing the role of social practices in the development of suffering, there is a felt sense of responsibility to change those contributing factors. Cristelle explained this when she stated, “When we ourselves are the ones that have created that suffering or that obstacle or barrier to fulfillment and to health, then I think we do have a responsibility to address it.”

Acknowledgement of the interconnections between personal privilege and professional responsibility is a strong motivator for continued social justice engagement, as explained below:

“I think the other thing that is a driver for me, and part of what makes this engagement with social justice important, is my recognition of my own privilege. And as I have become more conscious of how privileged I am relevant to some of the other people in the world, that awareness of privilege makes me conscious of my responsibility. I think those two concepts are really closely tied, privilege and responsibility. And I think the more conscious you become of your privilege, the more conscious you probably become

of your responsibility. The responsibility to other people, the responsibility to the world in general” (Sandra).

It was clear from participants’ experiences that social justice engagement is one way of fulfilling the great responsibility that comes hand-in-hand with the multiple kinds of privilege that many counselling psychologists hold.

**Finding meaning.** Participants repeatedly highlighted the importance of doing work and engaging in activities that they felt are meaningful to themselves and to others around them. Engaging in practices and work that are informed by social justice and align more consistently with participants’ core values makes their work meaningful, rewarding, and worthwhile. Cristelle shared that, “It’s what brings meaning to my life, certainly at this point in time, and I have a hard time picturing my life being meaningful if I didn’t continue to be doing social justice work.” This meaningful alignment with one’s values and morals was further echoed by Kathy when she stated,

“Well, I think it’s the right thing to do. I mean, I wish I had fancy words for you, but it’s not aspirational for me. It’s concrete and it’s a way of life... Like if we don’t share it and we don’t put it into action and we don’t demonstrate it and live it, then it’s just words.”

Doing work that is oriented towards social justice and meaningful is more important and more rewarding than being recognized as an expert. Participants emphasized the importance of their social justice engagement amongst other career goals and aspirations. Sandra exemplified this perspective as she shared, “And so, you know, I’m not too interested in being right anymore. I’m interested in supporting justice. I don’t have a need for people to recognize what I’m doing.” This sentiment was also evident in Susan’s statement,

“I would never think of myself as the expert in something, right? The social justice orientation that I have guides me to a place where I consider myself to be part of a community. And that community includes experts of all kinds: people with lived experience, people with amazing research careers, people who are great thinkers and

great doers, great activists. And I'm just part of that community. And that to me is social justice. That's what social justice looks like, is that respect."

Social justice engagement is so meaningful for those who engage in it, that it is hard to imagine living and working as a professional without embracing this stance. Bill highlighted this as he shared, "I don't know how I could be any different, to be honest. I guess that's where I get stuck. I'm just me, and I can't be something that I'm not."

In general, social justice engagement led participants to feel like they were making meaningful contributions to society and people in need. This sense of doing meaningful work emerged as more important and more impactful in participants' experiences than being recognized within the field of counselling psychology as an expert or great achiever.

**Integrity.** Social justice work is engaged in because of the belief that it is meaningful and needed in our society. As such, even when engaging in social justice was difficult, participants described a drive to follow their hearts, values, and sense of moral responsibility by practicing in ways that are consistent with what they believe. This thread of practicing in ways that were consistent with their beliefs of what is needed and responsible practice was evident throughout the participants' responses. Furthermore, this goal of striving for integrity between one's sense of responsibility and promoting justice often meant that participants' found ways of engaging in social justice work even when it was not a direct or recognized part of their job description.

Social justice engagement can often transcend the boundaries of professional paid time and enter unpaid personal time, as shared by Sandra,

"I make choices about how I spend my time engaging in things that are not necessarily paid because I believe in them. And so, that blurs the line between the personal and the professional acts, particularly in terms of time, because much of what I do in terms of social justice is not paid time. But that doesn't matter to me, it's just a reflection on how social justice is valued I think at this point. And the choices that we all have to make around that."

Several participants echoed this message that engaging in social justice work is more than just working within an interest area or filling a need within the profession. It is about doing what feels right, necessary, and socially responsible independent of whether it is encouraged or expected as part of a particular professional position or contracted job.

“I have had other professionals just go, “Kathy, I’m not interested in doing that, that’s just too much work.” And I’m really saddened when I hear “I don’t get paid for that, so I’m not doing it.” I’m really saddened to hear that... I work way beyond what’s expected of me, regardless of where I go, because, it’s like I say, it’s the right thing to do” (Kathy).

Participants provided examples of the many ways they engage in unpaid and unrecognized social justice work outside of their typical professional job descriptions, simply because they believe in the cause and are searching to have integrity between what they believe, value, and practice across personal and professional settings. Vikki highlighted this search for integrity when she shared this experience,

“You know, I’m in the Memorial March For Missing Women, and the next day I’m doing a training at the Rape Crisis Centre. I want to be doing the same work; it’s the same work, right? One is your unpaid work, and one is your paid work, but there’s things that are the same in terms of being in solidarity with each other.”

For the counselling psychologists in this study, engaging in social justice work was about achieving or preserving their sense of integrity between what they believe and preach to others, and what they choose to do and be part of both professionally and personally.

### **Theme III: Continuously Living Social Justice**

It was clear from participants’ responses that social justice is *lived*, not simply practiced or applied like one of many tools in a toolbox. Participants described an on-going and active process of engaging with and navigating their lives from a perspective of social justice. This enactment of social justice involves focused pursuit and requires constant monitoring, as there are barriers to living a life informed by this stance and unique challenges for embracing it

continuously. Participants shared the many ways that they work to balance the weight and risks of social justice awareness with the fulfillment of engaging with social justice initiatives. Within this theme there are five subthemes that highlight examples of how social justice engagement can look within various professional counselling psychology roles. These subthemes are: *the never-ending story*, *striving for balance*, *eyes wide open*, *spreading the word*, and *using power*.

**The never-ending story.** Participants described their efforts to navigate a process that is always fluctuating and continuously extending. Social justice engagement is an on-going process that is hard to pause, set aside, or disengage from. In many ways, embracing a social justice stance towards life means that you accept a perspective and commitment that cannot be cancelled, reversed, or easily ignored. And while at times this all-encompassing experience and attunement with social justice feels energizing and empowering, it can also feel draining and exhausting. As Sandra described,

“Well, I have varied over time from kind of, you know, the enthusiastic, passionate, ‘change the world’ kind of feeling to other times when I have been quite angry and distressed at what I’m seeing, and disempowered. So I think I’ve felt the full range of that, in both the sort of micro level and macro level injustices that I see. And that’s varied over time and varied over situations. I would say that I have tried to escape it sometimes, but it keeps coming back.”

The ever-growing connection to social justice is so strong, deep, and central, that participants have found it hard to ignore the many social and systemic injustices that are so important to the work they do as researchers, scholars, educators, and clinical practitioners. As Cristelle explained, in celebrating and contributing to efforts aimed at facilitating social justice, one is forced to also acknowledge the seemingly never-ending supply of injustice,

“Although you strive for social justice, it means that you often see where there’s social injustice. So I think striving forward is what brings meaning and that’s, I think, a very positive feeling. But at the same time, you have to see the injustice. One doesn’t exist without the other, I think...Like, I can’t sleep at night now if I turn a blind eye, for example, or if I do not do something.”

Upon recognizing the ongoing injustices occurring around us, it becomes more and more difficult to ignore opportunities for social justice engagement. As Bill explained, “I don’t think I ever had a real choice. [Engaging in this work] is just kind of me, it’s not even a really sort of deliberate kind of choice. It’s more just me and who I am.” Moreover, participants described social justice issues as being inescapably tied to the purpose and goals of professional psychology; “I don’t think that we would have the profession of psychology in the same way without social injustice” (Sandra). Thus, social justice work was seen as going hand-in-hand with participating in counselling psychology in an effective and responsible way. Participants found it challenging to conceptualize their professional responsibilities or goals without grounding their work in social justice. This was highlighted by Cristelle’s statement about the over-arching goal of professional psychology,

“I truly believe that social change is going to be that missing link or that final piece that’s going to help us make ourselves obsolete in this profession I think that should be our goal as professional, as a counselor. That was my motto with clients. I would tell them my goal in my work with you is to make myself obsolete.”

Overall, social justice engagement was described as an on-going and never-ending endeavor that, despite shifts and changes over time, was continuously active presence in participants’ professional and personal experiences.

**Striving for balance.** Engaging in social justice can come with personal and professional costs, as social justice perspectives may not be supported in every work environment. Thus, committing to and engaging in social justice requires careful consideration and navigation of these hazards and potential repercussions. Participants described the ways they have sought to balance self-care and community with risks of isolation and loss.

“Depending on the setting in which I worked, I found [social justice] was more or less important, more or less valued, and more or less relevant to what was expected. And in other places it was everything. It just wasn’t a great fit when I worked places where

[social justice] wasn't valued. It wasn't a good fit for me, to keep being myself when there's sometimes considerable pressure to be something different" (Bill).

Examples of the kinds of barriers or struggles participants have had in trying to live and breathe social justice into their lives were repeatedly shared. These experiences were not always pleasant or easily negotiated, occurring in various professional and personal settings, but were seen as worthwhile struggles in the larger movement towards social justice. A clear example of this kind of struggle and search for balance was shared by Vikki,

"I'm somebody who has been up for critique, that I'm way too political in our profession. And you know the fact that I'm very political... I'm a direct action activist, I take strong and clear work positions for social justice. I have never sided with neutrality or objectivity. This was very difficult during my training and getting through [graduate] school. And this wasn't a smooth go in a profession, you know, that requires objectivity. And so, I have had to continually defend my position as somebody who has a socially just orientation to my work. I have to defend how I'm political. And yet, the neutrality of the profession – that gets taken for normal, right? That doesn't have to be defended..."

It was clear from participants' experiences that it is very hard to balance one's sense of responsibility for collective social justice and one's regular need for self-care. In the fight for improving large social and systemic forces that cause or maintain injustice, it can be hard to maintain an optimistic and energetic sense of purpose and motivation. Strong examples of this struggle between working to fulfill a personal sense of responsibility while also attending to one's personal needs and level of engagement were shared by Cristelle and Sandra:

"You might feel like you're the only one seeing the injustice and how it's structured and how it's maybe contributing to the marginalization of certain groups. Yeah, it can feel a little difficult or a little overwhelming. But I think you find ways to overcome that or to feel, nevertheless, empowered in the face of something that could feel quite bigger than you" (Cristelle).

"So you know, one of the places where I end up with some value conflict is in the sort of balance in life and self-care, versus social justice and privilege and responsibility and some of those other pieces that I've talked about. And I don't find that an easy balance. And that's where I've sort of gone in waves over time, and sometimes it's just become too costly to me personally and I've pulled back. And then other times I've been able to come forward again. And I guess I would say we have to choose our battles" (Sandra).

Fostering a sense of belonging to and contributing to a community of other professionals who share a commitment for social justice engagement was one of the critical ways participants found in their efforts to maintain self-care and a sense of support in one's work. For example, Susan emphasized,

“It’s really important to me to be part of a community. And so, you create that community, like anything else, right? You seek it out; you create that. Well, I think that whenever we try to learn something from a different angle, and be questioning ourselves and our own knowledge, it’s risky. If you don’t have a strong sense of belonging... If you don’t really feel like you have good folks around you and you really belong, it doesn’t generally feel safe to go exploring from there.”

This emphasis on the importance of a professional sense of community was echoed by most participants, including Kathy and Sandra as shared below:

“I have found it has been imperative for me throughout my career to find like-minded individuals to support me and encourage me to continue to grow. Because, as I say, being on this path is not easy sometimes, right? So it means I constantly need to find a community that supports that and is like-minded, or I think I would also burn out” (Kathy).

“I think one of the things that I’ve come to realize is that for me, the self-care comes in community. So I’ve developed over time a social justice community and I feel like that has made a big difference in my life, because I’m surrounded by other people, virtually at least, who hold the same values, who take a stand, who are looking at the world in a similar way. And then I think together we can sustain it” (Sandra).

Participants’ highlighted the many challenges, risks, and barriers that have been encountered along their path of engaging in social justice, and identified the importance of a professional community in helping them to balance this important engagement with the need for self-care.

**Eyes wide open.** Embracing a social justice perspective and framework involves seeing the world through a holistic lens that accounts for systemic influences, power dynamics and contextual factors. Based on the experiences described, an important component of social justice engagement is about a willingness to have one’s eyes wide open to see all the social and



systemic contributors to the suffering of people in our society. Participants described their willingness to see the world systemically and to recognize the potential for injustice in every encounter in any context, as explained by Sandra,

“I’m looking there again from a whole systems perspective. You know, what are the power dynamics that are impacting this person? What are the sort of systemic and contextual factors that are impacting this person? What’s the power relationship between me and this person and how is that impacting what’s happening here? And it’s more complicated. You know it requires effort and it requires attention to another whole level of information that if you don’t care about social justice and you only about performance, you know it puts you in a whole different place.”

In addition to acknowledging the systemic and contextual influences on clients’ problems, being willing to keep one’s eyes open is also about recognizing the different kinds of expertise that exist amongst different members of society and utilizing that knowledge collaboratively. Bill highlighted the importance of seeing strengths in many sources as he stated,

“The other thing I think, is to recognize the knowledge and the wisdom that exists outside of the books and institutions and schools and all the things that we often locate expertise there. But there’s a lot of it in the community, and I don’t just mean people walking down the street, although it could be them too. I think of traditional leaders.”

Conceptualizing concerns from this broad systemic view allows us to be more aware of social justice issues and to respond from a social justice framework in any context or setting. Without this macro point of view, it can be hard to practice in socially just ways at the micro level. Vikki shined the light on the importance of being willing to see the systemic influences on every interaction as she shared the following experience,

“Whatever conversation or whatever piece of work I’m doing, you know whether it’s consulting or training or family session or group, I center ethics. Meaning, I’m thinking in the very center of it, like “what are the ethics I’m with and am I enacting them in this?” I don’t think “am I doing a motivational interview or are we doing group counseling?” I don’t think about technique and practice. I start by thinking about what are the ethics we’re about here, right? And it’s also about addressing power continually.”

As representatives of counselling psychology, we all encounter opportunities to raise social justice concerns or to engage in social justice work in our everyday lives, both in our professional roles and in our personal roles. The importance and relevance of recognizing these small and daily opportunities to engage in social justice work, both in professional and personal contexts, was shared by both Susan and Bill:

“The ways in which I hold people accountable for the language they use and the assumptions they may have. So we had dinner guests over recently and somebody told a joke that was quite demeaning to women. And I mean it used to be that I would think well, I need to be a good host and I won’t say anything. But I do now, and you know, I said to that person that telling jokes that demean women were not welcome. It kind of stops the conversation, but it’s important to me and I’ve realized that” (Susan).

“Trying to help my kids see that they’re very privileged in many ways and how fortunate they are and to help them see that they have a responsibility to help out each other, but also in their neighborhood and their school. They have a responsibility to give back as they get a lot” (Bill).

While this theme of being willing to see and recognize the larger social and systemic influences on well-being was echoed by all participants, it was clear that the application to this stance of acknowledgment was different for each participant. Social justice engagement can look very different for each person, and there are countless ways of acknowledging a social justice perspective, engaging in social justice work, and living life from this perspective.

“Lots of times I think that when people hear the word social justice or advocacy they think you know, immediately they think they have to be out protesting and they have to do things very publicly and they have to be militant... I embrace the principles and the philosophy and the embodiment of it and I can promise you I have never once held a placard or marched you know in any political way. However, I am very involved in this because I can do it in other ways” (Kathy).

Finding one’s own way of seeing the systemic, organizational, and social factors that influence each member of society is a critical component of engaging in social justice.

Participants repeatedly described the various ways that they aim to keep their eyes open,

metaphorically, to the environmental and social systems that influence the individual, family, group or community experience of well-being.

**Spreading the word.** Social justice engagement is also about finding ways to live social justice in whatever your professional roles happen to be and making choices about how you work that are informed by social justice concepts and principles. Participants repeatedly described how they share and spread social justice awareness by educating others, researching and writing about social justice issues, and being explicit about their social justice perspective within their varied and changing professional roles. As a researcher and graduate supervisor, Cristelle explained,

“I think it’s very important, the research decisions that you make. You know whose voice are you fore-fronting? And so, I do encourage students I work with to consider fore fronting the voice of those who aren’t very well represented in our current understanding.”

Participants described various examples of how social justice has informed their practice as researchers, scholars, educators, and clinicians. Some of these examples are shared here in an effort to illustrate the many different ways that social justice engagement can occur. An example of social justice engagement within the role of educator and administrator was shared by Sandra,

“I have also worked really hard to see social justice infused throughout our graduate program. And one of the choices that we made as a whole team, five or six years ago, was to adopt social justice as one of our sort of underwriting themes as an academic unit... So I think that infusion of the theme of social justice throughout the graduate program is one of the things that---one of the places I’ve been able to have an influence.”

Serving on various community, political, and organizational committees and boards, and using those kinds of roles as opportunities for raising awareness, advocacy, and influencing change is another way of engaging in social justice from various roles. This example was shared by Kathy,

“So I’m involved with a lot of committee work. And I do that as a trained professional, because I want to bring the voice of those who do have emotional and psychological

challenges to ensure that when we're talking about whatever it is, whatever committee I'm on, and to make sure that those needs are also being looked at.”

Overall, participants expressed a need to be explicit and open about their social justice perspective, and to uphold their social justice commitment across professional roles in an effort to raise the awareness of others and to influence social change. This openness and declaration of one's stance was experienced as an underlying and purposeful way of engaging in social justice, as expressed by Susan and Vikki below:

“I guess the only other thing would be sort of the public versus the private face of social justice. I think a lot of people work quietly in service to others, using social justice as a guiding principle. And it's a wonderful thing. I don't want to diminish that for a minute. But my personal belief is that if we want to change the world, we have to be visible about it. And you know, with my students, for example, well, I know that the reaction that many students will have is that they don't feel comfortable being public with their social justice views. And I think that's another part of it. It's living your values and becoming comfortable with who you are as a person and how that can affect who you are as a professional. And how that connects with what you show the world” (Susan).

“I'm overt about the fact that I'm taking a position overtly for social justice in all of what I'm trying to do. I'm not saying that I deliver justice all the time. I'm saying I'm always trying to enact my ethics for social justice in all that I do and I'm out about that” (Vikki).

Social justice engagement includes some component of spreading understanding, recognition, and awareness of systems of injustice, oppression, and marginalization. This form of applied social justice can look different in a variety of counselling psychology roles, as described by participants. What is central or consistent in the experience of social justice engagement for these participants is an embracing of opportunities to raise awareness of social justice issues across contexts and within various professional roles.

**Using power.** Making use of one's power and influence in various contexts to generate positive change through both personal and professional decisions seems important, given the sense of responsibility previously discussed. Social justice engagement can occur in any conversation or interpersonal context not only by being open to hearing another's perspective,

but also by embracing opportunities to use one's voice and influence to promote shared understanding and constructive dialogue that take into account social justice issues.

“What's interesting is that I know that [my colleagues] have engaged in things that I would consider to be social justice or action. But because they don't couch it that way, I think they're unaware of what we're talking about. Which is why I think it's so important that we get the opportunity to model and you know, we get the opportunity to dialogue and discuss” (Kathy).

Participants repeatedly shared ways that they consider the power dynamics within their interactions and professional roles, and are careful to use their own voice and privilege in ways that support social justice.

“And when I teach counseling interventions, we talk a lot about trauma and the vulnerability of people for violence in ways that are framed by social justice. So my teaching certainly is every day framed by social justice. And I do that all the time; teach all the time” (Susan).

Voicing concerns when one is in a position of social safety helps to ensure that others who may have less power, less support, or fewer resources will have an easier time navigating that particular system. A strong example of this deliberate use of one's power for the promotion of social justice was shared by Sandra,

“So the example is of being in Emergency in a hospital a few years ago, and trying to get the woman at the Admissions desk to change my marital status from common-law to married. And because I'm a lesbian, she had in her head that same-sex marriage was still not recognized in Alberta, which she was completely wrong. So my point in all of this is that the reason I choose to put the effort into something like that is because, there's very little risk to me in doing that. But there are many people, there are many people in the gay and lesbian community for whom it would be hugely risky to self-identify or at least they would perceive a risk to self-identify. And so, I think well, I have an obligation then because I have this privilege and there's no risk to me. I mean there's always risks, but no major risk to me. Then I have this responsibility that goes along with that privilege to pave the way for people who are in a way more vulnerable position” (Sandra).

Although Sandra's example occurred within her personal life, many participants shared examples of ways they have used their influence and professional voice as part of their counselling psychology roles. One such example, from an educator role, was described by Cristelle,

“So I’d have to say that on occasion, you know, I find myself taking on an advocacy role for students, for example, for when there are certain policies that are being put in place or that are in place that clearly might disfavor certain students over others in ways that are unfair. You know, I’ll go out of my way to bring that to the attention of those who are in that decision-making position. Or advocacy in terms of speaking on behalf of or with a student... If possible, I try to use an approach that’s empowering for the student, rather than just go and intervene on their behalf” (Cristelle).

Participants provided numerous examples of social justice engagement within their professional roles, including financial and supervisory/managerial decisions that were informed by social justice. Examples of using power purposefully within clinical practice were shared by Vikki and Bill below:

“I supervise a lot of teams. So I think that addressing power and acknowledging the presence of power is always important, acknowledging my power and the differential ways that is... And that what I’m doing in therapy, in group counseling, in supervising a team, this should be held to the same ethics and be a piece of the social justice practice I’m involved in on the streets” (Vikki).

“In clinical work, well, I mean a lot of people have sliding scales nowadays. A lot of people see clients for nothing if they need to. A lot of people will work with folks who many people won’t, like you know, pedophiles or something like that, inner city, drug involved, street involved and that kind of stuff. I mean lots of people do that, so I don’t know. But that’s all my professional work, because I don’t think they’re any less worthy, just because they can’t afford it” (Bill).

As has been highlighted, another important component of social justice engagement is the use of one’s personal and/or professional power and privilege to influence change within systems that contribute to injustice, oppression, and marginalization.

### **Summary of the Findings**

In considering all of the themes and subthemes together, it is clear that the experience of engaging in social justice is complex and closely connected with other important experiences that shape and direct the career paths of these counselling psychologists. For the participants in this study, the motivation or drive for engaging with and committing to social justice is rooted in personal experiences, value systems, and long-held moral beliefs about helping others and the

responsibility for promoting justice. Since most counselling psychologists have similar reasons for entering the profession, graduate training and education can serve more to awaken this deep-held interest, and help structure and shape the way professional helping is organized and conceptualized. In providing professionals with a framework that is grounded in and centered around social justice principles, opportunities for finding meaning within the professional roles and identity of counselling psychologists is likely facilitated.

For the participants in this study, this commitment and passion for justice is then able to be consistently acknowledged and enacted as foundational aspects of counselling psychologists' professional and personal identity. Achieving a sense of integrity between one's personal life and beliefs, and one's professional work and pursuits, may allow for continued passion and mutual dedication to the goals of counselling psychology, both within one's contained professional roles and as part of everyday life. This integrity between identities and ways of being also contributes to one's ability to navigate continuously fluctuating and expanding professional demands, allowing one to focus and stay centered in working from and living from a social justice perspective. For these participants, this kind of broad social justice commitment and identification is enacted through simple day-to-day actions and choices (such as recognizing the power and systemic influences in each encounter) as well as through more purposeful and explicit efforts to contribute to larger social change (such as through serving on the board of directors of local organizations and on professional committees). Overall, the process is one of recognizing inner values and beliefs and *living* them, not only on a personal level, but also within professional roles that hold both powerful influence and important responsibility.

A more in-depth discussion of these findings within the context of other professional literature and in relation to other current areas in counselling psychology follows in Chapter

Five. A discussion of the limitations of the current research and recommendations for future exploration of social justice within the field of counselling psychology are also provided in the next chapter.



## **Chapter Five – Discussion and Conclusion**

Counselling psychologists in Canada and in the US have increasingly worked to advance a social justice orientation within counselling psychology through research, training, and practice (Arthur & Collins, 2010; Blustein et al., 2005; Goodman et al., 2004; Hage et al., 2007; Miller et al., 2009; Vera & Speight, 2003). Members of the profession have been urged to consider what it means to them to be a counselling psychologist, to explore their commitment to social justice issues, and to re-examine the ways client change occurs. Further, it has been repeatedly emphasized that counselling psychologists need to reflect on the role that the profession plays within the dominant culture (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2003; Vera & Speight, 2003). An important component of a deeper embracement of a social justice orientation within counselling psychology would be advocacy towards macro-level, pro-social systemic change on behalf of all members of society who struggle with oppression and marginalization (Moe et al., 2010; Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2003; Roysircar, 2009).

Despite the recent emphasis on social justice within counselling psychology's professional literature, there has continued to be a lack of critical inquiry into the integration of social justice into counselling psychologists' professional identity and practice (Odegard & Vereen, 2010). In an effort to address this gap between a conceptual emphasis and professional practice, this study has explored counselling psychologists' lived experiences of engaging with social justice. Previous chapters have provided the context for this research, outlined the methodology, and described the findings of this study. This final chapter will offer a discussion within the context of previous research and relevant literature, highlighting the implications of the results for counselling psychology education, practice, and research. The delimitations of the study will also be explored, followed by recommendations for future research.

## Discussion of the Results

In exploring counselling psychologists' lived experiences, three key aspects of social justice engagement were identified. First, it was clear from participants' reports that they felt a natural pull towards engaging in social justice that existed prior to their formal training in counselling psychology. As highlighted by the theme *A Social Justice Calling*, social justice had influenced various domains of participants' lives, and was eventually applied in more purposeful ways from within their counselling psychology roles. Secondly, participants noted that social justice engagement was about achieving and/or maintaining a sense of integrity between one's personal and professional identities and roles, as described in the *Integrity in Identities* theme. Participants described the interconnected ways social justice informed their personal and professional identities, aligning with their values, fulfilling their sense of social responsibility, and bringing meaning to their professional activities and personal choices. Finally, social justice engagement appeared to be an on-going fluid experience, much like an evolving story. Within the theme *Continuously Living Social Justice*, participants described the many different ways that they *live* social justice within various roles, always striving to maintain balance, adopt a systemic perspective, dialogue and raise awareness with those around them, and use their personal and professional power to generate both social change and individual change.

Although these three seemingly distinct themes have been identified and described in Chapter Four, these themes and their corresponding subthemes are very much inter-related components rather than independent features of these counselling psychologists' social justice engagement. The experience of engaging in social justice seems to be fluid and cyclical in many ways. For these counselling psychologists, their experiences, values, and education have come to shape their identity as individuals and as professionals. Based on the experiences of the

participants, it seems counselling psychologists then come to identify with social justice very deeply and centrally, which inevitably informs and influences their worldviews, their personal and professional interests areas, and ultimately their choices and actions in various realms of their lives. When supported by a community of other people and systems around them, this process of engagement with social justice within both personal and professional realms of life is then propelled to repeat itself and continue to evolve and expand over time. In experiencing and contributing to this cyclical pattern of social justice engagement, there is a sense of flow, balance, and integrity that yields satisfaction and motivation, which ultimately provides meaning that fuels continued social justice engagement.

The current results raise new considerations for the profession and challenge previously cited ideas about the utility and feasibility of infusing social justice into counselling psychologists' professional identity and roles. What follows is a more detailed discussion of the current results within the context of previous literature.

**Professional identity development.** Professional identity can be attributed to one's values, historical experiences, theoretical perspective, the scope and focus of professional activities, and distinguishing features of a particular profession (Calley & Hawley, 2008). Similarly, the counselling psychologists in this study have come to identify with social justice as individuals and as professionals because a social justice orientation fits with their values and beliefs, their early life experiences, and their perspectives about how change occurs for individuals and groups within society. Their identity as counselling psychologists is defined by engagement in social justice, which informs the focus of their professional efforts and the scope of their professional activities.

The features that distinguish counselling psychology from other helping professions in Canada play a part in shaping participants' professional identity, including: (a) a commitment to human development across the lifespan; (b) attention to issues of diversity, advocacy, and prevention; and (c) awareness of social and systemic influences on the wellbeing of individual and groups (Sinacore, 2011). However, the explicit identification with a social justice orientation goes one step further than the defining features outlined in the official definition of counselling psychology adopted by CPA (Beatch et al., 2009), which does not explicitly use the term 'social justice.' This identifying with and naming of social justice as a core or central component of these counselling psychologists' identities and practices goes beyond the official definition and provides more explicit clarification about these counselling psychologists' values and political ideologies. It is this deeper integration of the definition with one's values and ideologies that can allow counselling psychologists to develop a professional identity that has meaning for them as individuals and can clearly inform their professional practice. In line with this finding is research suggesting that professional identity development involves a linking of personal and professional selves through contexts, thoughts, feelings, and experiences (Luke & Goodrich, 2010; Solomon, 2007). Without a values-based and personal connection to the aims and responsibilities of the profession of counselling psychology, it is unlikely that a meaningful professional identity can emerge for counselling psychologists.

Despite the many ways that a social justice orientation aligns with and supports the foundational features of counselling psychology in Canada, there has continued to be resistance to addressing social power and privilege as an issue relevant to the profession (Arredondo et al., 2008; Bemak & Chung, 2008; Hays et al., 2007; Weinrach & Thomas, 2004). This hesitation implies that there is an uncomfortable quality to aligning with social justice, perhaps because it

requires professionals to acknowledge their own privilege and power within society, both as professionals and as individual citizens. Although the participants in this study did demonstrate awareness and recognition of their own privilege and power, as described in the *Privilege and Responsibility* subtheme, this acknowledgement was not described as coming from a forced or uncomfortable place. Instead, the counselling psychologists in this study felt that this acknowledgement was part of taking on the responsibilities placed upon members of the profession. Similarly, students graduating from counselling psychology programs are increasingly realizing that counselling psychology and social justice are vitally linked (Chang et al., 2010). The counselling psychologists in the current study openly addressed the issue of social privilege as a necessary part of practicing in ethical and pro-social ways within counselling psychology. In fact, participants emphasized that the profession itself cannot escape a political stance, which means that the political ideologies of counselling psychology need to be clarified and given more focused consideration. Otherwise, there will continue to be a mismatch between the values and beliefs of many counselling psychologists and their professional endeavors, impeding the development of a coherent and clear counselling psychology professional identity. At a time when counselling psychologists in Canada are trying to solidify a professional identity, it is important to consider what values are guiding the specialization of the profession.

Nonetheless, many counselling psychologists have expressed that the incorporation of social justice into our professional identity and practices feels like an additional responsibility at a time when counselling psychologists are already feeling overburdened (Baluch et al., 2004). The counselling psychologists in this study recognized the potential for burnout and fatigue as a result of their social justice engagement, as described in the subtheme *Striving for Balance*. However, their establishment of a strong professional identity grounded in social justice has

generated more meaning, motivation, and satisfaction than exhaustion, as highlighted by the subtheme *Finding Meaning*. By achieving integrity across multiple layers of personal and professional views, beliefs, practices, and goals, counselling psychologists felt there was greater meaning to their professional roles and work. This sense of fulfillment is in line with research indicating that professional identity development is not only a cognitive process, but can also serve as a psychological resource for members of a profession which helps them to sustain their motivation and make meaning of their work (Luke & Goodrich, 2010; Solomon, 2007). Thus, although some counselling psychologists are hesitant to embrace a professional identity grounded in social justice, such a unified and values-based identity has the potential to provide more momentum and energy for their continued counselling psychology practice than feel like an added chore or unwanted responsibility.

Furthermore, in embracing the community-based and systemic approaches to facilitating change that are a defining feature of a social justice orientation to counselling psychology (Constantine et al., 2007; D'Andrea & Heckman, 2008; Vera & Speight, 2003), professionals are likely to feel more effective within their helping roles. Counselling psychologists are continuously addressing some of the most complex social issues that can contribute to and exacerbate clients' presenting concerns. Consequently, it is important to go beyond services that help clients to cope with aversive conditions in their lives, incorporating broader systemic approaches that address the social and organizational practices that contribute to client problems (Arthur & Collins, 2010; Bailey et al., 2007). In revisiting their historical roots that emphasize prevention, health promotion, and broader systemic change, counselling psychologists could distinguish themselves from other branches of psychology more explicitly.

In summary, the findings from this study have highlighted the many benefits and advantages for counselling psychologists to develop a strong professional identity firmly centered around social justice. The alignment between a social justice orientation and counselling psychologists' core values, beliefs, and experiences produces a sense of integrity and fulfillment for professionals that can propel them to stay engaged in the profession. Further, although social justice is well-aligned with the goals and responsibilities already defined for the profession, the lack of explicit emphasis on social justice in the definition of counselling psychology seems to be a missed opportunity for emphasizing this important facet of our professional identity. Based on the results, when professionals feel like they are engaged in meaningful activities that are facilitating positive change for all members of society, they are more motivated and satisfied in their personal and professional activities. This could be particularly true when counselling psychologists can find support for their social justice engagement within a community of peers and professional organizations.

**Embracing a social justice orientation.** It has been repeatedly emphasized that counselling psychologists need to explain in greater detail how social justice can be implemented into counselling psychologists' regular practice (Nelson-Jones, 2002; Moe et al., 2010; Weinrach & Thomas, 2004). The findings from this research begin to bring current social justice practice recommendations to life through examples from social justice leaders in Canadian counselling psychology. One important component of a social justice orientation to counselling psychology is the recognition that clients do not exist independently of society, culture, and context (Crethar & Ratts, 2008). Participants repeatedly discussed their broad systemic understanding of the influential factors in clients' lives, as highlighted in the subthemes *Eyes Wide Open* and *Using Power*, demonstrating adoption of a macro-view that accounts for systemic influences, power

dynamics and contextual factors that affect groups and individuals. This attitude or perspective has been repeatedly emphasized as necessary in the social justice literature, as counselling psychologists have been encouraged to recognize that those from non-dominant populations have access to fewer of society's resources, have less power within social systems, and experience a greater quantity of difficulties and mental health concerns than those who hold more social and economic power (Eriksen & Kress, 2006). It has been emphasized that populations with less power in our society have been disadvantaged due to the social construction of their cultural identities, such as ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, gender, religion, ability, and/or socio-economic-status (Arthur & Collins, 2010). Examples of the ways these counselling psychologists have applied this social justice principle are available throughout the various subthemes described, with particular emphasis within the subtheme *Eyes Wide Open*.

The *Eyes Wide Open* subtheme, along with the experiences described in the subtheme *Widespread Commitment*, also exemplify the ways these counselling psychologists have embraced a social justice conceptualization of where and how change occurs. As Ratts (2009) highlighted, it is important that counselling psychologists view both individuals and social systems as clients, and to reconceptualise homes, schools, neighborhoods, and communities as additional places where the work of counselling psychologists occurs. As summarized in the subtheme *Spreading The Word*, application of a social justice orientation to counselling psychology can also involve educating others about social justice and using professional roles to raise awareness about social justice issues. The experiences described by participants fit with the conceptualization of advocacy and consciousness raising, which are described throughout the social justice literature as some of the ways that inequitable social, political, and economic



conditions impeding the development of individuals, groups and communities can be addressed (Ratts, 2009).

As previously mentioned, another defining feature of a social justice orientation within counselling psychology is community engagement and activism (Brubaker et al., 2010; Constantine et al., 2007; D'Andrea & Heckman, 2008; Vera & Speight, 2003). The experiences described within the subthemes *Spreading the Word* and *Using Power* reflect how participants engaged in social justice work within various community organizations and events, and demonstrated a purposeful sharing and using of power to promote justice within society. This acknowledgement and application of power, privilege, and oppression is again in line with proposed social justice practice models (Fouad et al., 2006). Overall, the examples obtained from participants' experience suggest that it is quite possible for counselling psychologists to integrate and apply many of the principles of social justice within daily professional and personal roles. Further, the findings suggest that this application does not necessarily mean that counselling psychologists cannot continue to work with individuals in traditional contexts (such as in individual therapy/assessment, graduate training programs, or by using a variety of research methodologies). Rather, the results indicate that through re-connecting to a social justice orientation, these activities are expanded in scope, more focused in purpose, and more meaningful to both the professionals and the individuals, groups, and communities being served.

Despite a strong rationale for infusing social justice into counselling psychology roles and practices, several deterrents or barriers were identified by participants, consistent with challenges outlined in the literature (Arthur & Collins, 2013; Beer et al., 2012; Goodman et al., 2004). One such barrier is the kind and amount of support that counselling psychologists engaged with social justice receive. As described in the literature, counselling psychologists

work in systems that may at times place restrictions on their scope of practice in terms of funding, agency mandates, support from administrators, and time and resources available for meeting client needs (Arthur & Collins, 2013). Similarly, participants in this study highlighted through the subthemes *Integrity* and *Striving for Balance* the ways that they sometimes felt unsupported in their social justice engagement or that professional organizations and systems of which they were a part did not allow for or account for the social justice work they felt was needed. These kinds of barriers at times prevented these counselling psychologists from adequately addressing the social justice issues that were impacting their clients.

Interestingly, despite these barriers, the counselling psychologists in this study found ways of continuing their social justice engagement, as exemplified in the subthemes *The Never-Ending Story* and *Striving for Balance*. The importance of having a community of peers and organizations to support social justice engagement was repeatedly emphasized by participants. Additionally, many of these counselling psychologists simply engaged in social justice outside of their paid or structured professional roles, when necessary. Participants described in the subthemes *Widespread Commitment* and *Integrity* the ways that they supported social justice in their personal lives, in their daily choices, and in their un-paid time at work, going above and beyond employment expectations to engage in the necessary social justice efforts. Although this highlights how committed these counselling psychologists have been to promoting social justice, it also raises other concerns about the lack of recognition and organizational support available for social justice engagement in some practice settings.

This lack of recognition and organizational support is also a problem with regards to centering counselling psychology training and research programs around social justice. Many in the field have highlighted the challenge of establishing graduate programs grounded in social

justice. For example, the time allocated by educators and researchers to social justice activities often fall outside of traditional tenure-track and promotion-based systems, thus requiring these professionals to again go beyond job expectations, paid time, or recognized activities to align themselves with social justice goals (Beer et al., 2012; Goodman et al., 2004). Nonetheless, many of the participants in this study do hold positions as counselling psychology researchers, educators, and scholars and were able to provide examples within the *Continuously Living Social Justice* theme of how they have applied social justice within these roles.

As more counselling psychologists choose to align themselves with social justice independent of what efforts will be recognized or rewarded in various professional roles, we are beginning to see more examples of how curriculum in counselling psychology can support students in gaining the skills needed for addressing social justice in various forms of counselling psychology practice (Arthur & Collins, 2013). Overall, participants described ways that they balance traditional needs and expectations with the need for social justice engagement across contexts, as highlighted in the subtheme *Striving for Balance*. Although this balance is not always perfectly achieved, participants' experiences suggest that it is an important component of the ever-evolving process of engaging with social justice within counselling psychology.

### **Implications for Counselling Psychology**

Although there has been an increase in social justice counselling literature and recognition of its importance within Canadian counselling psychology, there continues to be a discrepancy between social justice rhetoric and practice. One of the relevant steps in promoting a social justice orientation to counselling psychology is generating interest and commitment to social justice issues and initiatives. The current results suggest that perhaps part of connecting counselling psychologists to social justice involves a re-connection to the values, beliefs, and

experiences that led professionals to choose a career in counselling psychology in the first place. Likely, most professionals in this field share common values and beliefs about fairness, human rights, shared power, and caring for those people who experience difficulties in their lives. The participants in this study emphasized their early ties to social justice in the subtheme *Early Experiences*. By also embracing these values and the need for social justice as critical for the effectiveness of our professional work, perhaps counselling psychologists can more easily identify with social justice on a personal level, and then come to internalize social justice as a central part of their professional identity. In doing so, counselling psychologists would be working towards achieving that sense of integrity and satisfaction that is necessary for keeping professionals feeling motivated to do meaningful work within the profession.

Additionally, it is important that counselling psychology in Canada continue to work towards establishing a unified professional identity for counselling psychologists. This will likely involve building upon the official definition of counselling psychology in Canada (Beatch et al., 2009), reflecting on the core values, beliefs, and goals that give the profession focus and direction, and recognizing the need for social and systemic change. As evident through the experiences of the counselling psychologists in this study, a professional identity needs to be grounded not only in the defining features of a profession, but also in a personal sense of what is effective and meaningful on an individual, group, and community level.

In addition to the establishment of a counselling psychology professional identity that is centered around social justice, more concrete and clear social justice practice models are needed that can further inform social justice engagement within counselling psychology clinical practice, research, and training. Creating these kinds of practice models has been a challenge in the past several years, and has delayed greater implementation of a social justice orientation within

counselling psychology (Mellin et al., 2011). The many applied examples that emerged within this research serve as initial guidelines for counselling psychologists looking to expand their social justice engagement, as numerous examples from clinical practice, research, and training are included in the *Continuously Living Social Justice* theme. However, in order to promote more widespread social justice engagement within Canadian counselling psychology as a whole, more concrete and specific guidelines and practice models need to be created, shared, and applied across organizations and settings where counselling psychologists work.

For example, counsellor education can incorporate curriculum that supports new counselling psychology students to reflect on the values, experiences, and beliefs that led them to choose a career in this profession (Burnes & Manese, 2008; Pieterse, Evans, Risner-Butner, Collins, & Mason, 2009). Graduate programs could also infuse curriculum in a social justice orientation, to assist students in identifying with social justice on both personal and professional levels (Bemak & Chung, 2007; Beer et al., 2012; Goodman et al., 2004; McWhirter & McWhirter, 2007; Talleyrand, Chung, & Bemak, 2006). This would assist students in developing their social consciousness within the various roles that counselling psychologists hold. Supervisors could also encourage students to engage in research and projects that have a social justice or community enhancement theme, so that they may become increasingly comfortable with applying social justice (Constantine et al., 2007; Goodman et al., 2004; Palmer & Parish, 2008; Zalaquett, Foley, Tillotson, Dinsmore, & Hof, 2008). Lastly, graduate programs need to work towards promoting, recognizing, supporting, and rewarding social justice engagement that may go beyond traditional faculty responsibilities, course requirements or program components. This could include service projects, membership on committees or boards of directors, advocacy or activism efforts, and community education about social justice issues (Miller & Sendrowitz,

2011; Nilsson & Schmidt, 2005; Singh et al., 2010). By helping students to identify with social justice, to apply a social justice orientation, and to take pride and ownership of their social justice efforts, graduate programs can facilitate the professional identity development of their students.

With regards to clinical practice, it was clear from the participating counselling psychologists that career choices need to be made from a place of integrity with one's own values, needs, and interests whenever possible. No single person can address all of the social and systemic issues that exist in our society, and all individuals have financial and personal needs that require attention. However, by aligning oneself with career opportunities that allow one to engage in work that feels meaningful, aligns with one's values and beliefs, and is effective at addressing factors that contribute to clients' problems, it is more likely that one will continue to feel satisfied and motivated in one's professional roles. Thus, social justice oriented counselling psychologists need to be aware of the constraints and barriers that exist within professional systems, and find ways to work around these challenges. In surrounding oneself with other professionals who are also working towards social justice, a supportive community of professionals with common goals and objectives develops that can assist in energizing and motivating continued social justice engagement and meaningful counselling work. Further, striving for balance between self-care and going beyond the call of duty for social justice is necessary. Practitioners need to stay aware of their own needs and increase or decrease their social justice efforts accordingly, so as to stay balanced and motivated. While engagement with and awareness of social justice is never ending, the level and form of social justice engagement is fluid and ever-changing in accordance with individual, group, and community needs, as well as personal, professional, and organizational resources available to support those involved.

Nonetheless, there are many ways that clinical practitioners can apply a social justice orientation in their regular counselling psychology practice. This includes: (a) adopting a macro, systemic perspective of client's presentations; (b) advocating and sharing power with clients in individual, group, and community settings; (c) becoming involved in organizational or community systems, such as committees and boards of directors; (d) using one's time, expertise, social position, and knowledge for the betterment of individuals, groups, and communities; and finally, (e) educating others about social justice issues and ways they can positively influence the wellbeing of individuals, groups, and communities. Currently there are many organizational and systemic structures that can impede or create barriers for social justice engagement. Those counselling psychologists serving on boards of directors or in positions that can influence these larger systems should work towards creating work environments and policies that support and encourage social justice action. While many of the counselling psychologists in this study provided examples of how they engaged in social action outside of their professional jobs, many examples of social justice engagement within traditional counselling psychology job descriptions were also shared by participants. Counselling psychologists wanting to become more engaged with social justice are likely to find opportunities in both their personal and professional lives to engage in social justice action.

For counselling psychologists who are involved in research and scholarship within counselling psychology, there are also many opportunities for social justice engagement. Researchers can choose topics or research questions that help to further promote or expand social justice initiatives, or that address social and systemic factors that contribute to oppression, marginalization, injustice, and mental health concerns. Researchers engaged with social justice also have choices about how they will conduct their research, whose voice will be highlighted,

and how the findings will be presented to benefit individuals, groups, and communities (Miller & Sendrowitz, 2011; Palmer, 2004; Russell-Mayhew, 2007). Participants in this study provided examples of the kinds of research activities they engage in and how social justice is infused into these various research roles throughout the *Continuously Living Social Justice* theme.

### **Delimitations and Future Research**

A descriptive phenomenological approach to research was selected for this current study, because of its aim to offer an account of space, time, and the world as we *live* them, giving a direct description of an experience without accounting for psychological origins or causal explanations often already provided (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). As previously discussed in Chapter Three, the central concern of descriptive phenomenological research is a return to embodied, experiential meaning in an effort to seek fresh descriptions of a human experience in all its complexities (Finlay, 2009). In particular, descriptive phenomenology was used as a way of accessing “insider” meaning about social justice engagement within counselling psychology as directly and subjectively experienced in everyday life by counselling psychologists (Finlay, 2009). While descriptive phenomenology was chosen for its strength in providing detailed lived accounts of counselling psychologists’ social justice engagement, the limitations of this methodology and the specific methods used in this study are important to highlight.

**Descriptive phenomenological blinders.** A key aspect of descriptive phenomenology is to describe a phenomenon based on a group of people’s lived experiences with that phenomenon. Thus, there is an acknowledgement that the phenomenon or event under investigation could be experienced by other people other than the way it is being reported, and that findings speak only to how the phenomenon presented itself to the persons interviewed (Giorgi, 2006a). Thus one



limitation of the findings presented here is that they are descriptive only of the experiences of these 6 participants, and other Canadian counselling psychologists engaged in social justice may have very different experiences of this phenomenon. Thus, while the essential aspects of social justice engagement presented here could reflect the experiences of many counselling psychologists practicing in various roles across Canada, there may be other components to social justice engagement that were not captured here or that are not reflected in other counselling psychologists' experience. For example, some counselling psychologists may not be able to enact social justice to the same degree as the participants in this study. Future researchers could seek to interview or survey additional counselling psychologists about their experience of engaging in social justice to explore other important components of this phenomenon and to discern how common or central the themes identified here are to the experiences of other members of the profession in Canada.

Despite this lack of “reality” claims made through descriptive phenomenology methodology, there continues to be an emphasis on minimizing researcher bias through the phenomenological reduction or bracketing. Many researchers have challenged the applicability and necessity of such a step, and descriptive phenomenological researchers have engaged in bracketing to various degrees and in multiple ways. As such, a challenge within this research, as would be in any other descriptive phenomenological research, was to continuously engage in critical and reflexive evaluation of how pre-understandings could influence the research and to devise ways of containing this influence. While significant efforts were made to identify assumptions and biases as they arose throughout the research process (Giorgi, 2006a), it is nearly impossible to discern whether there were any biases or influences which did not rise to the surface of awareness that could have played a role in the research process.

Similarly, many researchers have argued that even with strenuous bracketing and reflection, the researcher can only ever *imagine* the participants' world view and that this should be confirmed through a member-checking step (Spiegelberg, 1975). Participant feedback of this kind has been adopted by many as a key component of descriptive phenomenology (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2010). This strategy was not adopted in this current study, as explained in Chapter Three, in an effort to remain loyal to the ontological assumptions and methods outlined in Giorgi's method (1997). Instead, cooperation through an audit trail was utilized in an effort to make data analysis steps as transparent and descriptive as possible. In order to address these concerns about bracketing biases and capturing the experience of engaging with social justice from the worldview of the participants, future researchers could work towards auditing the current study. These efforts would serve to strengthen the claim that critical assumptions, biases, or influences were effectively identified and contained throughout the research process.

**Set-backs in the methods used.** In addition to the limitations inherent in the descriptive phenomenological methods selected for this research, a few additional limitations exist with regards to implementing the methods described. First, the recruitment process proved to be more difficult than initially anticipated. Obtaining nominations of counselling psychologists who were considered leaders in the area of social justice was challenging, as fewer responses were received than expected. This limited response rate may have been due in part to the time of year, as recruitment notices were sent out in late fall and early winter, when many counselling psychologists are incredibly busy and/or preparing to go away for winter holidays. Further, amongst those professionals nominated, many were not graduates from a counselling psychology graduate program and thus did not qualify for the study. This is likely in part a reflection on the lack of distinct professional identity for counselling psychologists and the blurring of

professional affiliations and roles amongst counsellors, clinical psychologists, counselling psychologists, clinical social workers, and other helping professions. In combination, these two challenges resulted in several social justice leaders choosing not to participate or being unable to respond to invitations to participate. Their experiences and opinions would have undoubtedly been valuable in this research, and future researchers should attempt to include the perspectives of these additional social justice leaders into a larger conceptualization of counselling psychologists' social justice engagement in Canada. Specifically, it would be interesting to explore how counselling psychologists engaged with social justice have worked to overcome the systemic and organizations barriers that currently interfere with broader social action within the profession.

On a practical level, defining "leader in social justice" also proved a difficult task, as there were no specific guidelines or qualifications available in the literature or in practice to guide this identification process. Fortunately, it was clear from talking with many of the nominees and all of the participants that they had been actively engaged in social justice activities in various roles for several years, impacting individuals, groups, and communities in various ways that were guided and informed by a social justice orientation. Many were also well-known and vocal in the social justice community, contributing to the advancement of a social justice orientation through their service and professional endeavors. While these characteristics highlighted the participants' leadership within the area of social justice in Canadian counselling psychology, participant selection was not based on a strict set of achievements, experiences, or professional affiliations. Future research exploring counselling psychologists' social justice engagement may consider compiling or generating some standards for what can be considered recognized leadership in this area of practice.

Another unanticipated limitation was with regards to the demographic distribution of participants. Only one male counselling psychologist agreed to participate in the current study. Many more nominations of female counselling psychologists were received than male counselling psychologists, which is likely in keeping with the overall gender distribution in the counselling profession (e.g., gender distribution of CCPA membership; CCPA 2013). However, while three male counselling psychologists were invited to participate, only one was able to do so. Future researchers should attempt to capture more male voices in the exploration of counselling psychologists' social justice engagement, in an effort to obtain male representation that is more reflective of the gender distribution within Canadian counselling psychology.

Another limitation of the study was the effectiveness of the interview questions selected in eliciting the kinds of descriptions needed in order to address the research question posed. Most participants provided much more detail, many more examples, and more information than was required to address the research question, often discussing aspects of counselling psychology or social justice that were not directly related to the overarching questions being asked. This tangential responding may have been due in part to interview questions that were a bit too open ended, and may also have been a result of participants trying to respond on the spot. Perhaps with a few more focused interview questions and/or by providing participants an outline of interview questions prior to the scheduled interview, this generation of excess and less relevant information could have been minimized. Future researchers should be aware that participants are likely to discuss tangential aspects of their social justice engagement if not provided with some guidelines and structure prior to the interview. This is especially likely in the case of social justice, given the very personal and intense identification and commitment that participants have to this orientation of helping.

A final limitation regarding the specific research methods used was with regards to the steps of data analysis and the inevitable prioritization of certain language and voices of some participants over others. Given that few social justice practice models exist currently in the counselling psychology literature, many of the participants used overlapping and similar language in describing their experiences, ideas, values, etc. While the repetitiveness of the data analysis steps allowed many opportunities for each participant to contribute to, shape, and refine the themes as they were being generated, the language and terms currently available in the literature were inevitably highlighted within each theme because they were used by multiple participants. In some ways, the voices or perspectives already made available thus far to members of the profession limited participants' descriptions by attributing certain terms or concepts to their experiences. In other words, presumptions and pre-established ideas or terminology for describing social justice did eventually influence the findings, not as a result of researcher bias or assumptions, but because they were relevant influences on the participants. Although this is likely to be unavoidable, since the social justice language and culture to date is inevitably part of participants' experience of engaging with social justice, future researchers may consider exploring and challenging participants to generate alternate language to describe social justice engagement.

A final consideration for future research is with regards to furthering and strengthening the perceived relevance and value of social justice action within counselling psychology. Counselling psychology researchers adopting a social justice lens have already been encouraged to incorporate advocacy, systemic activism, and education or consciousness-raising into the process of conducting and disseminating research (Brown & Perry, 2011; Palmer & Parish, 2008). Combining research initiatives with service opportunities serves multiple social justice

purposes, invites shared involvement in the research process, and encourages research that is applicable and valuable to the larger society. Demonstrating the value of psychology research that incorporates a social justice lens can also invite greater organizational, financial, and social support for social justice initiatives and research projects in counselling psychology.

**Applying the results.** A final set of limitations are worth highlighting here, with reference to the applicability of the results. As previously mentioned, the findings make claims only about the experiences of these 6 counselling psychologists' engagement with social justice in Canada. Thus, there is limited generalizability to the experiences of other counselling psychologists. While this in itself is not problematic within this descriptive phenomenological methodology and can be addressed by several of the suggestions for future research already made, it does raise potential limitations for the implications and recommendations made based on these findings. The findings generated here and the suggestions presented based on these findings are primarily based on the lived experiences of the participants, and informed in part by previous literature and research on the topic of social justice within counselling psychology. Ironically, the systemic, organizational, and social feasibility of implementing these suggestions has played a much smaller role in the implications discussed. Social justice researchers could also be encouraged to incorporate other methodologies (e.g., participatory action research) that serve to empower students, research participants, and communities through their involvement in research projects that can influence public policy and community systems (Brown & Perry, 2011; Palmer & Parish, 2008). These kinds of research would serve to increase the foundation of knowledge that informs social justice in counselling psychology while also amplifying the voices of groups of people who are marginalized in Canadian society.

Further, as highlighted by participants, certain social justice actions, goals, or perspectives may not always be a good fit within all practice settings. Thus future researchers should continue to explore the systemic and organizational side of counselling psychologists' social justice engagement in an effort to increase understanding of the factors that facilitate and hinder social justice engagement within various settings in which counselling psychologists work. This will assist counselling psychologists in developing a social justice practice model that is aimed not only at the needs of counselling psychologists and groups of clients, but that is also well-received in the various contexts in which social justice engagement and counselling psychology services are provided.

In order to continue to elaborate on how social justice can guide a common professional identity for counselling psychology and promote a community supportive of professionals engaged with social justice, we also need to find the conceptual and methodological grounding for the principles that underline social justice (Young & Lalande, 2011). Researchers could investigate the effectiveness of advocacy competencies, systemic interventions, and social justice training within various contexts (Toporek, Lewis, & Crethar, 2009). Outcomes from this kind of research could inform further formulation of conceptual frameworks and language for social justice work. Examples of how social justice can be incorporated into counselling psychology's professional identity, roles, practices, and education are needed. Finally, social justice researchers would likely be expected to engage in inter-professional collaboration in research as a way of broadening the scope of research questions asked, populations and contexts studied, and the implications generated.

## **Conclusion**

It has been emphasized repeatedly in the counselling psychology literature that the work of counselling psychologists “will be an endless and losing venture unless the true sources of the problem (unequal access to resources, stereotypes, prejudice, discrimination, and oppression) are changed” (Sue, 1995, p. 476). This profession needs to re-commit to addressing the needs of the more vulnerable members of our society and search for ways to collaborate with government and community organizations, not just at the level of providing individuals with life skills or coping mechanisms for dealing with existing personal problems, but at the level of systemic change (Arthur & Collins, 2010).

This research has utilized a descriptive phenomenological methodology to explore six counselling psychologists’ lived experience of engaging in social justice. Findings highlight the deep-rooted calling and commitment that these counselling psychologists have for promoting and working towards social justice. Participants’ descriptions of their experiences also revealed that their identification with social justice occurs on both professional and personal levels, informing and influencing their activities as individuals and as working counselling psychologists. Moreover, it was clear from participants’ experiences that social justice engagement is a fluid and ever-changing process that requires activism, support, and nurturance.

Overall, this research has exemplified the various ways that some counselling psychologists have centered their professional identity on social justice and benefited greatly from this identification in the form of increased motivation, satisfaction, and meaning within their work. Further, the examples provided by participants help to bring the many practice suggestions available in the social justice literature to life, clarifying the many large and small ways to be a social justice oriented counselling psychologist. In quoting Michael Hutchins, the



results of this research have very much highlighted that “social justice work and advocacy is not about what we do, it’s about who we are” (Browne & Craft, 2009, p. 29). In order to more fully embrace a social justice orientation, further research and discourse is needed that strengthens the connections between the work of counselling psychologists and issues of oppression, investigates the effectiveness of incorporating social justice into counselling practices, and exemplifies more concrete ways of integrating social justice within counselling psychology’s professional identity and roles.

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## **Appendix A – Sample Journal Entry**

December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2012

I have now completed three of the semi-structured interviews, and I have one further interview scheduled for next week. I will need to continue to recruit further nominations in an effort to have a larger number of counselling psychologists included in my study. I did not expect the recruitment process to be so challenging, as I had in some ways assumed that social justice leaders would be eager to participate in research that highlighted their voices.

Nonetheless, it is a good reminder that although these are social justice leaders, they will of course encounter many of the same barriers and social pressures that other members of the profession and of society encounter: pressures to meet targets and deadlines, expectations of balancing work commitments with family obligations, and the energy required to volunteer for a research project outside of regular professional roles or work hours.

In reflecting upon the interview completed to date, some things have also been surprising. For example, I had not really considered that participants would have had ties to social justice before entering their professional training. I'm not sure why I had not thought of that before... as I reflect within my own interests of social justice, this connection to childhood lessons or experiences have become more obvious. I also had not anticipated that participants' commitments to social justice would be apparent in the way they live their lives. I guess I had expected to hear mostly about examples of ways they make professional decisions differently, and ways that they interact with their clients that are informed by social justice considerations. I had not made the link that environmental consciousness, or eating locally, or participating in community fund-raisers or associations was also very much reflective of a social justice orientation to the world around us. Again, as I think about the larger community, environmental,

and global issues that get me really activated and motivated to work towards change, I am starting to see how these things may be more connected to the topic of social justice within the profession of counselling psychology than I had previously been aware of.