

Nurturing the Intersubjective Capacities of Social Work Students

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Abstract

While navigating numerous pressures as they work with vulnerable clients and communities, social workers are expected to use their emotional responses intentionally rather than to be ruled by them. Social work accreditation competencies require that students demonstrate regulation of their own affective processes, but their ability to do so will vary. This paper explores methods that instructors can take to support this developmental growth through the concept of intersubjectivity within the relational theory framework.

Keywords: social work students, teaching practices, competencies

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On any given day, social workers must balance multiple truths and hold prolonged tensions. Addressing and ameliorating oppressions requires social workers to treat people equally and to treat people differently according to their needs. Social workers live in the dilemma of both not rescuing clients and not idly watching while they suffer. Social workers both respect diverse experiences and speak clearly and loudly on the side of justice. Social work educators must both hold students accountable and give them a break. This stance of both/and is one of the underlying demands of the profession. The mission to respect the reality of both person and environment, where multiple constructions of truth can exist, requires social workers to live in gray areas, even when society prominently embraces all or nothing attitudes and behaviors. Maintaining such equanimity is not a common ability, nor easily acquired. Social workers can become prone to polarized extremes as rapidly as anyone else, but when they are at their best, they hold their own story and the story of another client, student, colleague, or community, at the same time. Honoring the truth in multiples stories is well described by Jessica Benjamin's theory of intersubjectivity.

The intersubjective stance allows social workers to navigate these difficult, inevitable, and life promoting tensions with greater ease. One of several relationally focused theorists who have explored this clinical concept over the last thirty years, Jessica Benjamin has written extensively on the interplay between whole subjects, describing how two people can interact in a way that mutually honors the individual agency of each (Benjamin, 1990; Benjamin 2004; Benjamin 2005; Benjamin 2006). Although Benjamin describes these concepts within the therapist-client context, these ideas can also frame educators' work with students (Schapiro, 2009). Amidst current minimization of the value of psychodynamic thinking for modern day

social workers, intersubjectivity is too important a concept to lose. In this space, social workers treat people as subjects, rather than as objects to be used.

Nurturing students' intersubjective capacities is relevant for all levels of social work education. Intersubjectivity offers a framework for an entire social work curriculum, explicit and implicit. Intentional use of self is a hallmark of effective social work (Bogo, Katz, Regehr, Logie, Mylopoulos, & Tufford, 2013; Butler, Ford & Tregaskis, 2007), and nurturing this skill in the next generation of social work practitioners is not accidental. This paper serves to identify social work educators' obligation to support students' emotional use of self, to explore the value of the intersubjective framework in doing so, and to discuss educator practices and learning activities that foster students' intersubjective development. Readers may recognize how the theory helps to explain some of their own favored pedagogical efforts.

Student Affective Development

In the United States, the 2015 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) (CSWE, 2015) recognizes that effective social workers not only need expertise in subject matter and skill delivery, while holding certain values, but they also need to think critically and manage emotions effectively under the dimension of cognitive and affective processes. The first competency in particular reifies the expectation that social work students demonstrate their readiness for working with clients by showing familiarity with how their inner experiences can impact their actions and beliefs (Bogo et al., 2013; CSWE, 2015; Drisko, 2015). Social workers must be able to analyze situations with self-awareness, while avoiding becoming ruled by their emotions. The EPAS require students to demonstrate these capacities sufficiently well to graduate, at both the BSW and MSW levels. Educators determine the specifics of what constitutes appropriate emotional regulation, which should differentiate natural variation in

communication style from dysregulation that could impair client growth or collegial interactions. For the purposes of this article, effective emotional regulation is considered the ability to intentionally recognize and modulate one's emotions in a way that fosters healthy relationships with clients and colleagues and effective work with communities.

Learning to regulate emotions is a common challenge for anyone, including social work students. Social work students struggle to contain their emotions, while also being able to acknowledge and accept them (Rajan-Rankin, 2014). Anecdotes abound among social work field educators describing how students' self-management or interpersonal difficulties became irrefutably evident during practicum. The early academic work a student does may not offer educators or advisors as clear a picture of a student's growth needs as their time in the field will. Amidst a variety of factors that go into successful field placements (i.e. supervisor skill, agency resources), there is also a common thread of some students being more 'ready' for practicum than others. This readiness shows not only in social work skill or knowledge, but also in terms of general skills such as communication, emotion regulation, capacity for reflection, and openness to feedback.

Social work educators help students further their affective management, even as students' backgrounds vary in important ways. Students pursue social work education with diversity in goals, life experiences, economic opportunities, and trauma histories, in addition to varied social opportunities or limitations related to ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, race, spirituality, economic, or ability privilege. This variation strengthens the profession. Students also vary in terms of how much their individual power to choose and to act has been nurtured in their families, communities, or society, as well as in how much resilience they have built. Social work education needs to support the emotional growth of students (Rajan-Rankin, 2014). Relational

theory's concept of intersubjectivity, which honors the spectrum of unique life experiences within a recognition of social dynamics, offers a framework for emotional regulation grounded in a stance of treating one's self and others as whole subjects can be useful for educators and practitioners.

Situating Intersubjectivity as a Needed Social Work Capacity

Benjamin's concept of intersubjectivity derives from a relational theory understanding of the individual in dynamic context and exploring the specifics will clarify how intersubjectivity can be applied to social work education. Relational theory's appropriateness for the social work classroom is considered. Then basic intersubjective concepts will be plumbed in greater depth.

Relational Theory in Social Work Education

Relational theory offers a practice framework and demonstrates values congruent with generalist social work and does not need to be limited to the clinical session (Segal, 2013).

Rasmussen and Mishna (2003) articulate the value of relational theory in social work education: considering how learning in a classroom occurs in the midst of relationships, recognizing the interplay that exists between the histories, needs, and goals of the students and educator, expecting educators to adjust themselves to invite student connection, and clarifying how classroom disconnections and distress are natural occurrences where growth can occur.

Relational theory recognizes that both internal experience of the individual and the pressures of the environment contribute to people's interactions, values collaborative relationships because of appreciation for free will and mutual respect, identifies the need to address issues at micro, mezzo, and macro levels, challenges underlying power, and holds the social worker responsible as an active component of the system impacting the client (Segal 2013). Relational theory offers

a complex and nuanced appreciation for how internal qualities and external pressures will influence interactional dynamics.

Intersubjectivity Defined

Intersubjectivity as a relational theory concept will feel familiar to social workers who rely upon such awareness in their work. Benjamin (2004) defines intersubjectivity as “a relationship of mutual recognition- a relation in which each person experiences the other as a ‘like subject,’ another mind who can be ‘felt with,’ yet has a distinct, separate center of feeling and perception” (p.5). Benjamin is describing a cognitive and emotional connection between two people who can feel both related and individuated. Intersubjectivity is a capacity where one person (or subject) engages physically, emotionally, and mentally with another person as subject. Such a holistic relationship differs from one person treating another as an object. Benjamin (2004) argues that a person can know one’s self and one’s power to think and take action more fully and completely when that individuality and agency is affirmed by someone else. This capacity may first be developed with the primary caregiver, where a mutual emotional regulation system can develop (Benjamin, 2005), but can be fostered in later experiences. The guiding forces of intersubjectivity theory are “‘self-assertion’ on the one hand and ‘mutual recognition’ on the other” (Schapiro, 2009, p.423). Fonagy and Target (2003) elaborate on this description: “the intersubjective relational emphasis is on connectedness, recognizing difference but not giving way to the temptation to discount the other once the difference has been identified” (p.217). This capability helps a social worker to attune to personal vulnerability, deepen relationships, and become a more emotionally secure anchor holds for clients or students. Recognizing one’s self and others as whole human beings is relevant to both micro and macro

focused social work, influencing not only how a social worker develops relationships and metabolizes distress, but also the types of initiatives and policies they foster.

Losing Intersubjectivity

Intersubjectivity, however, is not a one-time achievement, and when social workers become caught in power struggles, they are limited in their ability to foster change and growth. Maintaining an intersubjective position that respects the right of another person to hold an alternate view and appreciates one's own differentiated experience, is a difficult psychological task, as is evident on the world stage. Sometimes, two people may share such a space of mutual respectful connection for a moment or longer. Other times, it is lost, and people treat each other as objects, either actively or passively. The collapse of intersubjectivity between two people (or perhaps in a classroom) as dyadic complementarity, where both parties treat each other as objects, each being used by the other (Benjamin, 2004). Benjamin (2004) explains "the essence of complementary relations – the relation of twoness- is that there appear to be only two choices: either submission or resistance to the other's demand" (para. 13). Complementarity is the "pattern of all impasses between two partners" (Benjamin, 2004, para. 10), where "each feels unable to gain the other's recognition, and each feels in the other's power" (Benjamin, 2004, para 12). This collapse in the relationship, leaves two people locked in a tug of war, each feeling controlled or coerced by the other and powerless to change it. A person might feel forced to defend themselves or be unable to hear what the other person is saying, because of being stuck in a mire of rightness. The resentment can become palpable and effective growth is halted. Within this collapse, the social worker becomes more prone to frustration when the client behaves counter to one's own wishes, because the client is seen as an extension of the professional, rather

than a separate person. The social worker is unable to recognize how personal actions are affecting the client, and the ability to collaborate is impaired or derailed.

This loss of intersubjectivity is familiar for the social work educator. This can be the indignation that arises after receiving a student's late night exasperated and accusatory email. There can be a strong temptation for the educator to win the power struggle, immediately and decisively. This might look like an immediate email response replete with flawless logic and a precisely neutral tone to each point made, explaining how the information the student needed was readily available in the syllabus and that student would be advised to go through the module step by step as explained in class or instructed in the introductory video. The educator might have won the battle, but the relationship with the student may be severely damaged. In failing to appreciate the student's distress, the educator may have shut down the student from taking future risks of asking questions or engage in the class material. Additionally worrisome, a student may feel validated in treating struggling clients with a similar disdain. When the student or educator treat each other as objects, intersubjectivity is lost.

A limited intersubjective awareness may also be at the heart of student struggles in the field or the classroom. If a student feels sufficiently stressed, they are more likely to take difficulties personally and to demonize the supervisor. There can be a real risk of a communication breakdown with students and supervisors becoming locked into complementary struggles, where each blames the other and feels, in turn, blameless. Perhaps a student participates at their field placement at erratic times and cannot identify any steps to change this. Or, a student identifies so closely with a client that his sadness and powerlessness interfere with actions he might have taken to assist the client. Maybe a student feels overwhelmed and blames her supervisor for a host of issues, while the supervisor remains ignorant because the student

never raised any of these concerns. Frequently, a student might get tied up in thinking that they are entirely responsible for a client's success in reaching goals, taking too much credit when a client is doing well and feeling like a complete failure when the client is struggling. This is natural for new students, but potentially disempowering to the client. Learning instead what power they do, and do not, have to adjust clients' lives, is an important lesson, and it falls right in with beginning to recognizing the independent subjectivity of a client. What these scenarios share is that the students are not assuming responsibility and respecting the separate and distinct motivations of the supervisor, client or educator. Instead, the students are frustrated because the other person is not behaving the way they want. Many of these situations are common areas for developmental growth around boundaries and embracing one's agency- the very stuff of intersubjectivity.

Regaining Intersubjectivity

The most useful part of the concept of intersubjectivity for social workers learning to navigate challenging relationships is having a method of reconnecting after an impasse. While it may take two people for the collapse to occur, it also takes two people to progress and move forward. Each person caught in the complementary collapse can step to the side into a shared third space, where together they can reflect on the experience of this relationship from an alternate and mutual perspective (Benjamin, 2004). Benjamin (2005) describes the need to "shift from this complementary structure, with its features of omnipotence and helplessness, into a more recognizing relation in which it feels possible to communicate rather than push or pull" (p.450). This creation of third space is the way to get out of the logjam. The mutual effort by the participants to reflect on the interactions between them can create breathing room to try out some different perspectives and behaviors (Benjamin, 2004). It is as though a third point is created

next to the complementary dyad, and within that triangle, the air can move, personal choice re-emerges, and new frontiers are opened.

An intersubjective framework does not view the educator as blameless if a student is upset. The educator must consider how they might have participated (Rasmussen & Mishna, 2003) including what inner needs or projective assumptions the educator was experiencing (Schapiro, 2009). The intersubjective instructor must be able to recognize the power struggle, step back, become vulnerable enough to take responsibility, and invite dialogue with the students (Rasmussen & Mishna, 2003). This ability to identify when there is a relational breakdown and learn to move out of it is extremely valuable for educators or practitioners. From this place, the attacked educator might have let the email sit overnight and then reached out to the student in a way that invited discourse and a sharing of perspective. This models respectful behavior and collaboration amidst disagreement and demonstrates an awareness that the instructor's view is only one perspective and that the student's view must be actively sought and considered (Rasmussen & Mishna, 2003).

Classroom Practices to Foster Intersubjectivity

Just as in the clinical encounter, the onus for facilitating intersubjective space in the classroom is on the social work educator. Educators can do this through the teaching practices they use to build community and through the assignments they select to foster student growth. Examples of each are presented below.

Intersubjective Teaching Practices

Intersubjectivity guides social work educators to monitor what is happening between themselves and students on a regular basis, and when the relationships are distressed, to alter their approach and invite discussion, rather than retreat to a place of power and distance and

dictate consequences. The structure and climate of the course, as well as the method of addressing ruptures, encourage intersubjective growth in students. The modelling of the educator's negotiations of emotional pressures is relevant not only in foundational courses that are helping students orient themselves to professional expectations, but also in advanced courses when students can apply this learning to their field work.

Educators can foster intersubjectivity by staying mindful of the separate and interconnected nature of the instructor and student right from the first day of class. Educators can create an atmosphere of collaboration that promotes student agency. Eliciting student perspective from the start of the course which will set an empowering tone and communicate the importance of student views. Educators can ask students to articulate questions to be answered over the semester which may strengthen student personal motivation (Bains, 2004). By encouraging early feedback on the syllabus and periodic evaluations of the course, the educator communicates a respect of student opinion which affirms students and fosters agency.

Intersubjective educators can model a stance of being curious and being an expert by wondering aloud with students and demonstrating an openness to changing (Berzoff & Mattei, 1999). Encouraging students to be open to this place of flexible curiosity can strengthen their muscles to do this in the field. Educators have the opportunity to develop a shared reality with students, and modeling this vulnerability lays the foundation. By sharing power with students and acknowledging when class processes or assignments did not go well, instructors are valuing students' perspectives and initiative. Benjamin's (1990) intersubjective position encourages educators to collaborate with students and be open to feedback and dialogue around ideas. This can help to amplify students' own motivation for the course.

Educators can rely on this theory to guide their behavior when class or relationships get off track. Educators can do this by looking at classroom interactions and critiquing them in this third space, rather than only being rooted in their personal views. Letting go of the polarized position and displaying regret when appropriate invites students to take more ownership of their efforts and attempt to be vulnerable in their efforts to learn (Benjamin, 2006). This openness and mindfulness on the part of the instructor can be especially valuable when a rupture occurs publicly, such as a microaggression or impassioned discussion of diverse views.

Intersubjectivity requires social worker educators to recognize and challenge bias and to be transparent about personal power (Moffatt & Miehl, 1999, p.75). The transparency also offers a realistic view of the challenge of the work for students (Schapiro, 2009). Taking the opportunity to analyze power differentials and take ownership of bias can be used to help students learn to identify racism (Basham, 2004). With a space of shared vulnerability, communication can be restored, and the students might be more willing to tolerate open and challenging conversations with each other, their supervisors, or their clients. Exploring this dynamic with students helps them to learn to tolerate this vulnerability in facilitating relationship repair so they can do this with future clients in conflictual micro work and macro negotiations. Educators must take responsibility for their own investment and be clear on their own goals so that they can be intentional in what they are building with students. Without mindful attention, instructors may miss moments of collapse and not be able to demonstrate the vulnerability required to facilitate reparation.

Intersubjective Assignments

Assignments in social work classes to foster student intersubjectivity center around awareness of self and one's power to choose, appreciation of others as independent subjects, and

opportunities to engage in negotiations between the two. Figure 1 offers an overview of different class assignments to encourage this growth for students. This figure connects these common social work educational activities to the intersubjective role they can be playing.

Fostering Intersubjectivity	Assignment focus	Activities
Enhancing student’s awareness of self and personal agency	Self-awareness and articulation	Journaling Response reflections Integrating social work ideas with own experience
	Enacting personal agency	Establishing plan to complete learning activity & evaluating effort (cognitive wrappers) Stress management assessments
Enhancing students’ empathic recognition of others as distinct subjects	Emotional connection to another’s experience	Invited speakers Documentaries or Films Service learning Classroom sharing
Enhancing students’ recognition of self and other in the same moment	Interpersonal negotiations	Group work Group contract development Peer feedback Interviewing skill practice groups Organized class discussions Experiential learning Intergroup Dialogues (Zuniga, Nagada, & Sevig, 2002)

Figure 1 Intersubjectivity and Assignment Design

Awareness of self and personal agency. Assignments that encourage both self-awareness and active agency help students take personal responsibility and work their muscles of empowerment. Educators encourage student self-awareness when requesting articulation of the student’s experience, fostering reflection, and challenging students to identify goals and take action. A few methods are discussed below.

Self-articulation activities such as asking students to journal around experiences and respond to reflection questions about their personal development, biases, backgrounds, motivations, and feelings. This can strengthen a sense of ‘I’. Embracing one’s own subjectivity entails a recognition of how one is a part of the society where one lives and works. Knowing one’s self allows a student to know what they do well, what they do not do well, what comes easy for them, and what is more of a challenge for them, and places the responsibility for action and decisions on the student. By inquiring, educators are acting as a mirror to affirm the students’ individuality.

Nurturing students’ awareness of process when completing learning activities can also encourage students to recognize the connection between their own efforts and the impact they can have on their learning. Within an assignment, a student can be asked to identify their plan to complete the assignment and steps they will take to do so. They can later reflect on how this plan went and what action the students might take in the future (Gezer-Templeton, Mayhew, Korte, & Schmidt, 2017).

Stress management evaluations allow students to scale themselves on a weekly basis and set goals to enhance their wellness. This can help students to recognize how they can influence their own stress level in the midst of the turbulence of school demands that are often out of their control. As active agents with unique histories, the weekly self-evaluations challenge students to take responsibility for managing their own emotions and decisions in the moment rather than surrender their agency.

Empathic recognition of others as separate subjects. Assignments that require appreciating another’s subjectivity through an empathic perception are vital for fostering intersubjectivity. Documentaries, invited speakers, and experiential learning can require a

student to momentarily stand in someone else's shoes and consider how they fit. Papers where students identify an oppressed population and research this group's current and past treatment through policies, history, and the media can provide opportunities for students to empathize. Requiring students to decenter themselves enough to conceptualize another person's experience can help them learn to renegotiate the tendency to normalize and generalize their own experience. While society might demand this of some social identities more than others, it is an expected capacity of all social workers.

Interpersonal negotiations. Interactive assignments that require students to honor their peers' subjectivities through respect for each person's agency and individuality allow for moments of deep growth. Benjamin (1990) argues that people's self-perception is affirmed by other's recognition. Interacting with the reality of varied goals and opinions allows for an expectation of diversity of perspective, and a realistic understanding of the limits of one's control. Schapiro (2009) describes how "one can only find one's own voice in dialogue in relation to another's" (p.434). Intersubjective assignments may include group work, practice interviews, peer feedback and monitored discussions.

Group work offers opportunity to facilitate intersubjective experiences. Group projects that require negotiating initial contracts, active task completion, and mutual evaluation force students to have a realistic sense of what they can and cannot control, and how to be responsible for their own contribution. Group contracts may be developed by members to identify strengths challenges, and common goals, prior to embarking on a group task. In recognizing each other and naming each other's strengths, each student gets the chance to be reified individually and to perceive themselves in light of contributing to a team. Reflection on the feedback given from group members allows students to practice appreciating different viewpoints, and see how it fits,

or does not fit, with their own experience. This is a way for diverse thoughts not to be labeled as right or wrong, but instead to co-exist. Valutis, Rubin, and Bell (2012) also recommend group work as an opportunity for students to learn from each other's experience in identity formation.

Interview skill practice groups are commonly employed opportunities for students to critique each other's interviewing skills and offer personal experiences as feedback. These role plays offer an experiential lesson in the limits of students' authority, including requiring students to shift away from an expectation that they will hand out advice to a client who will do what they say. Instead students can reflect upon what it is like for them when the client does not meet their expectations and recalibrate their understanding of a social worker's role. This can begin to challenge the student's tendency to see the client as an object to be modified, rather than as an independent subject.

Peer feedback also offers opportunity for students to regulate their emotions. Students have to consider the wholeness of the other person (their subjectivity) in order to deliver feedback respectfully. This can encourage empathy as students consider how they would want to hear feedback. When the feedback is constructively delivered and offers a way to improve, the student might tolerate that, and respect the individual opinion of the other, and now has a practical way to develop skills. Alternatively, if the feedback is not given in a helpful manner, or if the student experiences the feedback in a punitive manner, then there may be a collapse in the dyad. While this balance of genuine feedback thoughtfully offered and respectfully received is a delicate dance, it is fertile training ground. Successful peer feedback can increase mastery of skills and encourage a more complex social work identity. How the feedback is given and received can be more important than what the feedback was and provide intersubjective growth.

Class discussions, including online discussion posts, can again require the student to understand themselves in relation to diverse views and appreciate their own perspective. How students comment on each other's ideas becomes an important aspect of negotiating understanding while modulating personal emotions. The experience of sitting with another student's viewpoint is a powerful one, especially if a student can learn to honor it and not dismiss or attack it. Learning to disagree while remembering the whole person behind the idea, the person with whom you have a disagreement, fosters valuable communication skills. Hart and Montague (2015) note that discourse encourages healthy identity development without rigidity, tolerates questioning, and can be actively anti-oppressive.

Larger classroom process can also facilitate this intersubjective space in a transformative way. Several articles speak to the structured process of intergroup dialogues developed at University of Michigan (Zuniga, Nagada, & Sevig, 2002) and used at many schools of social work, where individuals come face to face with diverse opinions without the pressure or expectation to coerce anyone else to change their mind (Werkmeister-Rozas, 2004). University of Michigan intergroup dialogues demonstrate conversation that allows mutual understanding and fosters respect for individual subjectivity. The shared experience offers a chance to play with third space and practice exploring one's self and another with vulnerability and genuineness without the power battle (Werkmeister-Rozas, 2004). Muth (2009) describes teaching German social work students about intersubjectivity with ongoing dialogue groups. Dwelling with both alternate views of the other and experiencing one's own views witnessed and honored, strengthened the students' abilities to negotiate that third space of vulnerability, uncertainty and collaboration.

Conclusions

When social work educators incorporate an intersubjective framework into their pedagogy, they are fostering affective durability within their students and a capacity to recognize when their emotions are influencing their work with clients and colleagues. Butler and colleagues note (2007) “if who we are and how we do social work are not closely connected, then we both limit our capacity for understanding others and deny our own complex and changing humanity” (p.292). Intersubjective capacities can allow a student to demonstrate the regulated affective processes required throughout the accreditation standards and highlighted in the first competency (CSWE, 2015). Intersubjectivity facilitates a clear appreciation of one’s self. When a student realizes how their views, influences, wants and actions affect others, then they can recognize where they end and where the agency and experience of the next person begins. Encouraging and supporting student intersubjective capacity could help them to have an easier time tolerating difficult emotions, and more success in navigating differences with clients and other professionals.

Relational theorists argue that individuals develop this intersubjective capacity through early experiences, but there is also the potential for growth over a lifetime through intentional therapeutic interventions or life encounters. While educators are neither students’ parents, nor their social workers, they do have an imperative to help students meet the cognitive and affective dimensions of the competencies and a moral obligation to help the students do this as effectively as possible for their clients and the profession. Students’ subjectivity must be recognized and valued so that they feel heard and can, in turn, respect the subjectivity of others. Intersubjectivity offers a frame that helps educators to reconceptualize their work routinely, with an eye to encourage student development in becoming self-aware and effectively emotionally regulated social workers. Rasmussen and Mishna (2003) emphasize that the operating theory of the

instructor influences classroom structure and management and intersubjectivity can be an effective framework for a social work educator to embrace.

A few years ago, Robbins (2015) asked social workers to think beyond the binaries that they rely upon in both practice and the conceptualization of social work. Applying an intersubjective stance with students can help students push against binary boxes and instead hold holistic views of clients, groups, and policies, which will facilitate greater demonstration of the new competencies. Social work instructors can draw on ideas of intersubjectivity to understand and intervene around interpersonal dynamics in the classroom and use it to support students along with the application of systems theory, empowerment theory, and the latest practice techniques. This can empower students to critique their selves and their society while maintaining the stability to shift their clients and their society to just change.

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