

Cultivating a Lifelong Commitment to Social Justice: A Quantitative Analysis

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Abstract: Leaders with a personal and professional commitment to social justice are necessary to meet the demands of the complex systems and structures that perpetuate marginalization and oppression. The purpose of this study was to better understand common experiences people perceived as influential on their commitment to social justice. This study was designed to quantitatively measure the perceived influence of five variables determined by qualitative research on the development of a social justice orientation. These variables were the influence of significant persons, exposure to injustice, education/learning, work experience, and religion/spirituality. The study found that all five variables are considered influential to personal and professional commitment to social justice using multiple statistical analyses. Other findings include race, level of education, age, and involvement in a religious tradition impacting the perception of influence of different variables as well as working with marginalized populations or experiencing marginalization. These findings have several implications for cultivating commitment to social justice across various disciplines. This article explores implications of these findings for the Catholic community of faith, with a view to generating high impact formation experiences that will foster lifelong commitment to social justice as an expression of Catholic faith.

FOR OVER TWENTY-FIVE YEARS, I HAVE TAUGHT SOCIAL justice through the lens of Catholic social teaching to different audiences: youth and adults, in classrooms and church basements, hospital meeting rooms, and on extended service-learning experiences. Early into this lifelong venture I, like many others, studied writing and research on the art of teaching Catholic social teaching in order to improve my craft. My research led me beyond Catholic spaces and into non-religious contexts: K-12 literature, counseling psychology literature, and beyond. I found only a small body of literature containing empirical data-based studies, mostly using qualitative research methods. For Catholic educators and faith formators in parishes, schools, colleges and universities, seminaries, healthcare systems, and wherever faith formation happens,

it is imperative to understand how to foster commitment to social justice. Such commitment forms an essential aspect of faith life. Not only does our current cultural context cry out for leaders who can address the real social problems we face, but our Catholic faith demands this as a way to authentically live the gospel.

This lacuna led me to design and complete an empirical study to measure factors fostering commitment to social justice. In the following pages, I describe how the study variables were determined through an extensive literature review, the creation of a reliable and valid survey tool, the sample methodology, study findings, and their implications for those committed to fostering lifelong commitment to social justice in the communities we serve. In the end, I demonstrate that there are common experiences leading to lifelong commitment to social justice—including the influence of significant persons, exposure to injustice, education/learning, work experience, and religion/spirituality—that can be leveraged to develop high impact formation experiences fostering such commitment.¹

SOCIAL JUSTICE: AN OPERATIONAL DEFINITION

Interest in understanding how a person develops a commitment to social justice extends across many different disciplines. Therefore, the necessary first step was constructing a definition of social justice including a wide variety of value systems.

In the Catholic tradition, a starting point for a common definition of social justice is found in paragraph 201 of the *Compendium of Social Doctrine of the Church*. It states:

The Church's social Magisterium constantly calls for the most classical forms of justice to be respected: *commutative*, *distributive*, and *legal justice*. Ever greater importance has been given to *social justice*, which represents a real development in *general justice*, the justice that regulates social relationships according to the criterion of observance of the *law*. *Social justice*, a requirement related to the *social question* which today is worldwide in scope, concerns the social, political, and economic aspects and, above all, the structural dimension of problems and their respective solutions.²

¹ Institutional Review Board approval for this study was granted on April 8, 2015, by Cardinal Stritch University IRB Committee, Milwaukee, WI.

² Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005), no. 64, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html.

Unlike the Catholic tradition, there is no common or shared operational definition of social justice in other fields.³ Bogotch addresses this difficulty by calling into question social justice as theory and social justice as practice.⁴ He argues that the meaning of social justice is ultimately a social construct bound to time and place.⁵ Shoho, Merchant, and Lugg argue for guiding themes to describe social justice since the complexity of issues renders consensus on a singular definition unlikely.⁶

The current study sees social justice as both a process and a goal.⁷ The goal of social justice continually needs to be reexamined in light of community contexts and, therefore, is a process continually questioning individual and societal values and the systems, policies, and institutions born from those values. This study uses Lee Ann Bell's operational definition of social justice as the "full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their need."⁸ This broad definition provided boundaries for identifying a diverse sample of people committed to social justice.

THE FIVE VARIABLES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

The small but growing body of empirical literature, much of which is rooted in qualitative research, identifies five variables correlated with commitment to social justice: influence of others, experiencing/witnessing injustice, learning/education, work experience, and religion/spirituality. These variables provided the theoretical framework for my own analysis.⁹ Confidence in these variables is rooted in their

³ Brittanie E. Atteberry-Ash, "Social Work and Social Justice: A Conceptual Review," *Social Work (United States)* 68, no. 1 (2023): 38–46, doi.org/10.1093/sw/swac042.

⁴ Ira E. Bogotch, "Educational Leadership and Social Justice: Theory into Practice," in *Annual Meeting of the University Council for Educational Administration* (Albuquerque, NM, 2000), www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED452585.pdf.

⁵ Ira E. Bogotch, "Educational Leadership and Social Justice: Practice into Theory," *Journal of School Leadership* 12 (March 2002): 138–156.

⁶ Alan R. Shoho, Betty M. Merchant, and Catherine A. Lugg, "Social Justice: Seeking a Common Language," in *The Sage Handbook of Educational Leadership: Advances in Theory, Research, and Practice*, ed. Fenwick English (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005), 47–67.

⁷ Lee Anne Bell, "Theoretical Foundations," in *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*, ed. Maurianne Adams, Warren J. Blumenfield, Carmelita Castenada, Heather Hackman, Madeline Peters, and Ximena Zuniga, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 21–26.

⁸ Bell, "Theoretical Foundations," 21.

⁹ Martha L. Barry, "White Antiracist Activists: The Formation of Activists" (Ph.D. diss., Cardinal Stritch University, 2007); Jennifer C. Caldwell, "Critical Factors in Social Justice Orientation Development" (Loyola University Chicago, 2008); Jennifer C. Caldwell and Elizabeth M. Vera, "Critical Incidents in Counseling Psychology Professionals' and Trainees' Social Justice Orientation Development," *Training and*

prevalence across disciplines. In this section, I draw primarily on three studies to demonstrate how operational definitions for each variable were created. These are Caldwell and Vera's research study on critical incidents in counseling psychology, Barry's work on the formation of white anti-racist activists, and Daloz Parks, Parks Daloz, Keen, and Keen's study of one hundred people committed to change rooted in social justice.

The first variable is the influence of significant persons on social justice orientation.¹⁰ Significant persons include parent(s), other family members, friends, mentor, and work peers. These significant persons are described as modeling and sharing their own commitment to social justice, and providing opportunities for service and social activism.¹¹ Parents and family members were noted for their particular influence during formative years. Daloz Parks, Parks Daloz, Keen, and Keen highlight the equally formative and profound impact of other mentors and community-based adults—teachers, professors, supervisors, community leaders, and even historical figures.¹² In the category of mentors, Barry's phenomenological study adds membership in social justice activist groups.¹³ Peer support was found primarily in friends, co-workers, and classmates who shared a passion for social justice and supported it, but also in organizations committed to social justice to which participants belonged.¹⁴ Peer support is pedagogically important, creating programs that included intentional community building and deep conversation which both challenged individuals and spurred learning, but also supported their commitment to social justice.¹⁵

Education in Professional Psychology 4, no. 3 (2010): 163–76, doi.org/10.1037/a0019093; Sharon Daloz Parks, Laurent A. Parks Daloz, Cheryl H. Keen, and James P. Keen, *Common Fire: Leading Lives of Commitment in a Complex World* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1996).

¹⁰ Caldwell and Vera, "Critical Incidents."

¹¹ Caldwell and Vera, "Critical Incidents"; and Ellen M. Broido, "The Development of Social Justice Allies during College: A Phenomenological Investigation," *Journal of College Student Development* 41, no. 1 (2000): 3–18; Betty M. Merchant and Alan R. Shoho, "Bridge People: Civic and Educational Leaders for Social Justice," in *Leadership for Social Justice: Making Revolutions in Education*, ed. Catherine Marshall and Maricela Oliva (Boston, MA: Pearson, 2006), 85–109; George Theoharis, "Woven in Deeply: Identity and Leadership of Urban Social Justice Principals," *Education and Urban Society* 41, no. 1 (May 6, 2008): 3–25, doi.org/10.1177/0013124508321372.

¹² Daloz Parks, Parks Daloz, Keen, and Keen, *Common Fire*; and Caldwell, "Critical Factors."

¹³ Barry, "White Antiracist Activists."

¹⁴ Caldwell, "Critical Factors."

¹⁵ Ann Curry-Stevens, "New Forms of Transformative Education: Pedagogy for the Privileged," *Journal of Transformative Education* 5, no. 1 (January 1, 2007): 33–58, doi.org/10.1177/1541344607299394; Bree Picower, "Learning to Teach and

The second variable is exposure to injustice either by witnessing someone experience injustice or personally experiencing injustice. The personal experiences described by participants in Caldwell and Vera's study included marginalization or oppression over a long period of time as well as specific experiences or events.¹⁶ Participants who witnessed or observed injustice described it in similar terms, speaking of witnessing injustice over long periods of time, like their childhood, and specific events that opened them up to a new understanding of injustice. This included deeper understanding of the impact of injustice on human lives.¹⁷ In other words, issues of social justice took on a human face. This deeper understanding led to deeper commitment to social justice. In Barry's study, many participants witnessed racism and segregation in the communities in which they grew up and some described witnessing racist attitudes in their own families.¹⁸ These experiences were highly formative, influencing them to become dedicated white anti-racist activists working against oppression.

Three-fifths of Daloz Parks, Parks Daloz, Keen, and Keen's one hundred person sample experienced being marginalized because of their identity including race, sexual orientation, physical ability, and socioeconomic status.¹⁹ The researchers described how this influenced participants: "Most have been able to transform the pain of their marginality into a deepened capacity for compassion and a strength of identity and purpose."²⁰ Being marginalized provided empathy for others with similar experiences and a clearer sense of their own purpose in working for the common good. Similarly, Merchant and Shoho and Theoharis found that leaders' personal experience of being marginalized was a motivating factor in their leadership practice for social justice.²¹ Other studies affirm the profound influence of witnessing injustice. For many studies this comes in the context of service learning, where a class or extended program will do service and those who witness injustice as transformative.²² Seeing injustice

Teaching to Learn: Supporting the Development of New Social Justice Educators," *Teacher Education Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (Fall 2011): 7–24.

¹⁶ Caldwell, "Critical Factors."

¹⁷ Caldwell, "Critical Factors."

¹⁸ Barry, "White Antiracist Activists."

¹⁹ Daloz Parks, Parks Daloz, Keen, and Keen, *Common Fire*.

²⁰ Daloz Parks, Parks Daloz, Keen, and Keen, *Common Fire*, 73.

²¹ Merchant and Shoho, "Bridge People"; Theoharis, "Woven in Deeply."

²² Amy L. Cook, Megan M. Krell, Laura A. Hayden, Robert Garcia, and Kari Denitzio, "Fieldwork Using the Professional Development Schools Model: Developing a Social Justice Orientation and Multicultural Competency," *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* 44, no. 3 (2016): 176–88, doi.org/10.1002/jmcd.12045; Jose Lalas and Eva Valle, "Social Justice Lenses and Authentic Student Voices: Enhancing Leadership for Educational Justice," *Educational Leadership and*

creates awareness and new understanding, altering how one sees the world.

The third variable is education and/or learning, both formal and informal. Participants in Caldwell and Vera's study reported that both formal and informal learning opportunities provided concrete ways to integrate social justice into their counseling practice.²³ The nine white anti-racist activists in Barry's study also reported that formal educational experiences (whether undergraduate, graduate, or seminary training) were highly influential in helping analyze oppression and understand their own privilege and the dynamics of marginalization and oppression. Personal reading, hearing Martin Luther King, Jr., speak, being on the debate team in high school, and attending workshops on justice related issues were also important.²⁴ These educational experiences offered opportunities for participants to deepen their understanding of racism and participation in it, but just as importantly, increase their capacity to be white anti-racist activists.

Daloz Parks, Parks Daloz, Keen, and Keen report participants coming to increased understanding of the complex systems supporting injustice, deeper cultural consciousness, and practical wisdom through formal and informal educational experiences. One participant reported that her formal education at a small Catholic liberal arts college helped her raise important questions.²⁵ More informal experiences, such as dialogue with others who were different from them, broadened their understanding. Similarly, in a large quantitative study of 597 undergraduate college students, researchers found that the two strongest influences motivating participants to work for social justice and remove their own prejudice were courses with diversity related content and co-curricular activities promoting interaction among students of diverse populations.²⁶ Coursework was identified in several other studies as influential in commitment to social justice.²⁷

Administration 19 (Fall 2007): 75–102; Matthew J. Miller, Kerrin Sendrowitz, Christopher Connacher, Susana Blanco, Cristina Muniz de la Pena, Shaina Bernardi, and Laurene Morere, "College Students' Social Justice Interest and Commitment: A Social-Cognitive Perspective," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 56, no. 4 (2009): 495–507, doi.org/10.1037/a0017220; Rebecca Bowers Sipe, "Academic Service Learning: More than Just 'Doing Time,'" *The English Journal* 90, no. 5 (May 2001): 33–38, doi.org/10.2307/821852.

²³ Caldwell and Vera, "Critical Incidents."

²⁴ Barry, "White Antiracist Activists."

²⁵ Daloz Parks, Parks Daloz, Keen, and Keen, *Common Fire*.

²⁶ Ximena Zuniga, Elizabeth Williams, and Joseph Berger, "Action-Oriented Democratic Outcomes: The Impact of Student Involvement with Campus Diversity," *Journal of College Student Development* 46, no. 6 (2005): 660–78.

²⁷ Colleen A. Capper, George Theoharis, and James Sebastian, "Toward a Framework for Preparing Leaders for Social Justice," *Journal of Educational Administration* 44, no. 3 (2006): 209–24, doi.org/10.1108/09578230610664814; Susan V. Iverson,

In many studies the course content focus on issues of social justice and the pedagogy used were important.²⁸ Others confirm that informal learning like attending workshops, co-curricular activities, reading, and support groups influence and support commitment to social justice.²⁹

The fourth variable is work experience, which includes work with people who experience marginalization or oppression and/or research regarding issues of social justice. Caldwell and Vera's study noted the key influence of working with marginalized and oppressed groups, experiencing and witnessing the inequality clients experienced, and becoming more aware of the impact of oppression on individuals and the community.³⁰ Research work included "scholarly or scientific investigation" on communities experiencing oppression and marginalization.³¹ This work led to new understandings of oppression and inequality that mirrored the dynamics in education/learning.

Barry reports defining moments in work environment. One such example is the case of a Lutheran pastor who joined the Birmingham Council on Human Relations because he recognized it would provide him access to others' experiences of racism, which he needed in order to engage in the fight against racism in the south in the late 1950s and 60s.³² Daloz Parks, Parks Daloz, Keen, and Keen describe the dynamic

"Multicultural Competence for Doing Social Justice: Expanding Our Awareness, Knowledge, and Skills," *Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis* 1, no. 1 (2012): 62–87; Matthew J. Mayhew and Sonia Deluca Fernández, "Pedagogical Practices That Contribute to Social Justice Outcomes," *The Review of Higher Education* 31, no. 1 (2007): 55–80, doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2007.0055; Matthew J. Miller and Kerrin Sendrowitz, "Counseling Psychology Trainees' Social Justice Interest and Commitment," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 58, no. 2 (April 2011): 159–69, doi.org/10.1037/a0022663.

²⁸ Kathleen M. Brown, "Leadership for Social Justice and Equity: Weaving a Transformative Framework and Pedagogy," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (February 1, 2004): 77–108, doi.org/10.1177/0013161X03259147; Kathleen M. Brown, "Leadership for Social Justice and Equity: Evaluating a Transformative Framework and Andragogy," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 42, no. 5 (December 1, 2006): 700–745, doi.org/10.1177/0013161X06290650; Adam Renner and Milton Brown, "A Hopeful Curriculum: Community, Praxis, and Courage," *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* 22, no. 2 (2006): 101–122; Theoharis, "Woven in Deeply"; Zuniga, Williams, and Berger, "Action-Oriented Democratic Outcomes."

²⁹ Broido, "Development of Social Justice Allies During College"; Curry-Stevens, "New Forms of Transformative Education"; Go Eun Na and Alexander W. Fietzer, "A National Survey of Social Justice Engagement among Professional Counselors," *Journal of Counseling and Development* 98, no. 3 (2020): 319–330, doi.org/10.1002/jcad.12326; Rebecca A. Proehl, "Transferring Social Justice Initiatives into Lasallian Schools," *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice* 12, no. 4 (2009): 457–74.

³⁰ Caldwell and Vera, "Critical Incidents."

³¹ Caldwell, "Critical Factors," 100.

³² Barry, "White Antiracist Activists."

behind this variable as a “pattern of engagement with others.”³³ Here “successive experiences over time create a way of being in the world which is continually open to rediscovering that ‘we’ and ‘they’ share common bonds.”³⁴ Such engagement is not a singular experience but rather happens over the course of time, via multiple experiences, long-term volunteering, working in communities or with people experiencing marginalization or oppression. Other studies, such as those by Iverson, Theoharis, Singh, and Picower, confirm this.³⁵

The fifth variable is religion/spirituality. This variable measured how affiliation and participation in a religious tradition, religious education, and relationship with God was perceived to influence commitment to social justice. In Caldwell and Vera’s study, this was the least reported of the critical factors, with only 14% of participants reporting that religion/spirituality influenced their orientation or commitment to social justice, but they also ranked it second in order of significance.³⁶ While not the most common variable, those who reported it considered it highly influential for understanding social justice and as source of correlative values.³⁷ Participants in Barry’s study described their religious tradition as a primary source for deep moral conviction and as a way of understanding injustice.³⁸ Daloz Parks, Parks Daloz, Keen, and Keen found the majority of their one hundred person sample reported that religion/spirituality was both a source of motivation to work for social justice and a way to understand its importance.³⁹

Religion/spirituality as a factor is not reported with a high level of frequency across the literature but when it is, it is considered highly influential. Linnemeyer conducted a mixed methods study measuring several variables to predict social justice orientation.⁴⁰ Using a two-step hierarchical regression analysis, Linnemeyer found that spirituality was significant in predicting graduate psychology students’ social justice orientation and that there were significant associations among spirituality and social justice action. Todd and Allen found that aspects

³³ Daloz Parks, Parks Daloz, Keen, and Keen, *Common Fire*, 71.

³⁴ Daloz Parks, Parks Daloz, Keen, and Keen, *Common Fire*, 71.

³⁵ Iverson, “Multicultural Competence for Doing Social Justice”; Picower, “Learning to Teach and Teaching to Learn”; Anneliese A. Singh, Christy D. Hoffsess, Elizabeth M. Boyer, Agnes Kwong, Allison S. M. Lau, Melissa McLain, and Kristee L. Haggins, “Social Justice and Counseling Psychology: Listening to the Voices of Doctoral Trainees,” *The Counseling Psychologist* 38, no. 6 (April 29, 2010): 766–795, doi.org/10.1177/0011000010362559; Theoharis, “Woven in Deeply.”

³⁶ Caldwell, “Critical Factors.”

³⁷ Caldwell, “Critical Factors.”

³⁸ Barry, “White Antiracist Activists.”

³⁹ Daloz Parks, Parks Daloz, Keen, and Keen, *Common Fire*.

⁴⁰ Rachel McQuown Linnemeyer, “Social Justice Advocacy among Graduate Students: An Empirical Investigation” (University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2009).

of religious congregational life influenced how individuals prioritized social justice and provided opportunities for participation in social justice related activities.⁴¹

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

With operational definitions set, a survey was built to measure the perceived influence of the five variables described above. Three questions guided the study: (a) Do the influence of significant persons, exposure to injustice, education/learning, work experience, and religion/spirituality have a positive relationship to one's commitment to social justice? (b) Of these factors, which are perceived to have the most influence on the development of one's commitment to social justice? (c) Are there statistically significant associations between/among characteristics of people with personal and professional commitment to social justice? Characteristics studied included gender, race/ethnicity, education level, age, reported level of work with marginalized and oppressed populations, reported level of experiencing marginalization and oppression, and reported level of religious involvement.

The survey tested the hypothesis that these five common experiences or independent variables were perceived as influential to the sample's one dependent variable (personal and professional commitment to social justice).⁴² The data was collected through an electronic survey instrument distributed to the sample through the organizations for which they worked and analyzed by descriptive and inferential statistics described in detail below.

The survey targeted individuals with a social justice orientation, operationally defined as: being committed to working against social inequality, marginalization, and oppression in a way that permeates one's whole life and manifests itself in the professional and personal choices made. It includes having critical consciousness and being committed to working for social justice.⁴³ The sample for this study was acquired using a nonprobability sample strategy called judgment sampling.⁴⁴ Judgment sampling is a strategy in which a researcher

⁴¹ Nathan R. Todd and Nicole E. Allen, "Religious Congregations as Mediating Structures for Social Justice: A Multilevel Examination," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 48 (2011): 222–237, doi.org/10.1007/s10464-010-9388-8.

⁴² If you are interested in a copy of the survey instrument, please contact the author.

⁴³ Deirdre Torrance, Christine Forde, Fiona King, and Jamila Razzaq, "What Is the Problem? A Critical Review of Social Justice Leadership Preparation and Development," *Professional Development in Education* 47, no. 1 (2021): 22–35, doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2020.1787198.

⁴⁴ Johnny Blair, Ronald Czaja, and Edward Blair, *Designing Surveys: A Guide to Decisions and Procedures*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2014); and William C.

chooses participants who meet certain criteria, in this case a population of people personally and professionally committed to social justice. Two strategies were employed to decrease sampling bias. The first was to have as diverse a sample as possible because creating diversity in the sample increases resistance to bias.⁴⁵ The second strategy was to have as large a sample as possible; a sample size of 400 is adequate for large populations.⁴⁶

Forty-seven organizations throughout the United States were recruited to distribute the electronic survey. Of those 47 organizations, 26 agreed to distribute it and did so electronically. Organizations were judged for inclusion in the study based on the alignment of their mission statement to a social justice orientation. Secondly, organizations were chosen from a variety of different nonprofit groups to increase sample diversity. Groupings used were determined by the nonprofit's National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities (NTEE) code.⁴⁷

The 26 organizations distributed the survey to 1732 people. A total of 550 individuals responded. Responses were filtered according to responses to the first five questions in the survey: (1) Please rate how committed you are to social justice; (2) Would you describe yourself as someone who seeks to understand injustice better through reflection and dialogue?; (3) Would you describe yourself as someone who actively works against injustice?; (4) Does your commitment to social justice affect the choices you make in your personal life?; and (5) Do you work in a job/profession that allows you to live out your commitment to social justice? This created a final sample size of 405 who self-identified as having the characteristics of a person personally and professionally committed to social justice. The total *n* for the analysis that follows varies depending on which questions were used. Some respondents did not complete the entire survey or marked *n/a* for questions that did not apply to them.

This sample was largely female (70%), between the ages 20–39 (60%), and well educated (82% with a college degree or higher). This sample population was racially diverse and aligned with demographics in the United States population per the 2010 census report, the most current report at the time.⁴⁸ Respondents represented all of the 26 organizations that agreed to distribute the survey.

Emory and Donald Cooper, *Business Research Methods*, 4th ed. (Homewood, IL: Irwin, 1991).

⁴⁵ Blair, Czaja, and Blair, *Designing Surveys*.

⁴⁶ Paul D. Leedy and Jeanne Ellis Ormrod, *Practical Research: Planning and Design*, 9th ed. (Boston, MA: Pearson, 2010).

⁴⁷ "National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities," accessed July 28, 2015, nccs.urban.org/classification/NTEE.cfm.

⁴⁸ United States Census Bureau, "2010 Census Shows America's Diversity."

A twenty-three question survey was developed to measure the perceived influence of the five independent variables using Likert scales to measure this perception. The Likert scales were written with an equal number of positive and negative expressions, for example: not at all, a little, somewhat, influential, very, extremely.⁴⁹

Since the instrument developed is original to this study, it was important to confirm that it was both valid and reliable to measure the perception of influence of the independent variables. Construct validity was determined through a principal component analysis that determines how many components exist within the data and to what degree each variable (survey question) contributes to that component (the five influences).⁵⁰ This analysis determines if, in fact, questions cluster together in components in a way that aligns with the survey's theoretical construct. This analysis was done in pilot testing and again on the final data in order to confirm construct validity.

The principal component analysis clustered the survey questions into seven components: (1) religion/spirituality, (2) work, (3) graduate school philosophy, (4) significant relationships, (5) exposure to injustice, (6) formal and informal education, and (7) research. These findings confirm the instrument's construct validity.

Internal reliability was confirmed via Cronbach's alpha with the full data set. Cronbach's alpha is a widely used measure to test the internal reliability of a survey tool.⁵¹ A Cronbach's $\alpha = .834$ was achieved for this survey with an $n=405$ which surpasses the .7 threshold for determining a reliable survey tool.⁵²

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Survey response data was interpreted using descriptive and inferential statistics via the IBM SPSS software, a common statistical analysis software package. Results reported below are organized by the three study research questions, variables analyzed, followed by a discussion of findings and their implications.

⁴⁹ Rensis Likert, "A Technique for the Measurement of Attitudes," *Archives of Psychology* 22, no. 140 (1932): 5–55; James Carifio and Rocco Perla, "Resolving the 50-Year Debate around Using and Misusing Likert Scales," *Medical Education* 42 (2008): 1150–1152, doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2923.2008.03172.x.

⁵⁰ Andy Field, *Discovering Statistics Using SPSS* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009).

⁵¹ Robert M. Groves, Floyd J. Fowler, Jr., Mick P. Couper, Lames M. Lepkowski, Eleanor Singer, and Roger Tourangeau, *Survey Methodology* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2004).

⁵² Field, *Discovering Statistics Using SPSS*.

QUESTION ONE

Research question one asks: In populations of people with a personal and professional commitment to social justice, does the influence of significant persons, exposure to injustice, education/learning, work experience, and religion/spirituality have a positive relationship to one's commitment to social justice? A Spearman's correlation coefficient was used to determine the relationship between each independent variable and their commitment to social justice. A $p \leq .05$ was used to determine significance. The frequency of survey answers was used to understand the distribution of sample answers. The results are organized by variable.

Variable One: Influence of a Significant Person

The survey used a Likert scale (not at all influential, a little influential, somewhat influential, influential, very influential, and extremely influential) and asked participants to rate the influence of the following groups of significant persons: parents, other family members, friends, a mentor, and work peers per the operational definition of this study.

There were significant correlations using Spearman's correlation coefficient for four of the five relationships measured in the survey and their perceived commitment to social justice: parents, a mentor, friends, and work peers. (Table 1)

Table 1
SPEARMAN'S CORRELATION COEFFICIENT FOR THE INFLUENCE OF SIGNIFICANT PERSONS

		Parent(s)	Other Family Members	Friends	A Mentor	Work Peers
Please rate how committed you are to social justice	Correlation Coefficient	.116	.063	.214	.203	.187
	<i>n</i>	405	405	405	405	405

This indicates a significant relationship between the rated level of commitment to social justice and each of these four relationships. In fact, the majority of the sample population rated parents (60%), a mentor (70%), friends (80%), and work peers (84%) as influential, very influential or extremely influential. (Table 2)

Table 2
DISTRIBUTION OF LIKERT SCALE RESPONSES BY PERCENTAGE FOR SIGNIFICANT RELATIONSHIPS

Likert Scale	Parent (<i>n</i> = 405)	Other Family Members (<i>n</i> = 405)	Friends (<i>n</i> = 405)	Mentor (<i>n</i> = 405)	Work Peers (<i>n</i> = 405)
Not at all	8.1	17.0	2.5	11.6	1.0
A little	11.6	16.3	5.2	6.4	4.4
Somewhat	20.5	23.5	11.9	12.1	10.1
Influential	21	20.2	27.4	20	24.2
Very	21	13.8	37.0	32.8	39.5
Extremely	17.8	9.1	16.0	17	20.7

These results affirm the relational nature of commitment to social justice. It suggests that commitment to social justice is not just a cerebral exercise but influenced by and through important relationships. If the goal of teaching Catholic social teaching is to foster lifelong commitment to social justice, then this finding highlights the importance of offering educational experiences with intentional opportunities for relationship with those already committed to social justice. The high frequency with which survey participants responded to mentors and friends suggest adolescence, when relationships play a key formative role during the process of individuation.

Variable Two: Exposure to Injustice

Two Likert scales were used in questions measuring this variable: a scale measuring perceived influence (not at all influential, a little influential, somewhat influential, influential, very influential, and extremely influential) and a scale asking to rate observation or experience of injustice (not at all, a little, somewhat, often, very often, and frequently). Eighty-two percent of respondents reported observing or witnessing a form of injustice often, very often, or frequently; 93% of respondents perceived that observing or witnessing a form of injustice to be influential, very influential, or extremely influential; only 33% reported experiencing a form of injustice often, very often, or frequently; but 71% of those who answered the question perceived experiencing a form of injustice to be influential, very influential, or extremely influential. (Table 3)

Table 3
DISTRIBUTION OF LIKERT SCALE RESPONSES BY PERCENTAGE FOR EXPOSURE TO INJUSTICE

Likert Scale	I have observed or witnessed someone experiencing a form of injustice (n = 396)	I have experienced a form of injustice (n = 396)	Likert Scale	Please rate how influential observing/ witnessing this was/is on your commitment to social justice (n = 394)	Please rate how influential this experience was/is on your commitment to social justice (n = 351)
Not at all	0	15.2	Not at all	0.8	5.1
A little	2.5	22.7	A little	1.3	10.8
Somewhat	15.7	29.5	Somewhat	4.6	13.4
Often	34.8	19.4	Influential	19.8	23.4
Very Often	26.8	7.6	Very	32.5	25.1
Frequently	20.2	5.6	Extremely	41.1	22.2

The results of the Spearman’s correlation coefficient showed a significant positive relationship between “I have observed or witnessed someone experiencing a form of injustice,” “Please rate how influential observing/witnessing this was/is on your commitment to social justice,” “I have experienced a form of injustice,” “Please rate how influential this experience was/is on your commitment to

social justice,” and how one rated their commitment to social justice. (Table 4)

Table 4
CORRELATION COEFFICIENT FOR EXPOSURE TO INJUSTICE

		I have observed or witnessed someone experiencing a form of injustice	Please rate how influential observing/witnessing this was/is on your commitment to social justice	I have experienced a form of injustice	Please rate how influential this experience was/is on your commitment to social justice
Please rate how committed you are to social justice	Correlation Coefficient	.287	.353	.143	.191
	<i>n</i>	396	394	396	351

These results affirm the qualitative literature’s insight that experiencing injustice in one’s own life or witnessing injustice is perceived as influential by those committed to social justice.

Variable Three: Education/Learning

The survey instrument used the Likert scale (not at all influential, a little influential, somewhat influential, influential, very influential, and extremely influential) and asked participants to rate the influence of specific educational experiences: a course or courses taken as an undergraduate or graduate student, other formal learning experiences (certificate programs, etc.), and one’s own personal reading (books, magazines, etc.). Seventy-four percent perceived an undergraduate or graduate course(s) to be influential, very influential, or extremely influential, 67% perceived other formal learning experiences were influential, very influential, or extremely influential, and 87% perceived their own reading to be influential, very influential, or extremely influential. (Table 5)

Table 5
DISTRIBUTION OF LIKERT SCALE RESPONSES BY PERCENTAGE FOR EDUCATION/LEARNING

Likert Scale	Course(s) taken as an undergraduate/graduate student (<i>n</i> = 366)	Other formal learning experiences (<i>n</i> = 313)	My own personal reading (<i>n</i> = 387)	Were you familiar with your undergraduate or graduate college or university’s philosophy of social justice? (<i>n</i> = 297)	Please rate how influential your school(s) philosophy was/is on your commitment to social justice (<i>n</i> = 286)
Not at all	5.2	12.1	.3	16.5	18.2
A little	7.4	8.3	2.1	9.8	12.9
Somewhat	13.4	12.8	11.1	16.5	16.8
Influential/Familiar	22.7	22.7	24.5	20.9	17.1
Very	22.4	21.4	35.7	20.9	19.6
Extremely	29	22.7	26.4	15.5	15.4

A Spearman’s correlation coefficient resulted in significant positive relationships between the perceived level of commitment to social justice and these three types of learning. It is interesting to note that both formal and informal learning experiences are significant and

this sample had a high percentage of engagement in informal learning. (Table 6)

Table 6
SPEARMAN’S CORRELATION COEFFICIENT FOR EDUCATION/LEARNING

		Course(s) taken as an undergraduate/graduate student	Other formal learning experiences	My own personal reading	Were you familiar with your undergraduate or graduate college/university’s philosophy of social justice?	Please rate how influential your school(s) philosophy was/is on your commitment to social justice
Please rate how committed you are to social justice	Correlation Coefficient	.198	.228	.309	.192	.141
	n	366	313	387	297	286

Variable Four: Work Experience

Two Likert scales were used in questions measuring this variable. A scale measuring perceived influence (not at all influential, a little influential, somewhat influential, influential, very influential, and extremely influential) of working with marginalized or oppressed people and of research (staying current on academic scholarship) on commitment to social justice. The second scale asked to rate if their work involves working with marginalized or oppressed people and requires research on issues of social justice (not at all, a little, somewhat, often, very often, and frequently). Eighty four percent of respondents reported working with people who are marginalized or oppressed often, very often, or frequently and 96% perceived that work to be influential, very influential, or extremely influential. Almost half, 49% reported that their work required research regarding issues of social justice often, very often, and frequently and 74% said that research was influential, very influential, and extremely influential. (Table 7)

Table 7
DISTRIBUTION OF LIKERT SCALE RESPONSES BY PERCENTAGE FOR WORK EXPERIENCE

Likert	In your work/profession, do you work with people who are marginalized or oppressed? (n = 386)	Does your work require you to do research regarding issues of social justice or people who experience injustice? (n = 386)	Likert	Please rate how influential your work with marginalized or oppressed people is on your commitment to social justice (n = 374)	Please rate how influential your research regarding issues of social justice or people who experience injustice is on your commitment to social justice (n = 335)
Not at all	2.1	13	Not at all	.3	2.1
A little	3.6	13.2	A little	.8	7.5
Somewhat	10.4	25.4	Somewhat	2.7	17.3
Often	13.0	21.0	Influential	12.8	23.3
Very Often	17.4	14.8	Very	22.7	22.2
Frequently	53.6	12.7	Extremely	60.7	22.7

A Spearman’s correlation coefficient resulted in statistically significant positive relationships between the perceived level of commitment to social justice and working with people who are

marginalized or oppressed and doing social justice research. These results clearly indicate the powerful influence work has on commitment to social justice. (Table 8)

Table 8
SPEARMAN'S CORRELATION COEFFICIENT FOR WORK EXPERIENCE

		In your work/profession, do you work with people who are marginalized or oppressed?	Please rate how influential your work with marginalized or oppressed people is on your commitment to social justice	Does your work require you to do research regarding issues of social justice or people who experience injustice?	Please rate how influential your research regarding issues of social justice or people who experience injustice is on your commitment to social justice
Please rate how committed you are to social justice	Correlation Coefficient	.220	.331	.128	.241
	<i>n</i>	386	374	386	335

Variable Five: Religion/Spirituality

The perceived influence Likert scale (not at all influential, a little influential, somewhat influential, influential, very influential, and extremely influential) was used to measure the perceived influence of involvement in a religious tradition, spiritual life or prayer, and relationship to God. Using Spearman's correlation coefficient, significant correlations were observed for three of the five questions: "Please rate how your spiritual life/prayer influences your commitment to social justice," "Please rate how your relationship with God/Deity/Higher Power influences your commitment to social justice," and "My religion provides a moral framework for my understanding of social justice." (Table 9)

Table 9
SPEARMAN'S CORRELATION COEFFICIENT FOR RELIGION/SPIRITUALITY

		Please rate your involvement in a religious organization/tradition	Please rate how your involvement in a religious organization/tradition influences your commitment to social justice	Please rate how your spiritual life/prayer influences your commitment to social justice	Please rate how your relationship with God/Deity/Higher Power influences your commitment to social justice	My religion provides a moral framework for my understanding of social justice
Please rate how committed you are to social justice	Correlation Coefficient	.098	.105	.234	.208	.211
	<i>n</i>	386	329	335	330	300

An additional question was asked to describe the level of involvement in a religious tradition (not at all, a little, somewhat, often, very often, frequently) and 49% of respondents who answered the question (21 respondents did not) rated at least some involvement in a religious organization or tradition. However, 56% of respondents rated their spiritual life or prayer as influential, very influential, or extremely influential to their commitment to social justice. 57% rated

their relationship with God as influential, very influential, or extremely influential. (Tables 10–11)

Table 10
DISTRIBUTION OF LIKERT SCALE RESPONSES BY PERCENTAGE FOR RELIGION/SPIRITUALITY, TABLE 1

Likert Scale	Please rate how your involvement in a religious organization/tradition influences your commitment to social justice (n = 329)	Please rate how your spiritual life/prayer influences your commitment to social justice (n = 386)	Please rate how your relationship with God/Deity/Higher Power influences your commitment to social justice (n = 386)
Not at all	31	22.4	25.8
A little	13.4	11.9	8.8
Somewhat	8.5	9.9	8.8
Influential	14.3	18.5	17.3
Very	16.7	15.2	11.5
Extremely	16.1	22.1	27.9

Table 11
DISTRIBUTION OF LIKERT SCALE RESPONSES BY PERCENTAGE FOR RELIGION/SPIRITUALITY, TABLE 2

Likert Scale	Please rate how your involvement in a religious organization/tradition influences your commitment to social justice (n = 329)	Likert Scale	My religion provides a moral framework for my understanding of social justice (n = 300)
Not at all	31.9	Strongly disagree	11.7
A little	18.7	Disagree	6.3
Somewhat	12.4	Somewhat disagree	6.7
Often	9.1	Agree	19
Very often	11.1	Somewhat agree	13.7
Frequently	16.8	Strongly agree	42.7

The difference in response rates suggests that, for some respondents, their relationship with God and spiritual life was influential but they were not actively involved in a religious tradition.

QUESTION TWO

Research question two asked: Of the five independent variables, which are perceived to have the most influence on the development of the commitment to social justice? Here the survey instrument asked participants to choose the most, the second most, and the third most influential factor.

The mode for each question determined what the sample perceived as first, second, and third most influential factor. (Table 12)

Thirty six percent of respondents chose exposure to injustice, 22% education and learning, 16% work experience, 15% a significant person, and 12% religion/spirituality as the most influential variable in their commitment to social justice. Twenty-six percent of respondents chose education/learning, 23% the influence of a significant person, 21% exposure to injustice, 19% work experience,

Table 12
FREQUENCY FOR MOST, SECOND MOST, AND THIRD MOST INFLUENTIAL FACTOR, N=384

Level of Influence	Independent Variable	Frequency	Percent
Most Influential Variable	Exposure to Injustice	138	35.9%
	Education/Learning	83	21.6%
	Work Experience	60	15.6%
	Influence of Significant Persons	56	14.6%
	Religion/Spirituality	47	12.2%
Second Most Influential Variable	Education/Learning	100	26%
	Influence of Significant Persons	87	22.7%
	Exposure to Injustice	79	20.6%
	Work Experience	74	19.3%
	Religion/Spirituality	44	11.5%
Third Most Influential Variable	Influence of Significant Persons	94	24.5%
	Work Experience	87	22.7%
	Education/Learning	85	22.1%
	Exposure to Injustice	82	21.4%
	Religion/Spirituality	36	9.4%

and again 12% religion/spirituality as the second most influential variable. Finally, 25% of respondents chose the influence of a significant person, 23% work experience, 22% education and learning, 21% exposure to injustice, and 9% religion/spirituality as the third most influential variable. Thus, per participant self-reporting and their significant relationship with ratings of commitment, exposure to injustice, and education/learning are perceived as crucial variables.

The three survey questions were designed so that some of the independent variables might not be chosen at all. Participants were not asked to rank variables in order of most to least influential. Rather for each of the three questions (most, second most, and third most) participants had the opportunity to choose from all five variables. In light of this design, it is important to note that the frequencies reported for these questions indicate that all five of these factors are perceived as most influential. Religion/spirituality was chosen least frequently, but was chosen as most influential by 12% of respondents and picked for one of the three levels by 33% of respondents.

This data gives strong evidence that all five variables are perceived as highly influential in personal and professional commitment to social justice and affirms the findings from question one.

QUESTION THREE

Research question three was: Are there statistically significant associations between/among characteristics of people with personal and professional commitment to social justice. This question explores if certain characteristics and/or experiences of individuals surveyed impact the perception of influence of the five variables. These characteristics include gender, race/ethnicity, education level, age, reported level of work with marginalized and oppressed populations, reported level of experiencing marginalization and oppression, and reported level of religious involvement.

The data were analyzed in two ways. First, data were categorized for each characteristic and then, for the first four characteristics (gender, race, age, and level of education) the means were compared to look for statistically significant differences in the answers to questions measuring perception of influence. For the final three characteristics (reported level of work with marginalized and oppressed populations, reported level of experiencing marginalization and oppression, and the reported level of religious involvement), a Spearman's Rho was done to test for a relationship between the questions measuring perception of influence and the reported level of that characteristic. A p -value of $\leq .05$ was used to determine statistical significance for each test. Second, a chi-square was run to look for relationships between categories of each characteristic and the ranking of each independent variable by most, second most, and third most.⁵³

Let me outline findings by population characteristic. Means of the responses were compared to the 23 questions measuring influence for two groups, male and female. The survey included an opportunity to identify as transgender; only one respondent identified as such, too small a sample to include in the statistical analysis. The question measuring the influence of work peers produced the only statistically significant result, and it was a small effect size. These findings suggest that gender alone is not a factor in what influences someone to have a commitment to social justice.

For race, the means of the responses to the 23 questions measuring influence for six categories were compared. Significant differences were observed in the means between Whites and both African American/Blacks and White and Hispanic/Latino for five questions relating to the independent variables: exposure to injustice and religion/spirituality. There were also significant differences in the means between Asians with both African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino for three questions relating to religion/spirituality. This affirms the qualitative research describing the profound impact of being from a traditionally marginalized group and experiencing injustice personally on social justice commitments.⁵⁴

⁵³ The chi-square test allows for the analysis of categorical data by comparing frequencies in categories against the number of frequencies one might get by chance. The results of a chi-square reveal in which categories relationships exist and the strength of these relationships. See Field, *Discovering Statistics Using SPSS*.

⁵⁴ These findings on race affirm qualitative research and also historical experiences of race and religion/spirituality, for example the civil rights movement in the United States. That said, the survey instrument did not measure how the significance is lived out, only that it is significant. The discussion and implications of this study will therefore be limited in terms of conclusions that may be drawn outside of the scope of this study.

For level of education, the means of the responses to the 23 questions measuring influence for three categories were compared. Significant differences in means were observed between those with Graduate Degrees and Some College or Less for two questions relating to the independent variables: exposure to injustice and education/learning. There were also significant differences in means between those with Graduate Degrees and those with bachelor's degrees for all five questions relating to religion/spirituality. It is difficult to know if these findings are solely connected to education level or other factors are involved, specifically age. Examining the data reveals that 56% of those in the bachelor's degree group are 20–29 years old. This could explain why religion/spirituality is significantly more influential with those who have graduate degrees as opposed to those with bachelor's degrees (see age group findings below).

For age, the means of the responses to the 23 questions measuring influence for five categories were compared. Significant differences in means were observed between those in their 20s and those in their 40s, 50s, and 60s. The means for four of the five questions relating to religion/spirituality were significantly different for those in their 20s and those in their 50s and 60s. The means for the question measuring the influence of courses taken in college or graduate school were significantly different for those in their 20s and those in their 40s, 50s, and 60s. Significant differences were also found between those in their 20s and 40s for the question measuring the influence of other family members and for those in their 50s for the question measuring the influence of experiencing injustice.

Five findings were indicated. First, there is a significant relationship between how one rated their level of working with marginalized or oppressed populations and the questions from the following independent variables: influence of significant persons, exposure to injustice, education/learning, work experience, and religion/spirituality. Second, there is a significant positive relationship between how one rated their level of experiencing marginalization or oppression and the questions from the following independent variables: exposure to injustice, and religion/spirituality. And third, there was a significant positive relationship between how one rated their level of religious involvement and the questions from the following independent variables: influence of significant persons, exposure to injustice, education/learning, work experience, and religion/spirituality. Fourth, the more one is involved in a religious organization, the less they perceive the influence of experiencing injustice on their commitment to social justice and the less they reported working with those who are marginalized or oppressed. Finally, the more one is involved in a religious tradition, the more influence it had on their commitment to social justice. Four questions were very significant ($p < .001$) and had

strong effect sizes. In other words, the greater the religious involvement was, the more religion in general influenced commitment to social justice.

Chi-square results found a significant relationship between how one rated their level of religious involvement and what was chosen as the most, second most, and third most influential independent variable on their personal and professional commitment to social justice. This was the only characteristic with significant findings related to what was chosen as most, second most, and third most influential independent variable.

DISCUSSION

Of the 23 questions measuring the perceived influence of the five variables, 20 were considered statistically significant at p value $< .05$. In fact, 17 of the questions had a p value much lower than .05 indicating that there is a very significant positive relationship between the independent variables and how one rates commitment to social justice.

The frequencies of responses revealed important findings as well. Being exposed to injustice by witnessing it and/or working with people who are oppressed or marginalized is not only reported as being significantly influential, but also a very common experience. The vast majority of the sample reported having these experiences as well as their high level of influence. This provides strong evidence that witnessing injustice provides significant motivation to one's personal and professional commitment to social justice.

While witnessing injustice was reported as the most frequent experience for the sample as a whole,⁵⁵ almost all questions were reported by a majority of respondents. The primary purpose of this study was to test the hypothesis that these five independent variables critically influence commitment to social justice. The results from this survey confirm that this hypothesis can be accepted, but with caveats.⁵⁶

The first caveat is that other family members do not seem to be a relationship significantly influencing one's commitment. Also, while religion/spirituality generally exercises significant influence, these findings suggest that involvement in a religious tradition may not be significant. A larger sample size of people who rated higher levels of

⁵⁵ 82% of respondents reported observing or witnessing a form of injustice often, very often, or frequently.

⁵⁶ The three questions that were not significant at $p < .05$ were the perception of influence from other family members and the two questions referring to religious involvement.

involvement in a religious tradition would be necessary to draw any hard conclusions.

The findings examining the seven characteristics studied indicate that men and women perceive the influence of the five independent variables in similar ways. Gender was not a significant factor. The other six factors, however, do play a role.

Race was a significant factor playing a role in how one perceived the influence of the five independent variables, especially exposure to injustice and religion/spirituality. Education level had a relationship to one's experience of injustice and the influence of education/learning. Those with graduate degrees perceived religion/spirituality as more influential than those with bachelor's degrees.⁵⁷

Age group also was a factor. Those in their 20s experienced religion/spirituality as far less influential, especially when compared to those in their 50s and 60s. Also, courses one took were perceived as more influential for those in their 20s than older participants. This could be because those in their 20s have experienced courses more recently than older participants.

How one rated their level of working with marginalized or oppressed populations had a significant relationship with questions related to all five variables and a significant relationship to the choice of most influential variable.

Personal experience of injustice had a significant relationship to exposure to injustice. Someone who experienced injustice also observed injustice and both the experience and observation are influential on commitment to social justice. The more one has experienced injustice, the more involved they are in a religious tradition and the more their relationship with God/deity/higher power influences their commitment to social justice. Findings also indicate that one's personal experience of injustice has a significant relationship to their choosing exposure to injustice as the most influential independent variable on their personal and professional commitment to social justice.

The level of religious involvement had a positive relationship to at least one question from each of the five independent variables. Findings indicate that the more one is involved in a religious tradition, the less they perceive the influence of experiencing injustice on their commitment to social justice and the less they reported working with those who are marginalized or oppressed. The findings also indicate that the more one is involved in a religious tradition, the more influence it has on their commitment to social justice. As reported earlier, all four remaining questions were significant ($p < .001$) and had strong effect sizes. The greater the level of religious involvement, the

⁵⁷ Questions referring to religious involvement were not significant at $p < .05$, but their p values were close ($p = .055$, $p = .058$).

more religion in general influences commitment to social justice. The chi-square results confirmed these findings indicating that there is a significant relationship between religious involvement and the choice of the most, second most, and the third most influential variables.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

This study provides several implications for teaching Catholic social teaching. It is important, however, to start with some assumptions regarding teaching CST. The first is that Catholic social teaching is essential to the Catholic faith and living the gospel. One cannot live an authentic Catholic faith without attempting to integrate Catholic social teaching. Much has been written to support this assumption including the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* which states: “With her social doctrine not only does the Church not stray from her mission but she is rigorously faithful to it.”⁵⁸

Second, one goal of teaching Catholic social teaching is to foster lifelong commitment to social justice among learners. In my own experience of teaching CST in a variety of settings I have found it tempting to teach as if the issues of today are the impetus for the teaching, when in fact, we are entering into a long tradition of responding to the call of God by asking questions not just of our own personal behavior, but how we are organized as communities and determining where we fall short in the vision God has for our human family.

The third assumption flows from the first two. Teaching Catholic social teaching is not just a cerebral exercise, but rather an opportunity for transformation. That transformation can manifest itself as a more profound commitment to social justice but can also be an opportunity for Catholics to live their faith more deeply. As the US Bishops write, “Our commitment to the Catholic social mission must be rooted in and strengthened by our spiritual lives. In our relationship with God we experience the conversion of heart that is necessary to truly love one another as God has loved us.”⁵⁹ Understanding Catholic social teaching and living out its implications is an active way to live one’s faith, not just a body of information to understand and articulate.

With these assumptions in mind, four implications of the study are most salient for the Catholic community. First, significant relationships matter. The research indicated that relationships were perceived as influential on one’s commitment to social justice. As a community

⁵⁸ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 64.

⁵⁹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions” (Washington, DC, 2011), www.usccb.org/resources/sharing-catholic-social-teaching-challenges-and-directions.

of believers, this is great news! Faith communities are organized to foster relationships that are intergenerational, provide mentorship, and even promote friendships rooted in this shared belief system. Leveraging these significant relationships to foster commitment to social justice requires intention as opposed to wholesale reform. Therefore, it is crucial to consider how educational or formational programs can build mentorship into the learning experience. Experiences that build peer to peer community, foster friendships, and support ongoing commitment to social justice should be designed. When we are teaching learners who are also parents, what resources can be offered to help them pass this along to their children? How can we provide formational family experiences increasing the capacity of parents to be significant influences for social justice?

Second, experience matters. This study affirms that experiencing or witnessing injustice can foster lifelong commitment to social justice. Without overstating what the findings suggest, experiencing injustice as part of a traditionally marginalized community can also foster this lifelong commitment. The challenge then is to create formational experiences that both allow for the opportunity to witness injustice in a way that makes the issues real and the effects significant in the lives of people.⁶⁰

It also calls for creating formation experiences that help people access their own experiences and witnessing of injustice as a part of their own lived experience and connect it to Catholic social teaching. This is especially critical in formation opportunities with diverse groups of people. Formation for social justice is an opportunity to not only foster commitment to social justice, but to practice and develop skills necessary to foster just communities, including listening to diverse experiences and valuing the diversity present.

This wisdom is not absent from our tradition. St. Francis of Assisi had transformational experiences once he let go of fear from the encounter of those considered “other,” literally those with leprosy. Entering into relationships with people experiencing marginalization and witnessing it in new ways opened him up to a life of radical commitment to the gospel. St. Oscar Romero’s story offers a similar witness when being made Archbishop of San Salvador in 1977 exposed him to oppression in new ways and led to deep and profound commitment that ended up costing him his life.

Third, education matters. Education has an influence on commitment to social justice. In our own Catholic tradition, assumptions have

⁶⁰ On a personal note, I have been a part of many service learning experiences throughout my decades of social justice formation. It is important to note that these formational experiences must be in a way that exemplifies Catholic social teaching and avoids field trip or tourism style experience to see what poverty looks like, for example.

bearing on this finding. If Catholic social teaching is integral to a life of faith then that teaching should foster commitment to social justice. Therefore we have to be intentional in our education. While there are places where a robust education on Catholic social teaching can be found, it is by no means ubiquitous. If a Catholic is not actively pursuing this education, they can successfully avoid any formation or education on it.

Catholic social teaching being an integral part of the gospel should be reason enough for it to be fully present and integrated into catechesis and formation from parish religious education to seminary formation. Couple that with the findings that both formal and informal education is perceived as a significant influence on commitment to social justice, it is imperative for Catholic communities to take this education and formation seriously and to provide it in meaningful and comprehensive ways so that people of faith are invited into a deeper and more authentic gospel way of living.

Finally, religion/spirituality matters. In this study, those who rated themselves as involved with a religious tradition, perceived their relationship with God, spiritual life or prayer, and involvement in that tradition as influencing their commitment to social justice. While this was not a majority of the population sample, the correlation was very high for those to whom it applied. This finding, coupled with the assumption that Catholic social teaching is essential to Catholic faith, suggests an enormous opportunity to impact one's lifelong commitment to social justice. I would argue not only opportunity, but responsibility.

If Catholic social teaching is essential to the mission of the church, it should impact how church life operates, especially in the context of parish community where most Catholics experience the church. A parish or any Catholic community can assess its success in living out the mission of the church by how it fosters commitment to Catholic social teaching. Important questions to consider are: How does the Catholic Church form people's spiritual lives to be rooted in the church's social mission? How does the church help connect people's relationship with God to the social demands of the gospel? Does the church look to find ways to understand how involvement in church life leads to commitment to social justice? Imagine if Catholic parishes were measured in such a way.

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING AS INTEGRAL TO CATHOLIC LIVING

So how can the church leverage these five variables to foster active faith in those who claim Catholicism as their religious tradition? First, it demands commitment to teaching Catholic social teaching as an essential element of faith rather than an elective to be chosen or for

those who find themselves on the “liberal” spectrum of American political life. Catholic social teaching should be integral and woven in whole cloth as an authentic expression of the Catholic faith that impacts one’s relationship with God, as well as personal and communal prayer.

Second, there is an opportunity to bring people together around this shared commitment to foster deeper relationship and community. Intergenerational communities can leverage both the mentor and peer-to-peer support the study findings revealed as influential to deepen commitment to Catholic social teaching while building authentic community rooted in gospel values. Real opportunity exists in finding young adults with a shared commitment to social justice and helping connect it to an active way of living out faith. I personally have had many encounters with young Catholics who find their commitment to social justice in conflict with how they understand what it means to be Catholic. I often imagine what it would be like for those young adults if Catholic social teaching had been a part of their understanding of authentic Catholic life from an early age so that as they learn more of the injustices that exist in the world, instead of breeding tension with their religious tradition, they see their Catholic faith as a source challenging them to be committed to responding to the needs of the world.

Third, the way we teach Catholic social teaching matters. The study findings indicate that both exposure to injustice and education/learning are perceived as extremely influential. This research in conjunction with the literature discussing critical reflection make a strong case that formal educational programs that wish to develop a social justice orientation in their programming must include experiential opportunities for students that expose them to social justice issues.

Critical reflection is a deep examination of one’s belief system that leads to new behavior, attitude, and action. This critical reflection examines one’s relationship to larger social dynamics that perpetuate oppression and marginalization.⁶¹ Educational experiences in the classroom must also include opportunities to learn more about social justice. The qualitative literature suggests that the educational experience needs to help students understand issues of justice systemically⁶² and allow students to make meaning out of their

⁶¹ John T. King, “Service-Learning as a Site for Critical Pedagogy: A Case of Collaboration, Caring, and Defamiliarization across Borders,” *Journal of Experiential Education* 26, no. 3 (2004): 121–137.

⁶² Capper, Theoharis, and Sebastian, “Toward a Framework for Preparing Leaders for Social Justice”; K. B. McKenzie, D. E. Christman, F. Hernandez, E. Fierro, C. Capper, M. Dantley, M. L. Gonzalez, N. Cambron-McCabe, and J. J. Scheurich, “From the

exposure to injustice.⁶³ Therefore, implementing these factors in educational programming will effectively leverage two of the most influential factors perceived to develop a social justice orientation.

The experience of the learner or those in formation programs also is important.⁶⁴ Race, level of education, experience of marginalization, and level of working with people who experience marginalization all impact one's commitment to social justice. It behooves a church that itself is a diverse community of faithful people to be mindful of this diversity and see it as a strength. The church can utilize this strength of diversity to include multiple voices and perspectives as a way of understanding issues of injustice, moving from paternalistic responses to injustice toward solidarity and interdependence, and ultimately inviting deeper relationships with each other as a community of faith.

CONCLUSION

My hope as I embarked on this study was to gain a better understanding of the common experiences people perceived as influential on their commitment to social justice in order to develop high impact formation experiences that foster lifelong commitment to social justice. It is imperative to teach Catholic social teaching, an essential element of faith, so that it fosters lifelong commitment to social justice. It is also imperative to present it as essential to authentic expression of Catholic living.

In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis describes a culture of encounter that cultivates a desire for meeting people and learning different points of view, that includes everyone. He challenges the church when he writes: "What is important is to create processes of encounter, processes that build a people that can accept differences. Let us arm our children with the weapon of dialogue! Let us teach them to fight the good fight of the culture of encounter!"⁶⁵

Commitment to social justice as a response to the gospel is more than just an ability to see issues of injustice and attempt to address

Field: A Proposal for Educating Leaders for Social Justice," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (February 1, 2008): 111–138, doi.org/10.1177/0013161X07309470; Theoharis, "Woven in Deeply."

⁶³ Brown, "Leadership for Social Justice and Equity," December 1, 2006; Gail C. Furman, "Social Justice Leadership as Praxis: Developing Capacities through Preparation Programs," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (January 5, 2012): 191–229, doi.org/10.1177/0013161X11427394.

⁶⁴ Brandon Reynante, "Learning to Design for Social Justice in Community-Engaged Engineering," *Journal of Engineering Education* 111, no. 2 (2022): 338–356, doi.org/10.1002/jee.20444.

⁶⁵ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 217, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

them through policy change and social programs. Rather, it is a commitment to the dignity of every human person and recognizing our interdependence and an ability to reach beyond social constructs that divide us and enter into relationships of encounter. These findings and their implications are important considerations as those teaching Catholic social teaching work to create formations that are transformational for both church and world. **M**

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