

Introduction to the Special Issue

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Abstract: This Special Issue on Dismantling Social and Racial Injustice serves multiple aims. It provides readers with a recognition and first-hand accounts of actions, thoughts, feelings and strategies used by the authors in their attempts to deal with racism. In addition to these efforts, it also serves as a call for more action against the ageless, blatant and persistent problem of racism. For those who are concerned by the focus on Black lives, it illustrates some of the ongoing violence against Black lives that are yet to be experienced by other groups. Finally, it closes with a message of hope for peace, love and continued actions in our determination to dismantle racism.

Keywords: social injustice, racial injustice, racism, Black males, racial oppression, inequality, restorative justice, Ferguson, Baltimore, Freddie Gray, Michael Brown

“I refuse to accept the view ...(that) peace and brotherhood can never become a reality... I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.” - Martin Luther King, Jr. (1964)

The history of the world has demonstrated the call and the active response of human beings, especially in those depressing and troubling periods of our lives. This Special Issue, *Dismantling Social and Racial Injustice* is, in part, a call and recognition of the blatant and ongoing violence worldwide against Black people, in general, and Black males in particular. This call was situated in a transformative context for civil and human rights. Given that this call is about dismantling social and racial injustices in the United States of America, a transformative context was essential. The transformative context recognizes that a country with a history of 240 years of racial oppression and inequality will not be transformed overnight. It suggests, however, that becoming our best selves and restructuring and creating systems that support, maintain and advance our country and the planet in a just and verdant way is an ongoing process—a process that demands awareness, compassion and positive action for results that work for all.

During the time that the call for narratives was issued, the national focus was riveted on the killing of unarmed Black males across the United States. Though the call suggested that the narratives for this Special Issue should reflect this national situation, it seems clear that those responding to the call recognized, not only that Black males’ live matter, but Black lives in general matter. Further, it is becoming increasingly clear that the Black Lives Matter Movement is not saying that other lives do not matter. Instead, the Black Lives Matter

Movement is suggesting – as is reflected in the narratives in this Special Issue – that there is a specific problem that has been happening and continues to happen in African American communities across the country that is not happening in other communities. In addition, this Movement is usually spearheaded by those in a younger generation who are devising new and different strategies to resist the negative treatment of Black people.

The 11 narratives from professionals and students in the helping professions constitute this Special Issue. The narratives are poignant, thought-provoking and reflect strategies using advocacy and activism for the purpose of in dismantling social and racial injustice. Specifically, the narratives may be divided into three broad categories: (1) reflections of teaching and learning activities employing experiential learning strategies for dealing with racial and social injustice; (2) narratives about social justice advocacy and activities which describe the critical interactive process between service providers and service consumers and (3) narratives about those affected by oppressive systems.

There are two narratives in the first category incorporating an experiential teaching/learning approach. In the first narrative, **Creating Space for the ‘Uncomfortable’: Discussions About Race and Police Brutality in a BSW Classroom**, Felicia Marie Mitchell brings the much publicized crisis, which occurred in the Ferguson Missouri with the killing of a Black man by a White police officer into the classroom. Mitchell courageously engages her students through dialogue about race and police brutality. In addition to providing readers with an overview of the critical engagement process, the narrator also documents her journey in learning to create space for

'uncomfortable' classroom discussions that foster critical reflections about race in America and practice in a multicultural world. The second article in this category, **Constructing a Deconstruction: Reflections on Dismantling Racism**, is narrated by Bronwyn Cross-Denny, and her students, Ashleigh Besto, Emily Cusick, Caitlin Doyle, Mikaela Marbot and Shauna Santos-Dempsey. This narrative reflects on the interaction and learning in a Human Diversity and Social Justice class. Cross-Denny, as a white female instructor of the class, discusses how she uses her white privilege to advance social justice to address racism. The students, who have taken Cross-Denny's class, offer their own reflections on taking the class. The narrative includes relevant data and concepts to contextualize the reflection along with strategies for deconstructing racism.

The second category consists of two articles that are co-authored by faculty members and students. These narratives reflect on the intersection of social justice and advocacy. The first narrative in this category is Brandon M. Higgins' and Valandra's, **White Guys in Trucks: Symbols of Violence and Weapons of Racial Injustice**. This narrative recounts the actions taken by a young Black male student and a middle-age Black female faculty member in a predominately white university (PWI) situated in a small white college town in response to a racist incident the student experienced. The reflection on this incident by the student and the faculty member demonstrate the ways in which one could navigate the intersections of race, gender, age and position within the academy and its surrounding community. Llewellyn Joseph Cornelius, and his doctoral students, Jenny Afkinch, Elizabeth Hoffler, Daniel Keyser, Susan Klumpner, Nicole Mattocks and Boyoung Nam, authored the second paper, **Reflections on Engaging in Social Action Against Social Injustice, While Developing a Survey to Study it: Restorative Social Justice as a Lived Experience**. In this reflection, they share their collective experience on the process as they engage in a year-long research project on restorative justice. The project was informed by police brutality cases across the country. Parental protection and parental comfort take center stage in the third article in this category titled **Policing: Social Control and Race** and authored by Shonda Lawrence and Candace Carter. These authors return to childhood memories about the day of Dr. Martin L. King's assassination

and recall in vivid detail the interactions and reactions of parents, police and looting of a neighborhood.

The third and final category of articles concern narratives of professional helping with those affected by oppressive actions or oppressive systems. The first of six narratives within this category is Yvette LaShone Pye's, **Courage Under fire: Handcuffed and Gagged by the Streets**. In this narrative, Pye describes her activist process in preparing for, and then delivering a presentation to a predominately White audience on a university campus entitled, *Black Lives Matter and the Unfinished Business of the Civil Rights Movement*. The second paper in this category is Susan F. Smalling, **Silence is not an Option**. Smalling notes that teaching about oppression from the position of privilege can be challenging. In this narrative, however, Smalling reflects on the importance as a White person to not only teach, but also to engage in an ongoing process of dismantling racial and social injustice. The third narrative in this category, **Reflection from Baltimore: The Role of Early Childhood Mental Health Providers in Responding to Community Unrest**, is narrated by, Sarah Nelson, Lauren Carpenter, Rebecca Vivrette and Kay Connors, a team of mental health clinicians at the University of Maryland. They share the process and role of using a trauma-informed response in their efforts to support children and families in Baltimore after the death of Freddie Gray on April 19, 2015 while in the custody of the Baltimore police and the civil unrest that ensued. Lauren Carpenter offers the fourth reflection, **Protest, Reflect, Respond: A Personal Reflection by a Social Worker in Baltimore Following the Death of Freddie Gray**, in this category. Carpenter narrates a personal reflection of her experience when participating in the protests in Baltimore, Maryland following the death of Freddie Gray. She describes how the experience affected her role as a mental health consultant in neighborhoods experiencing unrest. Given her personal and professional experience, Carpenter also explores the role social workers should be willing to assume to advance social and racial justice. In the fifth narrative in this category, Judith Shola Wilson and Rebecca Garcia, colleagues and friends, narrate their experiences and reflections in **Working against Racial Injustice: Bringing the Message to Community Mental Health Providers**. This pair collaborated as a bi-racial training dyad to address implicit racial bias, racial microaggressions, and cross-racial dialogue in community mental health

settings. As a strategy for making meaningful connections between people and place, the team utilizes a Community Circles as facilitation strategy. They also discuss the challenges in acting as a white ally and as a person of color facilitating cross racial-dialogues. Authors, Anthony T. Estreet, Anita M Wells, M. Taqi Tirmazi, Michael Sinclair and Von E. Nebbit of **Race and Social Justice in Baltimore: The Youth Perspective** aptly honored the wisdom of youth by providing a space and protection to capture their voices about approaches to peaceful and non-peaceful protest.

As we offer these hopeful narratives in this Special Issue on Dismantling Social and Racial Injustice in this country, we recognize that this offering is just the tip of the iceberg and that a great deal of work remains to be done. However, we remain optimistic. First, we believe in the power of unconditional love and the human spirit to heal all of life on earth and to change the world. We can, as evidenced in the response to this call, create a more harmonious and peaceful world through love, compassion forgiveness, acceptance, mercy and justice. Second, we support the efforts of a younger generation to follow in the footsteps of our ancestors in forging new strategies toward dismantling racism. These strategies may not be perfect, may not provide immediate social justice, and may not reduce the

amount of critiques from many sources. Yet, this younger generation has the passion and energy to act in new ways to call attention to the pervasiveness of racism. Third, we invite our colleagues and allies to act in their sphere of influence to further the cause of dismantling racism. Be it through teaching, research or community service, social workers and other human professionals should respond to the call for continued attention and actions to the many iterations of attacks on Black bodies. Regardless of social identities, all forms of injustice are interconnected, which demand action from all members of society.

References

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