

# Social Work is Not Rocket Science

Alexis Jemal

**Abstract:** This paper reflects on a three-day continuing education experience. Advancing continuing education can be challenging for the field of social work because there is much diversity in who social workers are and what social workers do. However, if social workers could rally behind a unifying, organizing principle, such as social justice, then continuing education could have a starting point from which to branch out into the different practice areas. Because social work is malleable, molded by the times, continuing education must shape social workers and their practice to remain current with contemporary knowledge and skills. A commitment to lifelong learning supports efforts to meet the demands of society and the needs of clients. This paper explores the question: If continuing education mirrors the field of social work, is social justice reflected? If not, what are strategies for moving social justice from the margins of social work to front and center?

**Keywords:** continuing education, social justice, social work

This paper is quite timely, since, as I write, I am attending several social work continuing education (CE) events and am able to reflect on my three-day experience. CE events should mirror and support who we are and what we do as social workers. So, who are we and what do we do? There are gaps in the literature about social worker demographics. However, Master's level social workers are predominantly white (86 percent) women (85 percent) (NASW, 2017). From the Lane and Humphreys (2015) study sample, the majority (72 percent) were married or partnered and 84 percent had children. These demographics are limited in detail, but they provide a sense of who is in the social work profession. As for what we do, I have called or have heard social workers be called “wounded healers” (Straussner et al., 2018), “unfaithful angels” (Specht & Courtney, 1994), “social problem-solvers,” and “social justice warriors.” Supposedly, social work is an interdisciplinary profession that has social justice at its core (inherent in social work knowledge and practice); serves communities at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels (Kaul, 2016); and addresses racism, social injustice, and other forms of oppression and human rights violations (Varghese, 2013). To do this work, social workers promote culturally competent research methodologies and interventions in the areas of health, well-being, and social justice (Varghese, 2013). Social workers also develop programs that address injustice by taking on a more preventative approach (Kaul, 2016). For the purposes of this paper, “social work practice” includes everything a social worker may do—for example, research, community organizing, clinical practice, management, advocacy, etc. The many professional tasks and roles that social workers do and can do are important to keep in mind because that list should provide key information to determine continuing education content.

The social work profession is diverse and eclectic in duties, roles, and service provision. At times, there seems to be tension between these duties (e.g., calling the police on a client of color vs. fighting racial disparity in the criminal justice system), roles (e.g., the researcher vs. the service provider), and service provision (e.g., clinical treatment vs. community organizing), such that a power struggle emerges—and within the context of capitalism, a hierarchy takes shape

around which way is better, has more value, or is more cost-effective. This division within the field of social work is oppressive and, like all oppression, prevents social workers and the field itself from reaching their full potential. As a consequence, we limit ourselves and all the ways in which we can facilitate creative problem-solving. Continuing education can ease these tensions by filling in gaps in understanding and building connections between skills, content, and people who could become meaningful collaborators. Moreover, continuing education can promote the centering of social justice within the field. Since social justice is a social worker's professional and ethical mandate, it can be the organizing principle or the hub of the wheel that connects the various spokes of social work practice. Continuing education could bring social justice to the core of social work practice, such that the field is organized around the many intersections within our identities, knowledge, and areas of practice. Some critiques of continuing education that I will highlight stem from what I consider to be issues in the field; these can be addressed via continuing education. The critiques or gaps I perceive are greatly influenced by my lived intersections pertaining to who I am as a social worker.

### **Who Am I?**

I am an African American woman who is licensed to practice law in two states. I am licensed as a clinical social worker (LCSW) and as a clinical alcohol and drug counselor (LCADC). I am currently studying for my master's in applied theatre. Boldly and proudly claiming the title of "artist," I consider myself to be a critical social worker who integrates the creative arts and activism. Anti-racism and humanizing action are my professional and personal goals. I use participatory action research methods to develop and test multi-level (e.g., micro, mezzo, macro) and multi-systemic (e.g., criminal justice, housing) socio-health interventions. These interventions are grounded in critical and radical theories and liberation health models—wherein, naturally, multi-level and multi-system organizing is the clinical intervention. My work is usually with system-involved persons (e.g., criminal justice, child welfare) to reduce racial criminal justice and health disparities. I am a daughter, a mother of two daughters, and a wife in an interracial marriage. As an assistant professor of social work aiming to be a social entrepreneur and creative writer of works that center the voices of marginalized populations, I teach to transgress capitalist, oppressive systems and to provide transformative learning opportunities, hopefully. And, to my surprise and content, I am still considered a young adult according to Erik Erikson's stages of human development.

My intersecting identities at various social locations attached to differing degrees of power definitely influence my perspectives on continuing education—mainly by determining what gaps I perceive and solutions I offer. Most of my work, whether professional or personal, institutional or community, research or theatre, community organizing or clinical practice, involves bridging divides, filling in gaps, and finding hidden connections between seemingly unrelated topics, people, or ideas. As evident by my background, I do not fit within a box. When asked, "Are you a lawyer or a social worker? Researcher or clinician? Educator or community organizer?" I say, "Yes, and..." My goal with this reflection on continuing education is to find areas in which continuing education for social work can fill gaps in knowledge; bridge divides between areas, specialties, and/or disciplines; and find ways to connect potential collaborators in order to center social justice-oriented practice within social work. Intersectional identities and practice are our strengths to be leveraged by continuing education to elevate the field and enable the

advancement of creative and holistic solutions to complex social conundrums. It is in this spirit that I offer a reflection on potential learning opportunities and suggestions for building new paradigms to connect social workers across the spectrum. While reflecting on continuing education, I will disclose and consider more specifically who I am and what I do as a social worker. These two factors greatly influence my perspective on continuing education, the ways I was impacted by the CE events I attended, the strengths and issues I encountered, and my proposals for intervention. Moreover, all proposed interventions incorporate an intersectional structure for advancing anti-oppression/privilege practice. As such, the reflection highlights how intersectionality applies to self and practice as well as what the field may gain from meaningful interactions through CE programs.

### **Day One Reflection**

On the first day of my three-day social work CE journey, I attended a four-hour workshop about the intersection of justice and clinical practice. Workshops like these tend to be hot topics. The justice system is a main provider of mental health services and many clients/communities are impacted indirectly, if not directly, by the criminal justice system. I was particularly interested in this workshop because of the racial disparities that persist within the criminal justice and health systems. Because I have a JD and MSW, I am constantly approached by lawyers who want to be social workers and social workers who want to be lawyers. I imagine that the number of dually credentialed professionals has increased in recent years, especially with the growing number of MSW-JD joint degree programs offered. Regardless of the first number, some content that lawyers and social workers must take for professional development overlaps, such as content in the areas of cultural competency, diversity, inclusion, and elimination of bias. Thus, the shared content areas could fulfill the continuing education requirements for both licenses. A continuing education session such as today's would work well as continuing education credit for dually licensed professionals. Moreover, if lawyers and social workers were able to take some continuing education classes together, the fields could cross-pollinate, build connections, and develop potential collaborations for implementing complex solutions.

Central to the workshop was the concept of "just clinical practice," a very important topic to me as a non-practicing attorney and social worker with an LCSW. Just clinical practice means, to me, clinical practice done using an anti-oppressive and anti-privilege framework. However, within the first thirty minutes of the session, it became immediately apparent that my definition was not the common understanding. Listening to the workshop participants, I heard three distinct categories: social work and the law, forensic social work, and social justice-oriented practice.

In this session, someone commented that clinical social workers are not "unfaithful angels" (Specht & Courtney, 1994). The gist of the comment was that clinical social workers do just clinical practice and, thus, have not failed the mission of social work pertaining to the ethical and professional mandate for social justice. These practitioners work with clients so they can advocate for themselves. Although I think this is one way to do just clinical practice—and it is certainly true of my work (which uses community organizing as the clinical intervention and develops a sense of community, self-efficacy, and identity)—there is a difference between indirectly engaging in justice practice as a consequence of your work versus justice work being the main objective. In other words, social work and justice have multiple intersections, which,

for continuing education organizing purposes, should be clarified because focus, content, and skills will differ accordingly.

There are at least three intersections for justice and social work. “Forensic social workers” do social work practice (e.g., sentence mitigation, evaluations of court-involved people, victim rights advocacy) within legal systems as indicated by the location of where they work (e.g., office of the public defender, juvenile justice detention center, prison, police precinct), on legal matters (e.g., custody hearing, termination of parental rights). For forensic social workers, the legal issue is the primary focus that dictates the work. For example, a social worker may refer a client to substance use treatment because they have a drug charge. The social worker is working with the client because they are involved with the court system. As such, a forensic social worker could carry out their job duties with no anti-oppressive thought or action.

At the intersection of “social work and the law,” a social worker’s practice may be indirectly affected by legal matters or the justice issue may otherwise be secondary. For example, a school social worker may have a student who is truant or involved in the child welfare system. Similarly, a social worker in private practice may work with a client who has a restraining order and is involved in a domestic violence case. And, here again, the social worker could work with clients on presenting issues without addressing power, oppression, or privilege.

“Social justice-oriented practice” pertains to issues of privilege and oppression rather than or in addition to legal issues. Of course, there is overlap because there is injustice within the justice system. Forensic social workers may fight against inequity (i.e., oppression and privilege) within the justice system that is exhibited through exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, and violence. However, it is quite possible to be a social worker, forensic or otherwise, and not address issues of oppression and/or privilege. Now, the question is: Should that be possible? Addressing issues of inequity is part of our field’s DNA and should be done by all social workers as part of what we do regardless of our practice area (Stewart, 2013). Rather than adding a sprinkle of social justice as seasoning to flavor our work, social justice should be the main course of our work, such that it is completely integrated with all social work knowledge and practice.

With the idea in mind that social justice-oriented practice should be integrated throughout social work practice rather than having it as a standalone category, effectively suggesting that social work could be practiced *without* centering social justice, I recommend that continuing education create one category for law and social work and a second category for forensic social work. The knowledge social workers may want to receive from continuing education would vary depending on which of these categories a social worker considers to be their area of practice. Because social workers work with people (whether they identify as micro or macro social workers) and the law is about people and affects all people, continuing education courses have the opportunity to help social workers obtain a basic understanding of the law. Forensic social work CE could then focus on the work in forensic settings and/or with specific justice-involved populations. Both categories should subsequently aspire to have social justice integrated within their content and practice.

There is just cause for having social justice-oriented practice be the unifying or organizing

component of all social work practice. Support for this idea comes from another incident in this four-hour session. When a good number of social workers in the room had not heard the term “intersectionality” before, I was a bit surprised. I do not support shaming anyone for what they do not know. We cannot be afraid to say, “I don’t know,” or to ask questions for fear of being labeled “stupid.” In this time and in this society, we need more room for error and redemption so we can be honest and authentic with each other, creating the supportive environment needed for genuine relationship-building. However, this kind of knowledge gap may indicate what can happen when professionals are out of school for some time and thus supports the need for continuing education. There are terms, ideas, practices, and practitioners that inform social work practice. For example, I would like to know more about the pioneers of social work who are women of color. Continuing education can fill these gaps in knowledge. Certain professional fields, like social work, should have continuing education requirements because social workers are people, and we work with people. People are not static or simple. We are in a continuous process of change and a constant state of growth. Thus, the field of social work needs to change with the times and grow with the people. Professional fields that work with inanimate objects do not need continuing education. The number one will always be a number, and water will always be H<sub>2</sub>O.

The brief discussion about intersectionality signaled to me that there is a need for social workers to be continually educated on the differences between cultural competency, diversity, and anti-oppression/privilege. I wonder if or how the “clinical social worker” distinction hinders the continuing education process around issues of white supremacy, racism, and oppression. Having obtained my LCSW, I understand that LCSW is a designation for someone who has undergone a training process. However, I wonder if this designation or identity serves to reinforce the micro-macro divide. I noticed most of the room identified verbally as clinical social workers. Why do we not identify as social workers who do clinical or micro practice? Similar to the movement to change language around calling someone “a schizophrenic” versus “a person with schizophrenia,” we seem to allow the “clinical social worker” label to define us rather than clinical social work being something we do. Is it about convenience—is it easier to say “clinical social worker”?—or is it about prestige and status? When we identify as clinical social workers, are we saying we’re not *just* social workers? This brings into question the false micro, mezzo, macro divide that has been created within the field and accentuated within social work education and continuing education. When there is a divide, there are boundaries that enclose territory. Macro practitioners are the ones who are concerned with racism and systemic inequities while clinical social workers work with individuals, not systems. However, individuals do not live in vacuums—their lives are directly and indirectly affected by family, community, institutions, and policies—yet we tend to silo our education and our work with people. Continuing education can help bridge the false divide and unite us as social workers under the common banner of social justice and equity. Fighting matrices of dominance and dominant ideology (e.g., racism, sexism) would not be reserved for those macro social workers over there; instead, it would be the professional and moral responsibility of all social workers. Understanding intersecting identities (e.g., woman, cisgender, gay, poor) and the way in which these identities have meaning for privilege and oppression is key to social work practice in multiple dimensions from relationships to experiences.

At the very least, continuing education can facilitate collaborations between social workers. For

example, in this workshop, the clinical social workers discussed how certain clinical issues caused their clients to be ineligible for different services and how some policies posed barriers to clients' treatment. These issues presented perfect working spaces for clinical, community organizing, and policy social workers to collaborate. Continuing education can highlight the false divide between micro, mezzo, and macro practice and encourage social workers to return to their social problem-solving roots as social activists and advocates featured in the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics preamble. Through meaningful interaction offered by CE programs, social workers will gain new insights, competencies, and skills to apply in practice with individuals, communities, institutions, and systems.

The need for social justice-oriented continuous education was also supported by a participant discussing the child welfare and juvenile justice disparities between black and white youth, stating that black youth are suspended and/or arrested more often than white youth for doing the same behaviors. The participant characterized the disproportionate number of incarcerated black youth as issues of diversity rather than manifestations of racism. This inability to discuss the R-word brought to mind an experience from summer 2016. I was a member of a listserv of social work professionals. One social worker asked the astute question: "How can we, as social workers, join in support of Black Lives Matter?" Before this conversation, I would not have guessed that this was a risky or potentially explosive subject among social workers; but, to my horror and surprise, the person's question received vitriolic responses and was confronted with "All Lives Matter" and "Blue Lives Matter." I never knew what it felt like to have my chin hit the floor so fast until that moment. I was outraged, to say the least, that social workers who have the professional and ethical mission to fight oppression did not understand the importance of the "Black Lives Matter" campaign and the racist implications of "All Lives Matter" and "Blue Lives Matter." Did they not understand that although all lives *should* matter—or, maybe, all lives matter to *you*—there is concrete evidence in every U.S. system and institution (e.g., education, housing, welfare, health, justice, employment) that black lives do not matter or matter less than white lives? White lives have always mattered. What evidence do we have that police officers' lives do not matter? Are they disproportionately poor; in failing schools; targeted by the criminal justice system; repeatedly victimized by violent attackers who are not prosecuted for crimes they committed against you, your family, or community; or discriminated against for employment because of their police status? No, they're not. In fact, NYPD police cars have a message that stipulates there's a \$10,000 reward for arrest and conviction of anyone shooting an NYC police officer. Blue lives already matter in this country. It is black lives, black bodies, black people's rights which have been violated repeatedly throughout our history and that precedent continues today. There's a lyric from "Ella's Song: We Who Believe in Freedom Cannot Rest Until It Comes" by Sweet Honey in the Rock (1988) which quotes Ella Baker: "Until the killing of black men, black mothers' sons, becomes as important to the rest of the country as the killing of a white mother's son, we who believe in freedom cannot rest until this happens" (Moyers, 2007). We do not need to be reminded that white people's lives matter. That point is declared and upheld in every way and in every U.S. institution. I also think it is important to note that advocating for Black Lives Matter does not mean you are anti-police. You can be pro-police and anti-police brutality, state-sanctioned murder, and modern-day lynching.

Social workers should be working to transform systems and institutions so black lives can matter too. Not only is continuing education needed to clarify these issues, but perhaps a person's

license to practice as a social worker should be revoked if you do not get the distinction *and* you don't want to get it. Social work is a rights-based field, but it is not the right field for everyone, and that's okay. The silence within our profession on issues of racism speaks volumes to those on the outside. We promote the racist status quo when we do not speak up and act out against it (Lorde, 1977). In essence, what we permit, we promote. Continuing education programming can provide tools for social workers to break the silence. Some social workers do not want to get their hands dirty with "political" issues. However, "the personal is political" (Hanisch, 1969) and addressing issues of racism is not a matter of politics, but a matter of justice and equity. In addition to racism being a culturally taboo topic to discuss, some people attempt to politicize race and racism by stating that even discussing it or admitting that it exists means you're a far left-leaning liberal. Again, this is a divisive and silencing tactic, similar to the micro-macro divide or the soft-hard science divide; the conservative-liberal divide has made it the business of liberals to be "woke." This is damaging in two ways: 1) those who identify as liberals may think they get an automatic pass and, thus, do not have to examine their ways of moving through this world that are oppressive; and, 2) those who identify as conservatives think racism is not their issue. If neither side takes responsibility in examining, interrogating, and acting against racism, then the oppressive status quo of white supremacy continues its unhindered agenda. Social workers need to be political—not in terms of Democrat, Republican, or other political affiliation, but in terms of understanding that the personal is political and that justice is personal and political (Boal, 1985; Hanisch, 1969). Politics affect people's identities, lives, families, and communities—gerrymandering and redlining communities, voter ID laws, human rights (e.g., right to marry), drug laws—and there is no way to work with only part of a person. There is also the job of challenging stereotypes (e.g., the welfare queen) and debunking myths (e.g., the poor take advantage of welfare) that grow out of gendered racism and underlying policies (Pinder, 2018). Probably, many social workers have good intentions, but intent does not negate impact; and, critical awareness without critical action is insufficient to uproot systems of inequity. Thus, continuing education can help enlighten social workers on how to engage in political and social activism and integrate activism into their social work practice.

After the four-hour session, I attended a keynote session that demonstrated the use of story-telling and the performative arts as a strategy to connect with others and to find oneself. Another intersection of my professional identity is that I am a social worker who uses the creative arts for healing, restorative, and transformative justice interventions. Unfortunately, I had to leave this session early because the sitter that I hired for my five-month-old baby had not arrived. This made me think—why are there no childcare options/services available, especially since many social workers have children? We research barriers to personal development and treatment for our clients and note that childcare is a major issue. Don't we know that the lack of childcare is a barrier for us, too? A potential solution for CE is to better utilize technology to allow people to attend sessions remotely. More online options may reduce overhead costs, which could also reduce the costs of continuing education courses for participants.

### **Day Two Reflection**

On day two, I considered attending a session about opioid dependence. The previous night I had a conversation with the babysitter. She told me about her experience with her foster son's father who died of a drug overdose near the location of this CE event. Listening to her story

highlighted my lack of awareness. I had forgotten about the community. Hundreds of social workers have descended upon this seemingly under-resourced and disadvantaged community of color to participate in knowledge and skill-building workshops, sheltered in this hotel, not seeing the light of day or breathing fresh air for three days. Continuing education can help social workers identify ways to collaborate with community partners to promote social justice. Potential continuing education ideas include 1) education about community partnerships; 2) strategies for learning in the community; and 3) ways for the community members to be involved in continuing education as presenters and/or participants. For education about community partners, social workers can explore how to find community partners and how to build mutually beneficial relationships with community partners. For strategies for learning in the community, continuing education courses could include learning about the community-based resources that are available and how services are offered to community members. Also, social workers can share information with the community. Lastly, community members can be part of presentations. For example, a presentation on opioid dependence may be more informative if taught by a person with lived experience in collaboration with a social worker with that area of expertise. However, if I'm being honest, the main reason I did not attend that session was that the session started too early for me. I had an unrestful night with my five-month-old, who slept on me peacefully. Plus, the session only offered one continuing education unit (CEU). This demonstrates how my personal experience influences my professional decision-making and my attempt at self-care. I think it is the norm for social workers to be overworked and overwhelmed by the competing demands of their professional and personal lives. We often discuss self-care in passing, but that is one category that I have never seen explored for continuing education.

The main session that I attended on the second day was about clinical work with African American clients. This session made me remember a time when I was practicing in a co-occurring disorder treatment setting. My client was a black, adolescent male who had been identified as a difficult case by treatment staff. He had visited the caseload of every social worker in the facility and was now passed to me (a new hire) as the organization's final Hail Mary. I come from the school of thought that there is no such thing as a resistant client and that I bear the responsibility to figure out how the client works best and how to best work with the client. He didn't talk much, but in the few words he said—and more in what he refused to discuss—I learned a lot. Probably most telling was that he was about 19, sucked his thumb, and was still highly respected/feared in the adolescent male house. During our sessions, he mostly slept, which I interpreted as him feeling safe enough to close his eyes and rest. Most of our discussions were about being a black parent. He cared for his girlfriend's toddler. We discussed the significance of "claiming" a non-biological child as your own and being a black father in a society that reverberates the message that black men are not good fathers, protectors, providers, or role models. Between his naps, I managed to conduct a few assessments. I took his assessment results and my observations to my clinical supervision. After reporting a few details—client scored a certain number of points on an anger assessment; client reported having no one in his life that he trusts; client is always on guard and is suspicious of most, if not every person—my supervisor, a white male with a history of substance use who had come up through the ranks to be a director in the agency, diagnosed my client with paranoid personality disorder.

Here is an example that demonstrates the need for continuous education in power, privilege, oppression, and cultural competency. The first rule of paranoia is that it cannot be paranoia if it's

real or justified. In other words, from the data I had collected, my client's thoughts, feelings, and behavior were appropriate when considering his identity, experiences, community, and circumstances. Continuing education could provide more training for supervisors. I don't think it's a secret or unfair to say that a good supervisor is a unicorn in the field of social work. Students and licensed social workers constantly joke about how the supervision they receive is either non-existent or worse than receiving no supervision. In addition to the supervision basics, continuing education for supervision should include how to discuss issues and contexts of power, privilege, and oppression that occur within supervision between supervisor and supervisee and, in practice, between the social worker and the client (Graham, 2017).

I mentioned that my last supervisor had an open history of problematic drug use. For sure, continuing education can allow social workers to share their stories so we may learn from our colleagues who are leaders in their profession and have knowledge rooted in lived experience, my definition of a credible messenger. Social workers sharing from their own experience bridge the gap between the social worker as a professional and the clients we serve. One of the main questions students ask is how and when to appropriately self-disclose. The self-disclosure topic is always a lively discussion fraught with fear of being unethical. On the topic of self-disclosure, my colleague once disseminated an article they published about their personal experience and journey coming to identify with they/them pronouns. They asked colleagues to share the article with others who could possibly learn from their experience. In response to my dissemination efforts, I received an email stating that I should have included a trigger warning because of the offensive, anti-LGBTIA language that was used against my colleague.

Another area to explore for continuous education could be on the use of trigger warnings—when are they needed and for whom? Personally, I think we have blurred the lines between safety and comfort, and thus trigger warnings are overused to make people comfortable with challenging content rather than supporting a person's agency to protect themselves from retraumatization. Material that may be potentially upsetting or produce discomfort does not deserve a trigger warning. Trigger warnings are needed when the content of the material is both of a traumatizing nature and unexpected. For example, a clear case for a trigger warning would be the following: A student is in a business class and all of a sudden the teacher strays from what's on the syllabus and presents a video on sexual assault or suicide or another traumatic situation. We are in the field of social work where much of the work is with oppressed populations and traumatic events. In fact, oppression is violence and can be extremely traumatizing, especially when it involves domestic terrorism (Helms et al., 2012). Thus, knowing the article is about the identity of an individual from an oppressed population is the trigger warning. This is especially relevant for people who are supposedly coming to an educational space to deal with oppression and social justice. When you sign up to do this work, that's the agreement. You've been warned, and you're asserting that the work won't break you. In sum, my view on trigger warnings is that trigger warnings act as an opt-in system, granting agency to traumatized individuals by informing them about what they might encounter and allowing them to attend to their trauma as they see fit (Manne, 2015). However, trigger warnings are not needed for discussing oppression or in spaces dedicated to dealing with oppression/social justice because it can be assumed that you will encounter traumatic/violent scenarios. For me, giving a trigger warning in these contexts is as unnecessary as giving a trigger warning for a dead body to a detective when investigating a murder case. Lastly, discomfort is to be expected when discussing issues of

power, oppression, and privilege. Discomfort is a sign that deeply held beliefs are being challenged, which is necessary for learning and personal growth. Safety and discomfort are not mutually exclusive; and, most likely, both are needed to create the brave spaces that facilitate transformative potential (Jemal, 2017; Jemal & Bussey, 2018). Continuing education can help create spaces for challenging dialogue and can educate social workers on how to create these types of spaces for their clients, colleagues, and students (Jemal & Bussey, 2018).

### **Day Three Reflection**

From day three, I received the message that social workers should be the change we want to see in the world. The idea of “visibility” was presented. Continuing education can help social workers learn how to be visible. We need to take our rightful place at the head of the table when discussing matters of racism, social injustice, and social problems that plague our nation (Jemal & Bussey, 2018). We certainly need to be leading the teams tasked with making change. I was a bit saddened when I heard some social workers complaining that bail reform makes their jobs harder because arrested individuals are not in jail long enough for them to do their reentry plans. Certainly, having clients languish in jail for a perfect reentry plan is not the answer.

I heard terms used such as “change agents,” “seekers of social justice,” and “protectors of human rights.” All the above sound great; however, continuing education can facilitate social work’s efforts to turn sounds into action. Continuing education can provide social workers with the tools to throw their collective weight around to better serve society. Social workers require a strong identity and presence because the complexity and the gravity of the issues—e.g., police brutality; targeted incarceration; the Orthodox Jewish community monopolizing the school board in East Ramapo, NY; immigrant families being separated and caged; poor people working for unlivable wages—weighs heavily on all parties involved. It is my hope that when people see a social worker coming their way, they know something is going to happen that moves everyone toward a more just and equitable outcome. Oppression limits possibilities. The field of social work reveals possibility, which is the foundation of hope. As such, social workers are in the business of creating hope for change, a purpose and mission to be respected and that should make all social workers proud.

### **Overall Experience**

One observation about the three-day CE event pertains to organization. Continuing education can be organized by practice area (e.g., community organizing, social entrepreneurship), population (e.g., LGBTQ, Aging), and problem (e.g., substance use, borderline personality disorder). Those categories seem to work well. In addition to those categories, another possible structure is to organize according to the Transformative Potential Development Model: Critical Consciousness, Responsibility/Accountability, Efficacy, and Action (Bussey et al., 2020; Jemal & Bussey, 2018). Critical consciousness would include trainings on anti-oppression/privilege theory in practice. The primary purpose of consciousness sessions is to identify gaps in knowledge that allow inequitable socio-structural factors to continue unchallenged. A major task of critical consciousness development is to make the invisible *visible* and the implicit *explicit*. Addressing knowledge gaps gives the practitioner tools to perceive problems from multiple perspectives so they are better able to envision and develop holistic and creative solutions.

The responsibility prong calls for social workers to identify their role in maintaining and perpetuating problems rooted in oppression and finding solutions. We are accountable for centering the voices of those most impacted, learning from those with lived experience, and creating responses that acknowledge how the past lives in the present. There's no more hiding behind the excuse, "I'm just doing my job," or "That's not my job." Social workers may not be responsible for causing all the problems, but we've chosen a profession that has accepted the challenge of solving these problems anyway.

Continuing education that is focused on efficacy provides skill-building seminars to better equip us to address knowledge gaps and apply our skills to social problems. For example, all social workers should be well-versed in how to discuss oppression, privilege, cultural competency, equity, and social justice. Additionally, continuing education focused on action would allow social workers to be involved at the micro, mezzo, or macro levels for social justice. Consequently, continuing education can capitalize on the many diverse and potential connections between identities, knowledge, experience, skills, and areas of practice to provide holistic care that is humanizing. This way, continuing education can help ensure that social work practice will always center anti-oppression/privilege theory and transform consciousness into action.

### **Conclusion**

I often say to my students and colleagues that social work is not rocket science—many people nod while giving the knowing look of agreement—and that look turns to shock and deep reflection when I say *it's harder*. I truly believe that social work is a more difficult field of study and practice than rocket science because for the "hard" sciences you can memorize formulas or utilize algorithms. The rules generally do not change. However, for social workers, we can follow the same plan of action in two different scenarios and, for one of those cases, be accused of unethical practice. It is difficult to exist in the gray area, and yet, social work has very few black or white spaces. For this reason, it is important for continuing education to meet the field where it's at, but not leave it there. From there, we can determine where we want to go (based on who we are and what we do) and how to move toward our destination, which will always be a moving target. Particularly, continuing education can change the culture of the field. Since social work is a multifaceted field that works with people, who are complex and ever-changing, social work practitioners in all manifestations of practice require lifelong learning. If you prefer an easier field, a field that does not require CEUs, then by all means... go to rocket science.

### **References**

Boal, A. (1985). *Theatre of the oppressed*. Theatre Communications Group.

Bussey, S., Jemal, A., & Caliste, S. (2020). Transforming social work's potential in the field: A radical framework. [Manuscript submitted for publication].

Graham, W. K. (2017, January 11-15). The utility of diversity, or the futility of diversity: Supervising the Black social worker [Roundtable]. 21st Annual Conference of the Society for Social Work and Social Research (SSWR), New Orleans, LA.

<https://sswr.confex.com/sswr/2017/webprogram/Session8143.html>

Hanisch, C. (1969). *The personal is political*. <http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html>

Helms, J. E., Nicolas, G., & Green, C. E. (2012). Racism and ethnoviolence as trauma: Enhancing professional and research training. *Traumatology*, 18(1), 65–74. <https://doi.apa.org/doi/10.1177/1534765610396728>

Jemal, A. (2017). The opposition. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, 28(3), 134–139. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10428232.2017.1343640>

Jemal, A., & Bussey, S. (2018). Transformative action: A theoretical framework for breaking new ground. *eJournal of Public Affairs*, 7(2), 37–65. <http://ejournalofpublicaffairs.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/211-1311-1-Galley.pdf>

Kaul, N. (2016). *How do clinical social workers stay attentive to their privilege once in practice?* [MSW research paper, St. Catherine University]. SOPHIA. [https://sophia.stkate.edu/msw\\_papers/614](https://sophia.stkate.edu/msw_papers/614)

Lane, S. R., & Humphreys, N. A. (2015). Gender and social workers' political activity. *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work*, 30(2), 232–245. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109914541115>

Lorde, A. (1977, December 28). *The transformation of silence into language and action* [Speech]. Modern Language Association's "Lesbian and Literature Panel." Chicago, IL, United States. <https://electricliterature.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/silenceintoaction.pdf>

Manne, K. (2015, September 19). Why I use trigger warnings. *The New York Times*. <http://www.bu.edu/fafc/files/2015/10/Why-I-Use-Trigger-Warnings-The-New-York-Times.pdf>

Moyers, B. (Host). (2007, November 23). *Bill Moyers journal* [Transcript]. PBS. <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/11232007/transcript2.html>

NASW Center for Workforce Studies & Social Work Practice. (2017). *Profiles of the social work workforce*. Retrieved from <https://www.socialworkers.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=wCttjrHq0gE%3d&portalid=0>

Pinder, S. O. (2018). *Black women, work, and welfare in the age of globalization*. Lexington Books.

Specht, H., & Courtney, M. E. (1994). *Unfaithful angels: How social work has abandoned its mission*. Free Press.

Stewart, C. (2013). Resolving social work value conflict: Social justice as the primary organizing value for social work. *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought*, 32(2), 160–176. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15426432.2013.779184>

Straussner, S. L. A., Senreich, E., & Steen, J. T. (2018). Wounded healers: A multistate study of licensed social workers' behavioral health problems. *Social Work*, 63(2), 125–133. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swy012>

Sweet Honey in the Rock. (1988). Ella's song [Song]. On *Breaths* [Album]. Flying Fish Records.

Varghese, R. (2013). *Transformation in action: Approaches to incorporating race and racism into clinical social work practice & curriculum* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Massachusetts Amherst]. Open Access Dissertations, 736. <https://doi.org/10.7275/hkpq-a240>

**About the Author:** Alexis Jemal, PhD, LCSW, LCADC is Assistant Professor, Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College, New York, NY (212-396-7526, [aj1423@hunter.cuny.edu](mailto:aj1423@hunter.cuny.edu)).