

From Intellectual Exercise to Facilitated Dialogue: How One Class Confronted Race and Racism in the Social Work Classroom

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Abstract: Social work education is primarily charged with preparing students to engage in social justice work that includes combating racism and other forms of inequity. However, these inequities are often viewed as external to social work academia and the discipline as a whole. In this article, we will share our individual perspectives, as Black instructor, Black student, and White student, of racially charged events that came to a head in a shared social work classroom space. We will share our thoughts on how race and racism were discussed and addressed in our school of social work in general; our personal experiences of race, racism, and/or microaggressions; and, finally, our feelings about how race and racism were addressed by the instructor during this culminating event. I (Campbell) will also discuss how my response mapped on to a critical race theory–informed approach to addressing race and racism in higher education/university settings.

Keywords: racism, diversity, higher education, MSW, teaching and learning

Introduction

When we first wrote on this topic, an article came out in a nationally recognized newspaper about a “racist” incident at a top-ranked school of social work. An African American student was traveling abroad and had emailed fellow students hoping to be “FaceTimed” into a class but received no response (Smith, 2019). After the class, he was contacted by a classmate and told, “I found it easier to lead the discussion without a black presence in the room, since I do feel somewhat uncomfortable with the (perceived) threat that it poses” (Smith, 2019, para. 4). The African American student shared his experience on social media; more students shared their own experiences of racism, a problem they stated was “long-standing” (para. 5) at the school. He went on to say that he was “really hurt” (para. 9) by the email and lack of response, especially since he had previously complained of racist behavior in the classroom and that student in particular. The solution? A referral to the school’s designated faculty member to address his concerns.

Although we may believe instances like these are infrequent, they are all too common in the experiences of students of color in college/university settings. Most hate crimes reported on campuses since 2016 were related to racial bias (Bauman, 2018). The *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* is one of multiple forums that describes the negative experiences many students of color have in institutions of higher learning (<https://www.jbhe.com/incidents/>). Students like this young man, who described feeling “attacked and stereotyped” in his school (Smith, 2019, para. 13), often confront instances of exclusion, microaggressions, hostility and outright racism (Boyer, 2013; Harwood et al., 2018).

When instances of racism happen on campus, particularly when rising to the level of national attention, schools write statements, hold townhalls, hire diversity officers, and adjust curricula in an attempt to address the issue. However, students of color and social work faculty report that students and faculty resist these efforts—therefore, the racist environment persists (Boyer, 2013). Even in the incident described above, the school acknowledged a problem with “institutional racism” (Smith, 2019, para. 2) yet took no ownership of the racism breeding within its walls and among its students. As far as the offending student, we could find no response from him.

While we knew this topic was important, especially in social work, we had a difficult time getting our original article published. We submitted it to three journals and received three rejections ... quickly. Feedback indicated that the piece was too experiential and not rooted enough in the literature: “a reflective account ... with important messages for social work education ... but insufficiently theorized or evidenced” and “you offer opinions rather than citing from the literature.” I (Campbell) get it: Academic journals lean towards empirical evidence and established theoretical constructs. Unfortunately, that narrow definition of scholarship reifies the very structures of intellectualism and racism that have silenced and excluded scholars of color for years. So, the reviewers were correct: This manuscript was “unsuitable for publication” in *certain* journals.

Then George Floyd was murdered. And everyone was horrified. And then everyone claimed to care about race and racism. And then came the apologies, and the tears, and the statements ... all of which folks of color had been asking for for years, but they were coming at a pace and with a tone that smacked of performance and insincerity.

It was happening in the academy as well. Many schools wanted to hold townhalls and teach-ins and issue statements on the tragic events. And then in the sea of journal solicitations was the *Reflections* call to confront and dismantle systemic racism within social work programs. Here, we could truly reflect on our experience. Here we could reveal our truths. Here, our experiences and the knowledge that grew from them would be embraced and valued. And most importantly, there would not be an explicit demand to do more work: no strong recommendations that we offer specific strategies that one could replicate in their classrooms; no implicit mandate that our pain be made useful for others (via classroom “tips”) in order for it to be seen and heard (via a publication). Our experience could just exist and take up space without having to be validated by a literature that never sought to include our voices. Our words and feelings would be enough: enough to compel others to do their own work, to stumble through their own process like we did and arrive at solutions borne of their own labor, both emotional and intellectual.

Racism in the Social Work Classroom

As lead author, I (Campbell) was surprised that, at the time, more had not been researched and/or published on the impact of race and racism in institutions of higher learning. Few articles talked about race and racism as they exist within social work classrooms or other spaces in schools/departments. Those that did reported students of color’s shock and disappointment in how injustice existed and persisted in programs that are ethically bound to promote racial and

social justice (e.g., Davis, 2004) and their concern over “the lack of cultural humility” (Vakalahi et al., 2014, p. 423). These feelings of disappointment and disillusionment can compromise the learning and professional development/growth of students of color and ruin their personal and professional confidence, robbing the practice world of their needed contributions to the field (Ashley et al., 2016; Hollingsworth et al., 2018).

How Did We Get Here?

Social work educators have strived to prepare students for engaging in social justice work that includes combating racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of inequality and inequity. To do this, social work has focused on cultural competence where self-awareness and cultural knowledge are emphasized (Feize & Gonzalez, 2018). However, focusing simply on individual reflection and all-encompassing multiculturalism leaves students unable to successfully combat the structural and institutional racism and oppression that culturally competent practice aimed to address (Abrams & Moio, 2009). Strategies to address these deficiencies include recommendations to incorporate theoretical perspectives like critical race theory (CRT) and anti-racism into curricula and teaching pedagogy, deemphasizing multiculturalism, and explicitly naming and integrating race and racism across courses (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Pérez Huber & Solorzano, 2018; Nakaoka & Ortiz, 2018); instructors must adjust “*how* one teaches, even in courses where race is not the subject matter” (Kishimoto, 2018, p. 540).

The idea is that “as students are provided course content on diversity, power, oppression, discrimination, and privilege, their classroom becomes a laboratory to explore and learn about themselves and how they fit in society” (Buila, 2009, p. 102). However, students end up believing that their fight against racism is something that happens “over there,” in some other space, outside of the classroom and institution. They accept their role as change agents in their practice settings but not in their present learning environment where they are active participants in, at the least, perpetuating racist systems, and, at the worst, being racist.

Shared Experience

The Walkout

Actor Isaiah Washington called upon African Americans to stay home from work and school on September 26, 2016, to protest another series of police shootings of Black men. Author Fussell-Ware, an African American student, was asked by another student if she was going to protest. She wanted to honor the protest but believed that, given the small number of Black students in the School, they would not be missed and the point of the protest would be moot. She felt that they should go to school that day but stay outside of the building. Unbeknownst to most, a handful of students reached out to faculty and sought “permission” to miss class that day. What resulted was faculty canceling classes and joining students in the courtyard for a “teach-in” of sorts about race. The organizing students were left feeling like their original plan and purpose were undermined.

Social Media

Each cohort sets up a group chat of sorts on a social media platform where they discuss topics relevant to their experience as MSW students. Year after year, these “chats” end up devolving into conversations—most often described and/or experienced as debates, arguments, or fights—about race and racism, among other matters, which author Fussell-Ware deemed as biased and unfair. Because these conversations exist in an ironically private, virtual space, many feel that little can be done to stop or regulate the behavior. Instead, conversations around professionalism and performance are held and the offending behavior is not challenged.

After I had declined to alter the rigor of my elective course at the behest of one White female student, students used the platform to discuss how complaints about faculty (me) could be taken to the dean and my tenure could be denied. Fussell-Ware noted that these criticisms and threats were most often levied at Black faculty and instructors, which concerned and troubled her deeply. When she pointed this out to her colleagues, factions developed, and Black female students were labeled as “nice” or “mean” or identified as “a good one” based on their positions.

The Meeting

I was approached by a diverse group of students who wanted to speak to me about these conversations. They valued me as a social work educator and were distressed that I might be denied tenure for my actions. They wanted me to have the information so I could act preemptively. While I thanked the students for their concern and assured them that I would be fine, I scheduled a meeting with our dean to discuss the social climate amongst the students as well as what I saw as a professional development issue around the appropriate use of social media.

Doing the Work

Before I could meet with the dean, I held my core course. We were at the point in the course where we were to discuss group endings and evaluations. While I lectured, there were whispers, gestures, exacerbated sighs, and the shuffling of papers. Using my facilitation skills (and knowing what was being discussed on social media), I told the students that I was sensing “something” and asked if everything was alright. A few students responded that they were tired, or that it was the end of the term, etc., etc. I said “okay” and attempted to continue with class. It started again. There was a particularly disruptive response to something I said, and I stated very firmly, “Okay, something is going on.” I told them what they were doing was disruptive and that we were going to take a break and when we returned, we were either going to talk about what that was or move on with class without any more disruptions.

When we returned from break, I said, “So, what are we doing?” One of the Black students apologized for her behavior and started to provide further insight into racial tensions that had been building during the two years the cohort had been in the program. Another Black student apologized for her disruptive behavior; all the students who apologized were Black. The other

students who had been disruptive, and appeared White, said nothing. Some of the Black students in the class then began to “unload” on their fellow students.

I let them. I let their fellow White students hear the very raw, painful ways that their behavior, or lack of interaction, impacted their Black classmates. A few White students spoke up about how they did not know what to do in the current moment: to speak up and share their opinions on the matter or remain silent and let Black students have a say. I validated their feelings of uncertainty, and what I interpreted as helplessness, and offered that it was the same uncertainty and helplessness that their Black colleagues often felt within the school. I added that they did not have to guess what to do: they could always ask their colleagues what they needed from them in that, and other, moment(s). The biggest perpetrators of abuse kept typing on their laptops and remained disengaged from the larger “work” being done in the room. Eventually, one of the Black students called out how the typing amounted to ignoring their concerns, which is what they believed these students had done throughout their time in the program.

One student stopped and listened; the others did not. After consulting with a White faculty member because he did not know how to “fix” what he had done, this student eventually apologized to me, although he could not find the words to say much more than that. Upon reflection, I let him off the hook by telling him that saying that was enough. (When editing this paper, author Winchester, who identifies as a White female, stated the following: “The word ‘fix’ is really important here and I’m glad we are using it. It connects to this idea that I think many White people have about wanting to easily fix mistakes and move on when it comes to doing something racist. However, it’s much more complicated than that and also about recognizing that there’s not a simple fix, but rather huge changes in systems of oppression that need to happen, as well as acknowledgment of things that we have done and continue to do wrong that hurt others.”)

After the students finished confronting, sharing, and being curious, I spoke. I told the White students that the Black students were justified in their anger, disappointment, and other feelings, for I, too, had those same feelings in the face of their and other students’ treatment. I went on to say that, while they chose to ignore the role race played in their treatment of Black faculty and fellow students, that factor was not lost on other administration and faculty—and the critique of Black faculty has been widely studied, understood, and, quite frankly, ignored when it comes packaged in obvious racialized gift wrap. At the end of the class, a number of students, Black and otherwise, thanked and/or praised me for addressing the issue of race, particularly how it pertained to them, for it had not been addressed at such depth or in such a way before. It was not lost on Fussell-Ware and Winchester that it was not until the end of their programs that race and racism were addressed like this.

Personal Perspectives

Here are our reflections and individual perspectives—as a professor who identifies as a Black, cisgender woman (Campbell), a MSW student who identifies as a Black, cisgender woman, (Fussell-Ware), and a MSW student who identifies as a White, cisgender woman

(Winchester)—on race, racism, and this event. We want to show that even in a school that recognizes, is openly committed to, and has actively moved to address such issues, they persist.

Campbell

Talking about Race/Racism

Race and racism are talked about quite a bit in our school of social work. However, I believe that many of these discussions are intellectualized and presented as something that happens “out there.” I think that many faculty members see themselves and our students as the people combatting the -isms of the world instead of being perpetrators and perpetuators of these oppressive systems. Even when an incident happens, it is seen as rare or an isolated occurrence. We also elevate race as important, but then add other dimensions of diversity to the table, diminishing the power and weight that race and racism carry. We do it amongst each other and in our classrooms with students. I know this because I have witnessed it myself, and students have often told me that issues around race are regularly ignored or not addressed properly or sufficiently in other classes. So, we have a group of people who say they are committed to combating issues of race and racism but seem to fail at addressing them in a way that feels meaningful and impactful.

Addressing Race/Racism

Comparatively, our school has made a great effort in trying to address issues around race and racism, even though we often fail. Race is definitely on the table as an issue, and we have tried multiple means to show our students that it is important. But again, I think we still suffer from tendencies to either intellectualize the issue, combine it with other social issues, downplay or question certain events as racist, and then individualize solutions. In other words, we see race as a systemic issue, but we do not see that it is very much a part of *our* system, one in which we are members of and, thus, need to be “fixed” as well.

Personal Experiences

Oh, my. This is tough. I could go on ad nauseum about my experiences around race within my school of social work. From students refusing to call me “Dr.” even though I stated that this is how I prefer to be addressed, being “surprised” I received my education at a top school of social work, or “reporting me” instead of addressing matters with me because they are scared by my “aggressive behavior,” to my colleagues periodically calling me by the name of another Black faculty member even though we look nothing alike, coaching me on how I can improve when they are approached with student complaints instead of recognizing the racism and sexism behind the grievance, or thanking me for shouldering the burden of racial issues because they believe I am better at it or because it is something that I have experience in. I have suffered greatly from these micro-aggressive behaviors (some of which Winchester argues are overtly racist), and sadly, when I give voice to them, am asked to consider a different perspective, thanked (almost always privately) for my service and dedication, or receive an apology with no change in behavior.

Feelings

As I reflect on this experience, I have mixed feelings. I really hate that this happened. I am one that loathes conflict although some will swear I start it and others will applaud me for how I handle it. I may not run from conflict and have learned how to effectively engage and manage it, but I still despise it. I really want so much more for my students. I want them to be so much more, and the fact that things like this happen show me that there is still so much work to do, and often that burden falls on people who look like me. I am happy that I called out what was happening and tackled it head on; doing so marked what was going on as important, relevant, and necessary. This might have been made easier given that this was a groups class and how I structured the course lent itself to this facilitated dialogue happening the way that it did. The Black students felt that their voices were heard and their anger was validated. Many White students felt relieved that the outcome was largely positive, and it validated their feelings of helplessness and ignorance around how to respond. And the guilty parties were called out and not allowed to continue in racially ignorant bliss.

But I still feel like, while there was individual-level change, there was no real, sustainable systemic change. We, as a faculty, did not know what should be done about the offending students. It was the end of the term. What were our options? Could we bring the students up for review? Fail to write them recommendations? The dean touched on the issue at graduation, and we spoke on the appropriate use of social media. But on a larger scale? Not much. At least not yet (is my hope).

I reflected on the experience with my colleagues at a faculty gathering/meeting. Honestly, I brought it up after growing angry when a colleague praised another for being such a great instructor—oh, how that burned after what I went through with the students. I tried to explain to my colleagues that I “could not have another semester like I endured,” meaning that I could not continue to carry the brunt of addressing such issues (what I felt was) alone. Their response was ... baffling. Most remained silent. Only a select few “got it” and recognized that what I was doing in that moment was calling on other faculty to “step up” and confront issues of race and racism in our school, among students, and in our classrooms. One colleague immediately moved on to another topic, only for another colleague to say “no, I think we need to spend some time on this.” Many failed to realize that this was not a *me* issue, it was an *us* issue. This was not just the individual struggle of one instructor; this was a symptom of a much larger problem that we *all* needed to play a role in addressing.

Other Thoughts

I genuinely love and respect my colleagues, students, and school; this is why I can be so openly critical of them, because I want us to truly be who we envision ourselves to be. I understand that we are involved in a parallel process with our students: just as we collectively feel helpless, unsure, exhausted, confused, and paralyzed on what to do, so do our students. I also realize that my Black students so fiercely wanted to defend me to their White colleagues because they perhaps felt that it was safer to challenge them about their racially charged behavior towards me than the behavior that had been directed towards them, which may have made them feel too

vulnerable. I think we can do a better job of being transparent about our own difficulties with addressing matters of race instead of trying to be the experts of the subject, which many, especially the students of color, recognize that we are not, as well as acknowledging the multitude of feelings one can have about doing race work.

I have to constantly remind myself that I will not reach every student. Every time I read my evaluations, I can count on at least one student complaining about how I inappropriately discussed race or social justice or world events in a clinical social work class when I should have been focusing on things they should know for practice. (But isn't that social work? Thank you, Winchester, for the reminder of what I often tell students: "If you look at the code of ethics and feel that you cannot do work in this way, there are other helping professions out there for you. Social work isn't it.") I just have to take a deep breath, try not to be angry or disappointed, and then remember what my mother told me, "If they do not want you to teach them, let life teach them." But it is always hard for me to digest that piece of wisdom. I always worry about the clients these students will encounter, our most vulnerable, the ones whose issues might be overlooked or misunderstood because students like these fail to understand how "the real world" impacts the health and well-being of the people they will see. "Why don't they get it?" I ask myself. Why do they refuse to hear it? But, alas, I already know.

Fussell-Ware

Talking about Race/Racism

Race always felt like the obvious elephant in the room at our university. However, once we would start talking about it in class, you could see that, for some people, it was not that obvious. As my two years in the MSW program went on, that became more and more frustrating. As a Black student, it became less and less desirable to bring it up because white¹ students would always feign ignorance over the ways that race and racism impacted the experiences of their Black classmates and their Black future clients or cry when challenged on how their behavior was offensive (techniques we later found out they would use intentionally to shut down or distract from conversations that they did not like or want to engage in). Our MSW program was set up in such a way that I shared all of my classes with some of the same faces throughout our entire program. This left me very confused as to how certain students still just did not get it.

In addition to those who did not get it, there were those students who "got it" but felt like we talked about it too much and were neglecting learning clinical skills. This was another source of frustration for me but much worse than the first one. This was disrespectful. This was a denial of my humanity. This was privilege rearing its ugly head. I encountered this group of students and their ideologies more often than was tolerable. The worst part was having professors acquiesce to their complaints instead of espousing why these conversations were the crux of the work we do.

¹ This author intentionally uses the term "white" in lower case.

Addressing Race/Racism

Black students often had to be the initiators of conversations about race. The only exceptions to this were if the course was being taught by a Black professor. However, even in these instances, conversations about race and racism were often kept to a minimum because of the discomfort they caused in white students, unless Black students pushed for more. Once issues concerning race/racism were brought to the attention of faculty and administration, though, they were quick to listen to the concerns of affected students as well as invite the entire student body to engage in dialogue about issues of race and their impact on the climate in our school. However, when it came to other students it seemed, even after these grand “kumbaya” moments, things would quickly go back to how they were.

Personal Experiences

There was a plethora of instances where it felt as if my white and non-Black classmates immediately forgot our conversations about not abusing your privilege in our academic space. Hearing about these students’ “frustration” with the focus on racial oppression in class discussions and lectures was disrespectful to Black students and disheartening. In addition to their frustration with course content, there were instances of blatant disrespect towards Black professors such as what has been described. I also was, myself, the victim of racially charged attacks during my time as an MSW student. One particularly painful experience occurred when I was serving in a leadership position with a school of social work student organization. After putting out a survey on self-care that was received negatively by Black students, I spoke with other members of the organization about how we needed to be mindful of the things we did because, as student leaders, our actions were always being watched and monitored. Shortly afterwards, I received a private message from another executive board member. This person said that the language I used during the meeting was “threatening,” particularly when I said that our behavior was being watched, and asked if I could refrain from using such language around them in the future. I was a witness to this person previously attempting to police the language of two other Black women not too long before this incident between us. I was hurt and frustrated.

As a Black woman, I grew up with my grandmother always reminding me that you should always “act right in public because you never know who is watching.” The language I used in this meeting was not a threat. It was the sharing of knowledge that had been passed down to me. Any other interpretation and consequential attempt to control how I spoke in the future was inappropriate, and I made sure that the other student was aware of how I felt. I wish that I could say that was the last time that a white student tried to police my tone and language, but unfortunately, it would happen again with another student before I graduated.

Feelings

I was appalled, enraged, and heartbroken by the behavior of a small group of my white classmates who decided that it was appropriate to publicly threaten the career of our Black professor because they were not given their way regarding a course assignment. Fortunately, our professor, as she had done previously, was open to hearing the concerns of Black students and

allowed space in our classroom for us to vent about our displeasure with the situation as well as similar behavior that had occurred with other Black professors throughout our two years as MSW students. Throughout this particular class session, our professor served as a facilitator by allowing Black students an opportunity to give their raw, uninhibited perspectives on their experience with racism, microaggressions, prejudice, and plain disrespect by white students in our program towards both students and Black professors, as well as gave white and non-Black students an opportunity to respond. At that point, as a weary, soon to be graduating, MSW student, I felt like most of what we had said went in one ear and out the other of those who really needed to hear it. However, I will always be thankful to my professor for allowing my Black classmates and I to get a huge and very heavy weight off of our chests, support us when we became overwhelmed with emotions, defend our right to feel these emotions, amplify our sentiments, and provide the space for all of the above to occur.

Other Thoughts

I am currently in a doctoral program at a top school of social work. One semester, one of my professors asked us what could be done to increase the number of Black scholars that receive NIH grants and are published in top journals. The cohort-mate that I am the closest with loves to joke about my answer. In response to my professor's questions, I told them that, as a Black woman, I am tired of telling white people how to do better and to not be racist. My MSW experience has me tapped out on teaching allyship. Black people did not create this system; therefore, it is not my job to dismantle it. White people need to figure it out. I believe the same goes for social work education. There are more white academics in social work than Black scholars. There are more whites than Blacks in leadership and administrative roles. The onus should be on white scholars to figure out how to make schools of social work actively anti-racist, make cultural diversity classes not just a tasting menu of different marginalized groups, and ensure that more Black faculty, particularly Black female faculty, receive promotion and tenure in our schools. It should not be demanded that I and other Black social workers provide more emotional labor in order to solve a problem we did not create. White scholars should handle it, and I hope this piece encourages them to do so. Until then, I'll be busy trying to make conditions better for my own community.

Winchester

I recognize that my perspective on these issues is shaped by a few unique factors. First, I am a White student, and with that comes a great deal of privilege, which often manifests in the privilege to be unaware of things that do not directly face me. Additionally, my perspective is slightly altered by being a dual student; being a member of two separate programs creates a good deal of distance, often making me feel separated and not totally a part of either school or cohort.

Talking about Race/Racism

It is hard to say how race and racism are talked about in our school of social work. I recognize that, as a White student, I am not as aware of the absence of these conversations as I should be;

only when we start having them do I realize the extent to which they have been missing. In my experience, when we do discuss race and racism within classes, it has mostly been in terms of how it happens in the “outside world” or at the larger university. Looking back, I think what happened in our class was my first experience with a conversation that actually acknowledged and explored the issue of racism and its existence within our own school of social work in a detailed and unveiled way.

Addressing Race/Racism

The only time I remember issues of race and racism being addressed in more than a surface-level way was during our first semester, when a large group of students and professors left class and sat outside in the courtyard for a conversation on recent deaths, the Black Lives Matter Movement, racism, and social justice. I do not remember all the details, and I know there were some issues and tensions, but I remember feeling overall inspired by the conversation—listening to my peers and hearing some incredible thoughts from professors made me think to myself “this is social work—this is social justice in action. I am proud to be here at this moment and in this program.” That is not really a feeling that I have felt since, and I wish it could have been.

Personal Experiences

One of the most important things that came out of this conversation for me has been a greater understanding of the experience of my peers of color in our school and my total lack of awareness of the racism and microaggressions happening daily within a bubble that I had thought was a safe space. A potent example for me is that I had never thought to consider how the harsh criticism leveled at certain professors and not others fell along racial lines. I heard a lot of criticism about certain professors from my peers, but only when a student brought it up during this conversation did I even realize that the professors who were criticized the most often and the most harshly were our professors of color.

Feelings

When the issue was brought up in class, I remember being surprised because I had not picked up on the tension in the room at all (another example of ignorance and privilege in action). I was simultaneously uncomfortable and glad that the conversation was “going there” and that we were tackling a tough topic that was having such a profound impact in our school. Another tension that I was feeling was the tension of whether or not to speak. On the one hand, I wanted to voice my support, but on the other, I did not want to interfere with the space that had been created for my peers of color to speak. I also felt angry that there were people in the room who were being incredibly disrespectful, typing on their computers and obviously not giving attention to the matter at hand and the real and emotional stories being shared. Something a White peer of mine said resonated with the way I was feeling at that moment: She said something about how all she wanted to do was give a hug to the people who had shared, but that she did not know if she was one of the people they were talking about who they had negative experiences with and did not want to interact with. I understood what she meant and felt the same way; I hated that so many of my classmates had these experiences, and I hated not

knowing what role I may have played in any of them. I think what I most appreciated about our instructor's responses, in addition to her willingness to "go there" and enter a space many professors ignored, was her commitment to allow everyone the chance to speak and be heard. I sat there and listened while working on formulating what I wanted to say in my mind, but I was never able to get it into words in time. With that being said, one thing that might help facilitate conversations like this in the future would be to pause, give everyone a few minutes to think or write what they would like to say, and then go around the room and give an opportunity or space for each person to speak if they would like.

Other Thoughts

A lot of my reflection on this experience came in the days following. Through discussion and self-reflection, I saw this as a wake-up call to another way that I have been unfairly using my privilege, in addition to my lack of awareness. In graduate school and throughout my life, it has been my strategy to try to be friends with everyone on an individual level basis, regardless of what I may have heard about their behaviors, and to avoid conflict or getting involved in sticky situations or conversations. Reflecting on this has made me realize that this behavior is available to me because of my privilege as a White person, and that it is unfair to my peers of color for me to act this way. I need to stand up as an advocate and an ally and make choices based on strong intentionality and not on peacemaking or avoiding conflict. I have been so committed to social justice in my role as a social worker that it seems I have overlooked it in certain ways in my role as a peer, classmate, student, and friend. What I am taking away from this experience is that there is a lot more that I can do, and that having these conversations and committing to taking strong action can help me to not only be a better social worker, but hopefully a better friend and a better human being as well.

A CRT Lens

My (Campbell's) approach to addressing racist and racially charged incidents follows a CRT-informed approach developed by Cerezo et al. (2013) from Villalpando's (2004) work in the university setting. The components of the approach are:

- 1) Recognizing the role race/racism play in classrooms by how they are instructed and how discussions are facilitated,
- 2) Understanding that color-blindness and race-neutrality operate to silence the lived experiences of students of color in and out of the classroom,
- 3) Re-emphasizing the importance of social justice as a part of social work ethics and redesign curricula and classrooms to centralize it,
- 4) Giving voice to students of color and allowing their experiences in social work programs to inform and improve the experience of future students, and
- 5) Emphasizing the importance of context in how students engage the classroom and creating tools for instructors that honor these diverse learning needs.

Even though I value the importance of reflection and I previously challenged the singular focus on "empirical evidence and established theoretical constructs," I truly believe in the application

of *relevant* knowledge and theory to handling such situations. At the time I engaged in this dialogue with my students, I was not fully conscious of my incorporation of CRT principles; I was simply being a good practitioner and instructor relying on my group work training. Now, I realize that these theoretical principles are so engrained and central to my teaching pedagogy, it is simply part of the way I respond to most situations.

My approach to teaching any social work class is to centralize race and use the social work code of ethics to support this attention to race and racism. This way, students know that all discussions are rooted within a social justice and anti-racist approach to social work practice. In allowing the Black students to voice their negative racial experiences with their White colleagues, I attended to the color-blindness and race-neutrality that operate against students of color and gave voice to their lived experiences to benefit the experiences of future students. I let the Black students use the classroom space to be heard and name race as the key factor in making their unsatisfactory and for some, distressing, educational experiences. I did not concern myself with how I might be criticized about focusing too much on race in class. I recognized the importance and potentially corrective experience such a dialogue could have and allowed it to unfold, using group work/therapy techniques to facilitate it.

I recognized the importance of acknowledging the role race/racism can play in classrooms. As a result, instead of shutting down racially charged dialogue and favoring a more egalitarian approach, I privileged the voices of the Black students in the room and intentionally held the space for them until I felt it was time to move to the place of dialogue. I let the Black students' words and emotions fill the room until the other students felt the weight and pressure of their colleagues' experiences. I let them sit in discomfort as their Black colleagues often have found themselves doing. I silenced the students who tried to interrupt the stream of consciousness that flowed and let them feel the experience of having their voices interrupted and/or silenced. In other words, as I later explained to the White students, "now you know just a taste of what your Black colleagues have been experiencing for two years."

Since the classroom is a space for learning and I know that there are a variety of ways to process and take in information, I used my group facilitation skills to lead a dialogue about what this diverse group of students thought about what was happening; how they felt in the moment; what responses or actions, if any, were activated; and what they could do going forward. In using the group facilitation process, I emphasized the importance of context in how students engage and honored the diverse learning needs. In retrospect, and according to feedback from the students, it was the way that this dialogue was facilitated that had the greatest impact on them. They learned that conflict, with varying levels of resolution, could exist, be addressed, and survived—one of the key lessons that I had attempted to teach them during our course. They learned that it was not that these conversations were unbearable but that the methods traditionally employed were ineffective in handling everything that sprung up in such a dialogue. They learned that by avoiding the taboo, or by being unaware of its existence, tension, and not the desired peace, was allowed to breed. Winchester noted that ignoring these conversations or issues is a form of colorblindness that continues to do damage. I helped many of them see that, in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King (1958/2010), "true peace is not merely the absence of tension: it is the

presence of justice” (p. 27). And by privileging the voices of their Black colleagues (equity) and abandoning thoughts of fairness (equality), they were operating in justice.

Conclusion

I (Campbell) know what many of you are expecting to follow is a discussion that ties together our experiences and perhaps provides some implications or teaching strategies for social work educators, but we have purposely omitted those elements in this paper. Especially after the “double-pandemic” of racist violence and unrest and widespread illness and death that plagued our nation after the murder of George Floyd at the hands of police and with the surge of COVID-19, we know that you are hungry for ... something. But we are going to leave you to forage. As I often say to my students at the end of some classes, we are intentionally leaving you open to feel, to process, to reflect, to contemplate, and so on. This work is messy. Given our nation’s history, and present-day politics, race work is difficult and challenging. The feelings it evokes are intense and varied. The new wounds it can create are raw and, at times, too painful. The solutions often feel distant, intangible, and unattainable. And that is where we want you to sit ... in the messiness, in the ambiguity, in the powerlessness. We want to expose you to all of the emotions that experiencing racism can bring. And we hope that that unease, that angst, that unsettling feeling will be a catalyst for YOU (to want) to seek, insist upon, and help create spaces that promote true diversity, inclusion, and equity particularly as it relates to race.

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