

White Like Social Work

Shena Leverett Brown

Abstract: This essay joins personal narrative with an unpublished book review expressing my skepticism about current anti-racism rhetoric within social work programs and the performative actions that often accompany it. Here, I revisit a critique of the personal narrative written by anti-racism educator Tim Wise in *White Like Me* (2011) completed during course work in a doctoral program. I use my reaction to Wise's reflection on his white privilege as material to explore and examine efforts to confront and dismantle systemic racism in social work programs and essentially throughout the profession. I challenge social work programs to think critically about the next steps towards their positions on anti-racism and their interactions with students, staff, and faculty. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the essay while offering opportunities for scholars to contribute to the conversation about dismantling, deconstructing, and divesting from racist ideology and policies in social work programs.

Keywords: critical theory, white privilege, book review, anti-racism

Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.

— Maya Angelou (<https://twitter.com/DrMayaAngelou/status/1028663286512930817>)

Truth be told, I'm weary from thinking about, talking about, and experiencing racism in all of its forms. I'm also jaded and skeptical of the popularity of confronting and dismantling systemic racism in our social structures, including social work programs. It's as if we've suddenly become conscious of our responsibility to promote social justice and social change, to engage in self-confrontational awareness of our racial biases, and to work towards the deconstruction of policies that cripple individual and society's well-being (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2021). As a discipline, social work has been charged with this reminder at critical points in history before.

Black social workers have been doing this work for a long time. As early as 1924, E. Franklin Frazier wrote about the promise of social work improving race relations in Southern states and challenged a larger social work professional body against their policy of segregating the Black social workers in meetings (Platt & Chandler, 1988). By the mid-20th century, the push for professionalism and the differences between Jane Addams' social action and Mary Richmond's individualistic social diagnosis left opportunity for social work to re-examine its radical roots (Reisch & Andrews, 2001) and address injustices such as racism. Then again, in 1968 the National Association of Black Social Workers was founded as a direct result of institutional white racism in social work (National Association of Black Social Workers, 1968). There have been numerous opportunities for social work programs to confront and act on systemic racism as a body ensuring that their students who go on to practice are exposed to these historical facts and critically reflect on the policies and practices that need changing or creating with equal emphasis and in combination with micro- and mezzo-level social work topics. Yet, still we are faced with the question and solemn answer that social work is still racist (Corley & Young, 2018).

Current anti-racism practices hinge on decades of work from countless Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) that has been limitedly acknowledged in social work programs until recently: from notable scholars such as W. E. B. DuBois, Angela Davis, Derrick Bell, Patricia Hills Collins, and Kimberlé Crenshaw to others using critical theory lenses and radical feminism. Maya Angelou reminds us that when we know better we must act on that knowledge by doing better. Once again, we are reminded that social work knows better and has known better for quite some time. It's our efforts at "doing" better that are questionable. Social work programs and social workers: Let's do better!

I am a Black cisgender female. I had been a social work practitioner for eighteen years post-MSW before returning to earn the PhD. During those practice years, it had not occurred to me to critique my profession or the social work programs that had produced me for their part in perpetuating racism. Perhaps it was because of the exhaustion from the day-to-day practice that monopolized my time, preventing me from critically examining the actual practice as a whole. I was busy checking my individual biases as I should, but not that of my craft. Perhaps it was because the social work programs and the individuals within them were not equipped to prepare me to do so. After all, they had been educated by the same social work programs we are currently indicting and many of the BIPOC faculty faced challenges of their own in the academy. Perhaps it was because I forgot all that I learned on the subject of racism as a social justice issue and was left to lean on lived experience. After all, it had been almost two decades ago and a different time. Whatever the reason, entering a doctoral program gave me the time and the space to learn some missed history, revisit some with a new lens, and contribute my voice to the change that is inevitable in our programs that educate new social workers.

In this essay, I will share some of the convictions I believe necessary for social work programs to grapple with and then consider my reactions to a required reading for a social justice course during my doctoral program. I desire that the reader be willing to replace the critique of the author and his experience, with that of social work programs and the individuals who administer them.

Confronting: Calling Out, Calling In

I want to hold social work programs accountable for what they (we) say that we do.

Social work educators have a great responsibility to "ensure a well-educated social work profession equipped to promote health, well-being, and justice for all people in a diverse society" (Council on Social Work Education, n.d., Vision section). The "attention to the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living" (NASW, 2021, Preamble section) is inherent to the profession of social work itself. I fundamentally believe the conditions that make up systemic racism and allow it to thrive hurt all within the society, even those historically and currently benefitting from it. NASW (2007) has acknowledged what we've known for a long time by identifying itself as a "predominantly white association" in its call to action on institutional racism (p. 12). And so, it is essential that we work to confront and dismantle systemic racism whenever possible in our society and where we are readily available to work and are charged to make a difference: starting in our social work programs.

I understand social work programs are not islands. We must first acknowledge that social work programs are situated within larger higher education structures that view education as a product. Schwartzman (2013) examines education as a commodity and explores some of the implications of managing students as consumers, justifying a sound argument as to why education is not compatible with the profit-seeking enterprise. The main argument is the impact of educational theory and practice devaluing “intellectual challenge and exploration by reducing knowledge to quantifiable, job-oriented results” and instead being driven by the consumer’s “momentary pleasures” (Schwartzman, 2013, p. 41). Thus, for social work programs to confront systemic racism they need to develop strategies to balance intellectual rigor/critical thinking with that of providing a skill set that makes the student marketable. Social work programs will also have to examine their practices within the tenure-track faculty following the market demand and momentary pleasures for specific types of research.

Secondly, social work programs will need to readily embrace more critical forms of theory to explain systemic racism and its relationship with other social problems. For example, Neo-Marxian Theory forms a structural, historical, and economic explanation for oppression (Robbins et al., 2019). This lens forces us to take a look at economics and political ideology’s role in continued inequality and oppression. Furthermore, the history of race in the United States is heavily influenced by the economic growth due to African slave labor and the exploitation of poor whites. This history has created hundreds of years of conflict between these two groups. This can be most recently seen in the racial and political lines drawn during the presidential elections of 2016 and 2020. Conflict theory in general is an uncomfortable and compromising position for social workers to take in practice. Many social workers who use critical theory do so in a philosophical way and not in practice. Social work practitioners proposing to explain oppression in this manner face critique and being seen as “too political” and are at times suggested to be unprofessional. Social work programs must insist that social work students and faculty become more political as the *Code of Ethics* (NASW, 2021) suggests, despite the societal preference to stay neutral. To exact change and dismantle unjust structures one must risk these consequences and move forward with what the profession considers structural social work (Hick et al., 2009; Weinberg, 2008). Advocating through this lens requires a radical stance and a willingness to take economic and political risks. The question to be asked is: Can social work programs afford to do this within their positions in the larger higher education structure? Additionally, social work programs must examine their policies and practices from hiring and dispersing work among tenure-track and non-tenure track faculty to the admission of students.

Dismantling, Deconstructing, and Divesting

To rid systemic racism of its power, we must challenge white supremacy. The rise in popularity of Critical Race Theory (CRT) among the mainstream can likely be attributed to more and more people exploring their multiple identities and being asked to attend to their privilege, particularly white privilege (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). However, if I’m being honest, this emphasis on anti-racism work is somewhat uncomfortable. I recalled having read and reviewed Tim Wise’s (2011) *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son* and it helped me to explain some of the discomforts I experience with anti-racism work. Social work programs must acknowledge that they too have perpetuated systemic racism and not ignore it as if it is

something outside of us that needs to be removed, when in actuality, it's happening inside of our walls. So, what did a book review articulate for me about racism and social work?

It was a good time in my life and profession to be reading about a Southern white male affirming his privilege. As an accomplished mental health professional with over 20 years of practice experience, pursuing the doctorate placed me in a position of dual occupancy. As a full-time student, I had given up practice but I wasn't quite an academic yet although I was being socialized to think, speak, and behave as such in a predominantly white institution in the conservative South. Being in a field like social work that is loaded with diversity, inclusion, and multiculturalism talk but a questionable walk, we are uniquely positioned for confronting major -isms as par for the course. Still, the placement of one's academic ventures and the political climate it exists within speaks volumes about how that task will be carried out.

Here's what I wrote:

Thanks go to the author for letting those of us on the other side of racial privilege in on the benefits of whiteness. Often known in our gut, but unable to articulate, it validates our many experiences of recognizing the reality of what some historical scholars have called the color line (Douglas, 1881; DuBois, 1903). While none of it is surprising, there is so much about it that is intrinsic to the fabric of our world and we often fail to document these experiences as symptoms of racism. Tim Wise seeks to dispel this notion of color-blindness and calls out what many people of color have done for many years only this time from a privileged perspective. It is frustrating to know that some people will never recognize the truths the author speaks of despite the color of the person speaking it. Moreover, it is equally frustrating to recognize that some will never be able to hear it from a person of color but miraculously "get it" from a Tim Wise. (Brown, 2018, p. 2)

As I read the book, I kept coming back to these questions: Who is responsible for the fight for racial justice? Who is responsible for the justice of the oppressed? Is it the responsibility of the oppressed themselves to fight for their liberation? Is it the responsibility of the oppressor to right a wrong? Is it the combination and alliance of two groups working together for overall justice? The unspoken burden of advocacy falls upon whom?

Relevance for Social Work

Wise (2011) mentions working in a poor Black community in New Orleans where he was likely seen as "either a cop or a social worker, neither of which they were too likely to want to mess with" (p. 174). At the mention of social work, I reflected upon this common assumption that social workers are child welfare workers seeking to remove children from their homes even though it is a quite diverse profession. Nonetheless, this statement rings true, and the fact remains people who live in such communities have no other frame of reference for social workers.

It is because of this assumption and the sheer power and privilege that goes along with that role that this book is of relevance to those seeking to work with and on behalf of oppressed people. If

social work did not have such an incestuous relationship with the system disseminating the oppression, it might be the discipline that could tackle racism directly without resistance. Embedded within its code of ethics lies the social work value of “social justice” and its “primary mission ... to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty” (NASW, 2021, Preamble section). Therefore, I see the work of anti-racism advocacy as one of opportunity for social workers.

This book would serve as an excellent colloquium-style course for white social workers confronting their privilege before entering into a profession designed for encounters with marginalized underprivileged populations. Even though there is the ever-powerful internalized racism to address as well, the benefit to social workers of color might provide more opportunity to hand off the responsibilities of anti-racist activism to those who benefit from it and perhaps focus more on healing and developing protective factors.

Insights

While reading the book, there were several times when I questioned if the author’s work might be better utilized in the very settings where he would not be welcomed. Is Tim Wise preaching to the choir? For sure, those who know of his work and ideology choose to attend his speaking engagements, read his books, or watch him engage in political discourse are doing so with motivation to change themselves or to indict him in some way. What happens to the people who haven’t assessed their privilege or who even recoil at the terminology itself? It is clear that the author has done much internal reflecting and likely continues to do so in this area, but who is his true audience?

After reading the book, I struggled with being convinced that the reading expresses racial privilege as harmful to white people. I believe not enough emphasis has been spent communicating with especially poor and working-class white people who systemically have more in common with their marginalized counterparts. It appears that conversations are happening in liberal spaces where blatant racial ignorance has not been tolerated very well. Although it may not be his aim, Wise has work to do if he wants to change the minds of people who have been manipulated by a system that encourages them to believe people of color are their enemy. In my idealism, I find poor and working-class white people to benefit the most from this kind of social advocacy which would include and change their narratives. I do not find Wise to be an effective voice for such persons.

There were several places in the book where I found the author to be especially off-putting and similar in spirit to the racists he speaks of. For example: “some of us [white people] are just too damned stupid to save,” (p. 168) “rich white women all look alike to me,” (p. 118) and making a mockery of the Easter bunny while referencing “Christ’s proclaimed resurrection” (p. 169). I wonder if these are blind spots for the author and if he has not fallen prey to “romancing resistance” (p. 92) as he warned against earlier in the book. The voice of the book resounds with a bit of arrogance that can only come from privilege, balanced with humility that often seemed patronizing instead of authentic.

I struggled with finding insight for myself as a Black woman and found it to be more taxing than helpful. I found myself trying to make sense of feeling grateful that someone who identifies as privileged can speak such truths and, at the same time, trying to disconnect myself (a Black woman) from the outcome and allow white people to figure out how to fix themselves.

Recommendations

I will keep the book on my shelf as a reference for anti-racism efforts, accounts of privilege, and because of its seminal nature. I would recommend it to white social work students to assess their racial privilege. I would also recommend it to other social work students to introduce them to one of the players in anti-racism rhetoric for its use and/or critique. The practice of social work and social work education has a responsibility to contribute to social justice advocacy as a commission. It might be best practice to incorporate *White Like Me* and readings of its kind into required reading for individuals seeking to engage in this work. It is up to us in the profession to figure out how to bring that about in practice and research through our advocacy for what we need to be better social workers.

Conclusion

In summary, my takeaways from reflecting on what it means for me to charge social work programs with confronting and dismantling systemic racism include acknowledging complicity and not living up to the overall mission of social work. This written critique of someone else's narrative represents the ongoing internal monologue and sometimes dialogue I've had with myself since reading the book and writing this piece. I can remember the day that I read the feedback from the professor who had given the assignment. Their words were positive, affirming, and dare I say unlike anything I had received up until that point from scholars in my own discipline. Did I fail to mention that the class was taken in a different department at the university? I have quite often made the statement that other disciplines are beginning to "out social work social work." That perhaps is a topic of another reflection.

So much of the current landscape for research and expanding knowledge in social work has been in the area of racism as of late. Major funding sources for health-related research initiatives are placing significant emphasis on minority health disparities, including ethnic and racial disparities. National conferences and major journals are calling for special submissions and presentations regarding the topic of racial justice. For example, for the last two years, the Council on Social Work Education's annual program meeting has attempted to lead critical conversations about racial justice and diversity, equity, and inclusion. Additionally, professional organizations and even schools of social work are leading with position statements and designing programs with objectives to name and confront racism and white supremacy head-on. Not having a full understanding of the outcomes of these initiatives, we must ask: How are we ensuring that this momentum is not performative and will not disappear when the topic is no longer a target on the mainstream radar?

We are at a potential turning point in the field of social work research. During my time as a doctoral student studying racism and racial microaggressions, I found that much of the literature

and research regarding racism comes out of disciplines other than social work. Regardless of epistemological leanings, social work scholars have the opportunity to investigate these outcomes and add knowledge and understanding as to how or to what extent our racial justice initiatives have been effective. Qualitative and mixed-methods researchers have a great variety of tools to allow for more immediate change such as the empowering and collaborative methods of participatory action research and focus groups (e.g., Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Likewise, quantitative research offers privilege in the use of pre-existing data, quantifying participants' experiences, and the emphasis on measurement and generalizing the impact of anti-racist interventions. As mentioned previously, there is huge interest in funding projects about race and racial disparities right now and it is imperative that social workers take advantage of such opportunities to work toward the mission of social justice.

Finally, teaching and administrative roles should share the burden of managing anti-racism policies in social work education programs. Despite the challenges programs will face within the larger structures of academia, it is expected that we will take a position towards social action and partner with oppressed populations to offer resistance. Because racism is exhausting, I charge programs to radically change who is responsible for teaching racialized topics and initiating diversity, equity, and inclusion activities—taking some of the burdens off of those most affected by racism. Even as a doctoral student teaching in my program, I noticed the number of Black professors teaching cultural diversity-related courses versus our white counterparts.

As a former practitioner and current educator of future practitioners, I must recognize that change is a slow and difficult process and therefore, I must pace myself and accept help. I must also encourage and charge my white colleagues to move out of neutrality and take responsibility for the problem of white racism and the “fixing.” Remember that we are not in this trench alone. There have been many before us and will be after us. But most importantly, there are so many right here alongside us. Let us use each other and take care of each other. Let us do better!

References

Brown, S. L. (2018). *Book review for “White Like Me”: Reflections on race from a privileged son* [Unpublished assignment submitted for EDUC 8190]. University of Georgia.

Corley, N. A., & Young, S. M. (2018). Is social work *still* racist? A content analysis of recent literature. *Social Work, 63*(4), 317–326. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swy042>

Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications Inc.

Douglass, F. (1881). *The color line*. American Literature.

<https://americanliterature.com/author/frederick-douglass/essay/the-color-line>

DuBois, W. E. B. (1903). *The souls of black folk*. Halcyon Classics.

Hick, S. F., Peters, H. I., Corner, T., & London, T. (2009). *Structural social work in action: Examples from practice*. Canadian Scholar's Press, Inc.

National Association of Black Social Workers. (1968). *NABSW position statements: First NABSW position statement*. <https://www.nabsw.org/page/PositionStatements>

National Association of Social Workers. (2007). *Institutional racism and the social work profession: A call to action*.
<https://www.socialworkers.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=SWK1aR53FAk%3D&portalid=0>

National Association of Social Workers. (2021). *Code of ethics*.
<https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics>

Platt, T., & Chandler, S. (1988). Constant struggle: E. Franklin Frazier and Black social work in the 1920s. *Social Work*, 33(4), 293–297. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/33.4.293>

Reisch, M., & Andrews, J. (2001). *The road not taken: A history of radical social work in the United States*. Sheridan Books.

Robbins, S. P., Chatterjee, P., Canda, E. R., & Leibowitz, G. S. (2019). *Contemporary human behavior theory: A critical perspective for social work (4th Ed.)*. Pearson

Schwartzman, R. (2013). Consequences of commodifying education. *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, 17(3), 41–46.
https://libres.uncg.edu/ir/uncg/f/R_Schwartzman_Consequences_2013.PDF

Weinberg, M. (2008). Structural social work: A moral compass for ethics in practice. *Critical Social Work*, 9(1). <https://doi.org/10.22329/csw.v9i1.5761>

Wise, T. (2011). *White like me: Reflections on race from a privileged son*. Soft Skull Press.

About the Author: Shena Leverett Brown, PhD, LCSW, MAC is Assistant Professor, Whitney M. Young, Jr. School of Social Work, Clark Atlanta University, Atlanta, Georgia (404-880-6781, sbrown@cau.edu).