

# REFLECTIONS

NARRATIVES of PROFESSIONAL HELPING



“Academic Justice” Pencil on Paper 9”x12” Shonda K. Lawrence 2023

Artist’s Statement: Social work is rooted in core values that are taught by social work academics across the country. The core values instilled in students support advocacy for vulnerable populations. However, what happens when the teacher is a part of the vulnerable population? Navigating academic systems can leave many vulnerable as they experience issues in academic settings. The hand represents the weighted feeling of oppression and hinders the full potential of the person no matter how accomplished.

## A Call for Social Work Educators to Confront and Dismantle Systemic Racism *Within* Social Work Programs (Issue 2)

Guest Editors: Tiffany D. Baffour and Shonda K. Lawrence

Volume 30 (2024)

Number 1

# REFLECTIONS

## NARRATIVES of PROFESSIONAL HELPING

---

**Editorial Leadership Team:** Editor-in-Chief: Darlyne Bailey, PhD, LISW (Professor and Dean Emeritus; Director, Social Justice Initiative, Bryn Mawr College Graduate School of Social Work and Social Research); Associate Editors: Monica Leisey, PhD (Professor and Program Director, Salem State University School of Social Work); F. Ellen Netting, PhD (Professor Emerita, Virginia Commonwealth University School of Social Work); Assistant Editor: Kelly McNally Koney, MSSA (Founder and Lead Consultant, The Kyla Alliance, LLC)

**Sections & Section Editors:** Practice – Patricia Gray, EdD, LCSW (Hunter College); Practicum Education – Beth Lewis, DSW (Bryn Mawr College, retired); Research – D. Crystal Coles, PhD (James Bell Associates, Inc.); Teaching & Learning – Arlene Reilly-Sandoval, DSW (Colorado State University Pueblo)

**Guest Editors:** Tiffany D. Baffour, PhD (University of Utah); Shonda K. Lawrence, PhD (Governors State University)

**Cover Artist:** Shonda K. Lawrence, PhD

**Copyediting and Production Team:** Lead Copy Editor: Jack Pincelli, BS (Cleveland State University); Copy Editor: Lindsay Young, MSW (Columbia University)

### PUBLISHED BY SALEM STATE UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

**Publishing Partners:** University of Georgia School of Social Work; Howard University School of Social Work; California State University Long Beach School of Social Work; Monmouth University School of Social Work

**Executive Committee:** Beth Massaro (Publisher, Salem State University), Chair; Philip Hong (University of Georgia); Sandra Crewe (Howard University); Nancy Myers-Adams (California State University Long Beach); Robin Mama (Monmouth University); Darlyne Bailey (Editor-in-Chief, Ex-Officio)

ISSN - 1080-0220. Published February 2024 using Open Journal Systems software. Hosted at Public Knowledge Project. Indexed in Social Work Abstracts and Social Services Abstracts. Full text available in EBSCOhost SocIndex and Proquest Research Library. The content, opinions expressed, and use of language in each article appearing in *Reflections* reflect the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Editors, Publishing Partners, or Salem State University.

# REFLECTIONS

## NARRATIVES of PROFESSIONAL HELPING

---

- 4-11 [Reflections from the Guest Editors: A Call for Social Worker Educators to Confront and Dismantle Systemic Racism Within Social Work Programs \(Issue 2\)](#)  
Tiffany D. Baffour and Shonda K. Lawrence
- 12-29 [Teaching While Black: A Call to Decolonize the Social Work Curriculum](#)  
Christiana Best-Giacomini
- 30-48 [Who Positioned Social Work as the Noble Alternative to Policing?](#)  
Funke Oba and Samantha Zerafa
- 49-58 [Guilty Until Proven Innocent: Reflections on Encounters with Whiteness in an Academic Institution](#)  
Victor Chikadzi
- 59-64 [My Reckoning](#)  
Sanjana Ragudaran
- 65-80 [From Intellectual Exercise to Facilitated Dialogue: How One Class Confronted Race and Racism in the Social Work Classroom](#)  
Rosalyn Denise Campbell, Dashawna J. Fussell-Ware, and Madison R. Winchester
- 81-100 [“Black People Are Not My Thing”: Microaggressions Experienced by Black Graduate Students in Social Work Programs](#)  
Joan M. Blakey, Quenette Walton, and Sheara Jennings
- 101-108 [Dilate: A Reflection on How My Marginalized Experiences in Education Created My Call for Equity in Social Work Education](#)  
Nathaniel L. Currie
- 109-125 [Participatory Program Evaluation: Centering Critical Perspectives in Developing Socially Just and Collaborative Solutions](#)  
Laurie A. Walker
- 126-134 [Tough Nuts to Crack: Initiating an Imperfect Racial Justice Accountability Process Within One School of Social Work from One Perspective](#)  
Elspeth Slayter
- 135-137 [Double Special Issue: The Epilogue](#)  
Jenny L. Jones and Anthony P. Natale

# Reflections from the Guest Editors: A Call for Social Worker Educators to Confront and Dismantle Systemic Racism *Within* Social Work Programs (Issue 2)

Tiffany D. Baffour and Shonda K. Lawrence

**Abstract:** The second volume of a two-part Special Issue of a Trilogy on race and racism amplifies the narratives, experiences, and truths of social work faculty and students who are working to confront and dismantle systemic racism in social work programs and departments globally. Counter-storytelling, using teaching and learning as its central theme, is used to first name racist and colonizing practices and then offer strategies to improve institutional change efforts. Sustainable anti-racist efforts in social work education can be improved by incorporating knowledge, skills, strategies, and lessons learned throughout this Special Issue.

**Keywords:** anti-racism, systemic racism, social work education, reflection, higher education, pedagogy, decolonization, narratives, counter-storytelling

## Tiffany

In 2022, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), the accrediting body for US social work programs, issued a newly developed set of standards. CSWE standards must now clearly reflect anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion (A DEI) across program elements: mission, curriculum, learning environment, assessment, and inclusive practices and policies, including governance structure and resources (CSWE, 2022). These new standards present a critical opportunity for organizational development strategies that social work administrators, educators, students, and staff can collectively utilize to improve institutional outcomes within the profession. Importantly, they will impact how social workers are prepared to practice within institutions. Previous research illustrates that social work faculty can serve as a barrier to facilitating student learning around anti-racist content due to insufficient skill and preparation (Perez, 2021). Uniquely, this Special Issue presents knowledge, skills, strategies, and lessons learned to create organizational change within social work programs and higher education institutions.

While the 2022 accreditation standards represent a monumental shift in the implementation of competency-based education, we are simultaneously witnessing legislative intervention throughout the United States to dismantle A DEI policies, practices, and strategies within publicly funded institutions of higher education. Many of these policies seek to influence the right of faculty members to discuss pedagogically relevant viewpoints on race and racism within their classrooms (Honeycutt et al., 2023), while others seek to prohibit federal and state funding for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) offices, training, and hiring statements. For example, Florida's Senate Bill 266, signed into law in May 2023, prohibits the state's public colleges and universities from spending any state or federal dollars on DEI (Suarez & Royal, 2024). According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Chronicle Staff, n.d.), more than 40 anti-DEI state bills have been introduced, seven have final legislative approval, seven have become law, and 29 have been tabled, failed to pass, or been vetoed. Despite the repudiation of DEI work

happening within US society, I find joy and purpose in my role as an associate dean of equity, diversity, and inclusion. Often, I work with students, faculty, and staff across disciplines implementing strategies for social change as well as assisting individual and groups through the development, implementation and assessment of recruitment and retention programming and initiatives.

My life has been a mosaic of experiences and choices marked by interactions with folks from all walks of life and diverse societies. Throughout my life, I have both travelled and lived abroad, my life experiences enriched by many. I have always chosen to build trust between communities of different cultural systems while remaining deeply rooted in the many layers of my own cultural heritage and identity as an African American woman. I have chosen to spend my time with people with both divergent and similar viewpoints. Both perspectives have helped expand my creativity and challenge the ways I think about social problems, social policies, and their solutions. I struggle to understand ethnocentrism and the rejection of alternate ways of knowing and viewpoints. However, as I think back to the numerous conversations and meetings with faculty, staff, and students over the past few years at my own institution, I recall the resistance to integrating diverse perspectives and content into the curriculum. While some faculty have supported the integration of ADEI, I have witnessed many remain silent. Additionally, I have observed (especially among a segment of the student population) consistent and aggressive advocacy for curtailing ADEI content. To the credit of the administration and faculty, they have implemented ADEI into the curriculum consistent with the requirements of CSWE. I echo the sentiments expressed by colleagues in this Special Issue; I am troubled that some social work students don't feel that learning about systemic racism and improving their skills to address it are important. In these troubling times, commitment to racial justice on campuses is critical to the institutional success of academic institutions. DEI policies and practices are not being dismantled because they are ineffective, but because they provide opportunity for equity, spaces for inclusion and belonging, and classrooms where faculty and students can express their identities and ideas. As social workers we must be on the forefront of protecting spaces of inclusion, belonging, and mattering.

Recently, I attended the closing plenary of the Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA) Racial Equity Conference. It was an uplifting experience in the face of the current vitriolic attempts to defund ADEI nationally. It reminded me that *anti-racism is a movement, not a moment*. As we continue the movement, how will we maintain safe spaces? How will we continue with the work of social justice in the face of sweeping changes in higher education? As a profession, how will we continue to engage in reformative and not performative action? How do we resist fear created by legislative overreach? We still need to model anti-racist practices to serve students. We can improve the success and sustainability of our efforts by incorporating the lessons learned and strategies identified in this Special Issue.

Thank you to the brave authors who chose to share their stories here. Read and re-read them! I learn something new each time I re-engage them. Importantly, please cite this work as well as share it with your administrators, colleagues, family, and friends. Use these articles in your faculty meetings and other academic spaces to help others name and dismantle racist and

colonizing practices. Colleagues, continue to envision bold new strategies for an anti-racist social work future. *Yebetumi aye* (We can do it)!

### **Shonda**

Reflecting on my educational experience, in the past as a student and now as a faculty member, I have always believed that students should pursue education to become great thinkers. Moreover, professors should teach to expose and stimulate the inherent greatness in all students. I believe knowledge and discovery are perpetual forces in the evolution of mankind and, therefore, must always be supported and protected. Knowledge must be passed on for discovery to happen. To achieve this goal, we must sit in a space that allows and supports critical thinking, the discovery of self, and the connection of what is learned in the classroom with the realities of the world and all its imperfections. It is imperative to understand what we teach and why we teach it to be effective. Without this imperative, what we learn may be fundamentally flawed. Therefore, to be conscientious educators with a lens of social justice, we must grapple with and reconcile the fundamental flaws in social work education. For example, social work history clearly identifies pioneers like Jane Addams and Mary Ellen Richmond, with Whitney M. Young, Jr. and Ida B. Wells included in some discussions. This supports the redundancy of how people of color have been included in our history as anomalies. Sure, we can google African American/Black/people of color in social work and retrieve a listing of names with short biographies, but where are they in our curriculum? While I am thankful for the trails blazed, triumphs, and forward-thinking of social work leaders, I have also been baffled by the lack of inclusion of persons of color in the fight for an equal and just society in our curricula. This omission is especially troubling since many social work policies and programs target populations that include people of various ethnic and racial backgrounds and other vulnerable populations.

Historical positionality limited the involvement of people of color on a national platform. However, communities of color experiencing and witnessing inequitable treatment and injustices did not sit idly by; they engaged in community uplift. It is important to include and discuss the resilience, survival, and triumph of groups of people facing systemic racism not just from a victimization lens or deficit model but from a strength's perspective. For example, when African American children were parentless for whatever reason, family/community members took children into their homes, provided for them emotionally and financially, and raised them as their own. This intervention is known as kinship care or fictive kin today (Hegar & Scannapieco, 1995; Scannapieco & Jackson, 1996).

The articles included in this volume highlight the need to revisit how we present our history, how we include the accomplishments of persons of color in the social work field, and whether an in-depth examination of what we require of programs justly meets our standards and Code of Ethics (National Association of Social Workers, 2021). We also must contemplate what it means to embrace and give life to diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, and belonging (DEIAB) for faculty, students, and staff. In this volume, readers may use this compilation to navigate the complexities of incorporating DEIAB into previously colonized curricula. I thank the scholars who have courageously contributed to this Special Issue by sharing their experiences and reflections.

## **Descriptions of Articles and a Special Tribute**

In this volume, authors from academic institutions in the United States, Canada, and South Africa present reflective accounts that describe personal experiences with institutional racism within schools, colleges, and departments of social work. These narratives are both timely and timeless. Although racism exists in a historical and socio-political context, these narratives provide illustration of faculty and student experiences that depict present day conditions while also illustrating ties to historical themes in higher education including systemic injustice, discrimination, and oppression. Social work educators have a moral and ethical responsibility to confront and dismantle racism globally. These counter-stories indelibly stand in opposition to stock stories and meta-narratives common in our academic culture. This second volume demonstrates how theories, teaching strategies, and skills embodied in antiracist educational activism can be put into practice to confront and dismantle racism in social work education.

Both Best-Giacomini and Oba and Zerafa focus on decolonizing the curriculum as an anti-racist educational strategy. In “Teaching While Black: A Call to Decolonize the Social Work Curriculum,” Best-Giacomini shares her personal journey in academia, including encounters with racism. She provides a call to action to decolonize the curriculum through the integration of anti-racist competencies, use of Critical Race Theory (CRT), and collaborating with organizations to create a more inclusive educational experience that recognizes the contributions of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color). “Who Positioned Social Work as the Noble Alternative to Policing,” Oba and Zerafa delve into the complexities of social work’s history inextricably tied to colonialism and white supremacy. By tracing the roots of social work in Canada to colonialism and racialization, they provide specific examples of the profession’s complicity in sustaining anti-Blackness. The authors underscore the impact of race and racism, calling for solidarity and inclusive learning environments in academia.

Both Chikadzi and Ragudaran provide powerful narratives about colonialism and their experience within academic institutions. In “Guilty Until Proven Innocent: Reflections on Encounters with Whiteness in an Academic Institution,” Chikadzi shares his lived experiences as a professor in a predominately white institution (PWI) in South Africa. Drawing from encounters and interactions with colleagues and students, he reflects on how being Black often results in unwarranted presumptions of criminality, incompetence, and the denial of privilege granted to white students and faculty. These incidents not only provide concrete examples of white privilege but also emphasize the necessity for dismantling the economic and educational structures that perpetuate structural racism in South Africa. In conclusion, Chikadzi underscores the necessity for policy changes informed by research as he asserts “a dismantling of [informal, biased] networks and the development of new pathways for recruitment which give a fair chance to black candidates, who largely lack social capital to access such privileged spaces, is needed” (pg. 9). Similarly, in “My Reckoning” Ragudaran reflects on her experiences in PWIs in the US, both inside and outside the classroom, to confront and disrupt racism. Ragudaran provides concrete examples of how she actively engaged in social justice movements and anti-racism efforts within academia following George Floyd’s death while balancing the responsibilities of the tenure track. Facing many demands for teaching, research, and service, she continued to

advocate for genuine inclusivity and integrated racial spaces to foster honest conversations and action across campus in a variety of settings.

Likewise, there are several common themes in the three narratives of Campbell et al., Blakey et al., and Currie. Each counter-narrative speaks to personal and/or professional experiences with discrimination including macroaggressions, mega-aggressions, and microaggressions. These narratives, centering CRT and scholarship, counter the common portrayal that experiences with racism and discrimination within social work educational spaces are isolated incidents. In the article “From Intellectual Exercise to Facilitated Dialogue: How One Class Confronted Race and Racism in the Social Work Classroom,” Campbell et al. discuss the longstanding goal of social work educators to prepare students for social justice work, including combatting racism, sexism, and other inequalities. However, students often perceive these issues as distant problems unrelated to their academic environment. The article presents the perspectives of a Black female instructor, an African American student, and a White student who share their perspectives on and debrief their collective experiences regarding racially charged events in a shared classroom. They underscore the need for social work educators (and students) to sit in discomfort to which will stir them “to seek, insist upon, and help create spaces that promote true diversity, inclusion, and equity particularly as it relates to race” (p. 57). In “Black People Are Not My Thing: Microaggressions Experienced by Black Graduate Students in Social Work Programs,” Blakey et al. address the experiences of Black students in social work programs at PWIs. They provide definitions and examples to name the various forms of racism and aggression experienced by Black students and describe the psychological distress and disconnection these experiences can cause. The authors highlight the urgency for social work education to confront and dismantle racism and microaggressions by implementing anti-racist policies and practices including inclusive curricula and expanded support for recruitment and retention. In “Dilate: A Reflection on How My Marginalized Experiences in Education Created My Call for Equity in Social Work Education,” Currie recounts his journey from foster care to higher education. He emphasizes the profound impact of early racial trauma due to bias experienced in a predominantly white suburban environment. Currie advocates for innovative strategies that foster equity-mindedness, integration of healing justice, and theoretical frameworks such as CRT and DEIPAR (diversity, equity, inclusion, intersectionality, power analysis, anti-racist). He asserts the need for greater inclusivity, emphasizing the re-envisioning of admissions procedures by considering criteria outside of GPA, such as trauma history, resilience, and work experience.

Both Slayter and Walker provide vital examples of social justice work taking place within social work programs. In “Tough Nuts to Crack: Initiating an Imperfect Racial Justice Accountability Process Within One School of Social Work from One Perspective,” Slayter discusses an institutional plan to prioritize racial justice work. Her narrative describes efforts to engage faculty and staff in data-driven equity initiatives, leading to the discovery of racial disparities in low grades and dismissals, prompting personal self-reflection and systemic change. Within the reflective work titled “Participatory Program Evaluation: Focusing on Critical Perspectives for the Creation of Equitable and Collaborative Solutions,” Walker engages themes of research methods, community engagement, and decolonization within the context of social work coursework and practicum. Walker highlights several challenges in engaging students in decolonizing work including inconsistency in instructional methods (i.e., what knowledge is



considered credible) across courses as well as lack of agency expertise in cultural humility to adequately support Native American clients which was reflected consistently in students' program evaluation assignments. The authors highlight collaborative solutions to improve social work education, such as course restructuring efforts, hybrid course formats, and engaging Indigenous territories in community engagement efforts.

### **Acknowledgement**

We would also like to thank Angelica Uzoigwe undergraduate research assistant at the University of Utah for her support in compiling materials for this volume.

### **Tribute to Dr. Ruby Gourdine**

We would especially like to acknowledge and honor [Dr. Ruby Gourdine](#) (1948–2022), Professor, Howard University School of Social Work, who passed away on February 1, 2022. She was incredibly encouraging and excited about this special issue “A Call for Social Work Educators to Confront and Dismantle Systemic Racism *Within* Social Work Programs.” She was a tireless supporter of *Reflections* and an incredible social work pioneer. She published a narrative in 2004 [“A Beginning Professional’s Journey Towards Understanding Equality and Social Justice in the Field of Social Work”](#) reflecting her own journey into the social work profession which began shortly after the implementation of civil rights legislation. Her expansive teaching, research and scholarship experiences focused on child welfare, children with disabilities, African American adolescents, social work education, critical race theory, social welfare history and much more. She was an exceptional mentor to students and faculty across disciplines as well as to those at other Universities.

The reflections that follow about the life and legacy of Dr. Ruby Gourdine are largely from her school at Howard University, yet we know that they also convey the thoughts and feelings of many who knew her:

She taught me to be strong and stand firm in who I am as a Black woman, especially in predominately white academic spaces where the topics, theoretical frameworks, research methodologies and perspectives that are central to my work were often not valued. She was more than a mentor, she was a source of constant encouragement, my confidant and second mother. My life as a scholar, mother and wife has been incredibly enriched by her presence. I think of her often and all the important life lessons she taught me.

– Tiffany Baffour, PhD

In reflecting upon 25 years of collegiality with Dr. Ruby Gourdine, several key qualities come to mind. Organized. Timely. Dedicated. Committed. Knowledgeable. Helpful. Loyal. Dr. Gourdine was consistently first to complete assignments because of her keen organization skills. She was extremely dedicated to the Howard University School of Social Work Black Perspective. These qualities were evident in her research, scholarship,

teaching mentorship, and friendship. Her knowledge of Black history was freely shared. Dr. Gourdine was unshakeable in her loyalty. I am grateful that our paths crossed.

– Sandra Edmonds Crewe, PhD

Long before “Black Lives Matter” the movement and use of the word “unapologetic” became popular, it is evident from her scholarship, practice, and research that Dr. Gourdine had always insisted that Black lives matter and anyone who came to know here, knew she was “unapologetically Black.” As her colleague, I learned first-hand that she didn’t arrive at these positions by accident or to seek personal glory or fame. Her lived experiences with entrenched systematic racism motivated her to spend every living moment producing advocacy, research, and scholarship that affirmed Black people, highlighting their strengths, and amplified their contributions.

– Altaf Husain, PhD

Dr. Gourdine was a shining example of generosity. She generously shared her scholarship, support, experiences, time, opportunities, and intellectualism. She was a champion for the Black Perspective and the centering of the Black experience in the scholarship of the School. I am grateful to have benefitted so greatly from her kindness, experience, and support.

– Tracy Whitaker, DSW

## References

Chronicle Staff. (n.d.). *DEI legislation tracker: Explore where college diversity, equity and inclusion efforts are under attack*. The Chronicle of Higher Education. Retrieved July 14, 2023 from <https://www.chronicle.com/article/here-are-the-states-where-lawmakers-are-seeking-to-ban-colleges-dei-efforts>

Council on Social Work Education. (2022). Educational policy and accreditation standards. <https://www.cswe.org/accreditation/standards/2022/>

Hegar, R., & Scannapieco, M. (1995). From family duty to family policy: The evolution of kinship care. *Child Welfare*, 74(1), 200–216. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45399031>

Honeycutt, N., Stevens, S. T., & Kaufmann, E. (2023). The academic mind in 2022: What faculty think about free expression and academic freedom on campus. *Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression*. <https://www.thefire.org/research-learn/academic-mind-2022-what-faculty-think-about-free-expression-and-academic-freedom>

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

Perez, E. N. (2021). Faculty as a barrier to dismantling racism in social work education. *Advances in Social Work, 21*(2/3), 500–521.

Scannapieco, M., & Jackson, S. (1996). Kinship care: The African American response to family preservation. *Social Work, 41*(2), 190–196. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23718490>

Suarez, C., & Royal, D. (2024, January 24). *Florida board bans use of state and federal funds on DEI programs at state universities*. CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/24/us/florida-universities-dei-spending-ban/index.html>

**About the Authors:** Tiffany D. Baffour, PhD is Associate Dean for Graduate Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, Graduate School, and Associate Professor, College of Social Work, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT ([tiffany.baffour@utah.edu](mailto:tiffany.baffour@utah.edu)); Shonda K. Lawrence, PhD, LMSW is Associate Professor, College of Human and Health Services, Department of Social Work, Governors State University, University Park, IL ([slawrence5@govst.edu](mailto:slawrence5@govst.edu)).

### **With Deep Gratitude...**

We want to recognize and thank the reviewers who contributed their time and invaluable assistance to Reflections V29(2):

Mari L. Alschuler, Rosemary Barbera, Manasseh Begay, Shena Brown, Margaret Counts-Spriggs, Shadonna Davis, Nanette I. Fleischer, James Angelo Forte, Caren Frost, Ruby M. Gourdine, Anthony J. Hill, Rosa James, Leroy Curtis Johnson, Shonda Kaye Lawrence, Nicole Nicotera, Arlene Reilly-Sandoval, Joi Showell, Desiree Stepteau-Watson, Tracy R. Whitaker, Gerry L. White, Darrin Wright

We appreciate your commitment to this journal and its authors!!

### **Supporting Reflections**

Ways to contribute to the publishing of *Reflections*:

- \$\$ (any amount) — FRIEND OF *REFLECTIONS*
- \$250 or more — FRIEND FOR LIFE
- \$1,000 or more — A THOUSAND THANKS
- \$3,000 over a three-year period — Institutional PUBLISHING PARTNER

Please visit: [salemstate.edu/reflections](http://salemstate.edu/reflections)

THANK YOU!!

# Teaching While Black: A Call to Decolonize the Social Work Curriculum

Christiana Best-Giacomini

**Abstract:** As a Black, female, middle-aged, naturalized citizen who transitioned to higher education mid-career, my role as faculty is sometimes challenged. Moreover, I'm often the only faculty member at the table with so many intersecting social identities rooted in systems of oppression. My journey to this point has taught me that having a seat at the table doesn't always mean having a voice. During the 2020 racial reckoning that ignited a global movement for racial justice, I found my voice again. This essay chronicles that journey, which rekindled a culture of resistance established in my Grenadian childhood. In my Black-majority country, I was surrounded by oral histories of my West African and Indigenous ancestors, instilling self-love and fortitude used today in the face of microaggressions in the US. Using an autobiographical approach, I'm calling for the decolonization of the social work curriculum and the inclusion of Critical Race Theory.

**Keywords:** anti-Black racism, color blindness, white culture, social justice, racial reckoning, Grenada

## Introduction

My journey to academia as a full-time faculty member was not linear. While in college, I hoped to continue with my education through graduate school and eventually teach in higher education. Still, it was not a practical option for my immigrant family at the time. Nonetheless, it was a dream deferred, not extinguished. During my career in the child welfare system, I obtained an MSW and a PhD in Social Welfare. In 2000, I began teaching as an adjunct and continued teaching for the next fifteen years, primarily at the City University of New York. Recently, after I retired from the child welfare system, I rekindled my dream as a full-time faculty member with the support of my mentors.

While I am happy with my career choice, ultimately, I still face certain hardships in academic settings—as I did as a student and while working in the child welfare system. Specifically, I continue to regularly encounter racism from seemingly well-intentioned people in the workplace, on webinars, at conferences, and in Zoom meetings in the form of microaggressions or on the receiving end of implicit bias. Systemic racism is endemic (Roberts & Rizzo, 2021). Since the social work field is a microcosm of the larger society, it is safe to say that the social work profession, like other professions in the educational system, in spite of the desires of some of its members, is institutionally racist. Still, the social work profession is one of the few professions with social justice as one of its codes of ethics (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017). Yet, the interpretation and implementation of social justice literature and strategies often fall short in the formal curriculum. Professionally, we have learned how to use terminologies that are “politically correct,” yet we struggle with putting those words and rhetoric into action. This essay outlines what decolonization of the social work curriculum is and suggests ways for addressing it. It provides a case for making the social work curriculum more

inclusive. It also includes a list of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) scholarly resources. It suggests the need for systemwide training. Most significantly, it calls for an antiracist and anti-Black racism social work curriculum.

The disconnect between our professional values and what actually happens in social work education is rooted in the eurocentrism present in most social work training (classroom and practicum education). For instance, as a student, the content of my MSW courses exclusively relied on theories and therapeutic interventions derived from Europeans or European Americans. During my MSW program in the late eighties, I yearned for materials and discussions that included people who looked like me or had similar experiences to my own. I dreaded the neatly typed case studies that featured dysfunctional Black and Latino families. But most of all, I was disappointed by the erasure and invisibility of the contributions of researchers and theorists who were African Americans, American Indian and Alaskan Native people, Asian Americans, Latinx Americans, and those who shared my intersecting identities of race, ethnicity, gender, and place of origin.

In the first semester of my first PhD program, we were instructed to select a theory or phenomenon that resonated with us from a peer-reviewed article to jump-start a discussion and analysis. This assignment excited me. My choice was an article entitled *Jamaican Family Structure: The Paradox of Normalcy* by Mary Dechesnay (1986). I felt the content of this article would allow me to introduce an author and the application of theories that were different and frankly more interesting to me as a Black woman from the West Indies. I was looking forward to a robust discussion with my peers about the concept of family and the various matrifocal family structures while contrasting it with the European ideal of a patriarchal/patrifocal structure. This article also included systems theory, which was one of my favorites. While I was aware that I had to guard against stereotyping and pathologizing an aspect of my culture's family structure, I also felt my selection was worth it because it allowed me to share a part of my authentic self. Unfortunately, my instructor disagreed with me. Even though I distributed the article to the class a week in advance, she waited until the class began and publicly shamed me for my selection. She shared that she didn't see the theoretical value of the article. I pushed back, explaining the need for diverse perspectives in literature and theories. However, she only acquiesced when one of my white-presenting male classmates from Brazil, an ally, spoke up in support of my position on the issue. He shared that he could also identify with the cultural and theoretical value of the article because of his country of origin. So, with great restraint, I was able to present and lead my class in an analysis of family dynamics and structures within the context of socioeconomic class, culture, and colonialism. Needless to say, I left this PhD program after the first year and started another the following fall semester.

### **A Culture of Resistance**

My culture of resistance began in childhood. I migrated from Grenada, West Indies, to New York City at 15. Growing up in Grenada, I was taught to resist oppression. I learned these lessons through oral histories and direct experience as an adolescent. Stories of my West African and Indigenous (Carib) ancestors fostered a culture of resistance in me. The stories I heard as a child were confirmed later through my research. Some of them were of the indigenous people of

Grenada, for example, the 1609 Carib destruction of British settlers and Chief Kairouane's rebellion against French colonists in 1649 (Steele, 2003). More important was the story of the Caribs taking agency of their lives by choosing suicide over subjugation by the French by jumping off the cliff in Leapers Hill in Sauteurs, St. Patrick, the northern part of Grenada (Hanna, 2022). I also heard stories of revolts by my West African ancestors. Some of them included Tacky's Rebellion in the 1760s in Jamaica (V. Brown, 2020); Fédon's Rebellion in Grenada in 1795–1796 (Jacobs, 2015); the 1816 Revolt in Barbados led by Bussa (The National Archives, 2018); and the 1831 Revolt in Jamaica led by Sam Sharpe (Zoellner, 2020). The most extraordinary revolt by enslaved people was the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804). Haiti was the first free Black republic and contributed to the end of the Atlantic Slave Trade and Feudalism in Europe (James, 1989). The Haitian Revolution was led by three legends—Toussaint Louverture, Jean Jacques Dessalines, and Henri Christophe. Henri Christophe was born into slavery in Grenada in 1767 and later fought in the American Revolutionary War in the French Contingent, followed by the Haitian Revolution; in 1807, he was elected president of the Northern State in Haiti (The New York Public Library, 1999). Both Christophe's and Fédon's legacies have been passed through oral histories from one generation to the next amongst Grenadians. Like me, many schoolchildren visit Leapers Hill annually, and it is also a popular tourist stop today. Moreover, when I was a student in Grenada in the 1970s, I was inspired by the ideals of the New Jewel Movement and attended several rallies. In 1979, the movement evolved into the People's Revolutionary Government, led by another Grenadian legend, Maurice Bishop (Burtenshaw, 2019).

The oral histories that were passed down to me as a child inspired me to be bold and unyielding in the face of adversity. My childhood also consisted of many role models like my mother, grandmother, teachers, doctors, artists, plumbers, electricians, nurses, and other ordinary citizens who kept the legacy of resistance alive—in a country with a primarily Black population. At the same time, I recognize that my country of birth continues to struggle with residuals of patriarchy and colonialism, including colorism (prejudice against people with dark skin tone). Still, being exposed to colorism and classism in Grenada did not prepare me for the anti-Black racism and xenophobia—particularly against people with black skin—that I would experience and witness in the United States.

### **Social Work Education Today**

Today, as a social work educator, I noticed that the textbooks have undergone significant changes since I was a student—specifically a move towards one that is more inclusive of Black and Brown people in the form of case studies that emphasize the humanity of marginalized groups. However, most theories in the formal curriculum continue to be overwhelmingly of Europeans or European American scholars. Even though there isn't a shortage of scholarly works by people of color, most social workers interested in expanding their knowledge have to find these alternative academic texts themselves (e.g., Hill-Collins' 2009 *Black Feminist Thought*; Crenshaw's 1991 intersectionality model; and E. Pinderhughes' 1989 textbook on understanding race, ethnicity, and power; and in some cases, articles on Critical Race Theory (CRT), which began with Derrick Bell, 1992). Yet, there still is minimal emphasis on structural and systemic racism in the formal curriculum. At the same time, I'm aware that many racially

conscious BIPOC teachers and white allies strive to infuse scholarly articles into the informal curriculum.

In the summer of 2020, COVID-19 and a racial reckoning forced the United States and the rest of the world to acknowledge the impact of systemic racism on marginalized communities. One and all witnessed the present-day version of lynching meted out to George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor—as well as many others who were killed by the police between May and August in 2020 whose names we do not know (Cohen, 2020). Yet, while many well-meaning people sympathized with Black communities during the summer of 2020, many of them went back to their everyday lives as if nothing had happened by the time fall came around. Many in the helping professions—like social work, nursing, and education—continued to practice, teach, research, and apply for grants, focusing on issues near and dear to their hearts, ignoring the people that have historically been relegated to the bottom of the caste system as described by Wilkerson (2020). However, this was not as simple for many in the Black community. Police brutality is a daily occurrence for Black people, not a trend. We don't get to shake it off and move forward with our lives as most others do. For many of us, George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, and Eric Garner represent our brothers, uncles, sons, and fathers, while Breonna Taylor, Sandra Bland, Kendra James, LaTanya Haggerty, and Miriam Carey represent our daughters, sisters, mothers, aunts, and nieces. The all-too-frequent killing of Black people and the failure of the justice system to punish the state-appointed executioners contribute to our learned helplessness (Seligman & Peterson, 2001). To combat this sense of helplessness and in the spirit of Black Lives Matter, I am calling for the decolonization of the formal social work curriculum.

### **What Does It Mean to Decolonize the Social Work Curriculum?**

It is important to note that some faculty members consciously understand the impact of structural racism and infuse materials in the informal curriculum by utilizing articles that explicitly unpack structural racism and white privilege. Yet, there is still a hesitancy for social work programs to formally embrace an antiracist stance, centering anti-Black racism. As a result, very few schools have developed courses that address structural racism and white privilege as part of the core curriculum, and most do not appear to be considering it. Among those that have is Silberman School of Social Work, which has instituted a full-year course entitled “Social Work Practice and Learning Lab,” which engages BSW and MSW students directly in identifying, discussing, and finding solutions for structural and systemic racism. It is time for *all* social work schools to decolonize (remove the chains of colonialism from) the formal social work curriculum.

While the term “colonization” has its roots in settler colonialism in the United States, Africa, India, South America, the Caribbean Islands, and other parts of the world, the term *decolonization* is used here metaphorically to emphasize the settler colonialism mark on institutions and organizations in America, while at the same time addressing the invisibility and erasure of contributions made by people of color in these institutions and social work education programs (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

What would it mean to decolonize (dismantle and rebuild) the social work curriculum? First, it means the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) must explicitly integrate the language of systemic and structural racism related to the genocide of the American Indian and Alaskan Native people (Rensink, 2011) and anti-Black racism based in chattel slavery in its competencies. Second, the CSWE must support social work programs to explicitly infuse CRT in all its curricula—theory, policy, practice, and research. Third, it means encouraging social work programs to provide trainings like the Undoing Racism workshop (The People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond, n.d.) to faculty and BSW/MSW students as a foundation. Because CRT isn’t a part of the American educational system, most social work faculty members and practitioners do not have the knowledge and understanding of structural racism related to American Indian and Alaskan Native genocide and anti-Black racism. Additionally, regardless of their commitment to the NASW code of ethics, their early internalized biases and stereotypes often still surface because it is unconscious (Shulman, 2017). Fourth, it means encouraging social work schools and programs to develop courses similar to the one mentioned above, imbuing the materials throughout their different courses, or combining the two. Fifth, it means collaborating with the National Association of Black Social Workers, American Association of Indian Social Workers, the Association of Latina/Latino Social Work Educators, the Association of Asian American Social Workers, and NASW, including the NASW-LGBTQ Social Work Committee, and the NYC chapter of NASW Immigration and Global Social Work Committee. Most of all, it means creating spaces and resources for dialogue for the social work community to imagine and envision all cultures and ways of knowing in the curriculum.

### **A Summary of Those Left Out**

A cursory review of the literature of African Americans’ early participation in the social work field includes historical figures and organizations comparable to Jane Addams—social work leader in the Settlement House Movement. What if we also lift up and make visible some of the amazing BIPOC social workers, organizers, and leaders? Social workers that should be recognized include the likes of Birdye Henrietta Haynes—a social welfare pioneer who worked at the Wendell Phillips Settlement House in Chicago in 1912 and later at Lincoln House in New York while encountering racism by social reformers of the day (Carlton-LaNey, 2001). In addition, the role of Black women in social movements has been erased in the feminist and antiracist literature although these women have been critical in the survival of their people throughout the ages (Marshal, 2001, as cited in Hounmenou, 2012). Many of these Black Settlement Houses were developed for the purpose of educating, empowering, and providing a nurturing environment in the midst of the inhumanity of slavery and segregation, which evolved into organizations that fought for racial equality while fostering a culture of resistance (Hounmenou, 2012).

Of course, during the Great Migration, the Black Women’s Club Movement was critical to the resettlement of Black people fleeing Jim Crow in the South and bringing attention to the issue of lynching (Terrell, 2005). In 1896, the Black Women’s Club Movement joined together to form the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) under the leadership of Mary Church Terrell. The NACW’s motto was “Lifting as we Climb.” Its founders include Harriet Tubman, Frances E. W. Harper, Josephine St. Pierre-Ruffin, Margaret Murray Washington, Frances



Willard, Ida B. Wells, and Margaret Murray-Washington, Mrs. Booker T. Washington, to name a few. In addition to being co-founder and the first president of the NACW, Mary Church Terrell was a lifelong advocate for women's suffrage and Black civil rights.

Some other influential African American social workers were Dr. Dorothy Height, who championed civil rights, voting rights, school desegregation, employment opportunities, and public accommodation in the 1950s and 1960s (NASW Foundation, 2004). Whitney Young, Jr. was President of the NASW and focused on the crisis of health and welfare services (Okocha, 2007). Ruth McRoy is an educator, social worker, scholar, and researcher and continues to contribute to social work and social welfare through her publications (Suneby, 2019).

In our practice courses and practicum education programs, what if we were to teach students about the impact of intergenerational trauma (Hankerson et al., 2022), historical trauma (Briggs et al., 2023), collective trauma (Gardner & Kohomban, 2020), and racial trauma (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019)? What if students were given the opportunity to read about the existing racial disparities in diagnoses of psychotic disorders by mental health professionals (with African Americans being diagnosed three to four times as much as European-Americans; e.g., Bazargan-Hejazi et al., 2023; Schwartz & Blankenship, 2014; Williams & Rucker, 2000)? Additionally, it is important for all social workers to have access to the letters of apology to BIPOC people from the NASW (2021) and the American Psychiatric Association (2021a, 2021b) to understand the harm done by our profession. More significantly, what if we were to use some of the tenets of CRT—the centrality of race and racism in society, the commitment to social justice, the challenges of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy in society (Bell, 1992)? What if CRT tenets were applied to practice in child welfare, public assistance, and mental health treatment (Kolivoski et al., 2014), in addition to articles on counseling diverse populations (Sue & Sue, 2013) and biracial identity development (Hud-Aleem & Countryman, 2008)?

Similarly, in the Human Behavior and Social Environment track, what if we introduced students to CRT through the work of Quinn and Grumbach (2015), Crenshaw (2002, 2011), May (2015), Delgado and Stefancic (2012), and Constance-Huggins (2012)? What if we included articles on minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003), racial identity development theory (Helm, 2019; Hud-Aleem & Countryman, 2008; Tatum, 2000) and other models that emphasize cultural humility (Yeager & Bauer-Wu, 2013), as well as motivational interviewing (Hohman, 2015) and restorative justice (Berlinger, 2014)? In research, we should embrace the principles of participatory action research and social justice (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2019). These changes would begin an integrated and more balanced social work curriculum.

While I'm not an expert on social work with American Indian and Alaskan Native people, I suggest a preliminary review of the literature works of Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart on historical and intergenerational trauma (Brave Heart et al., 2011); Michael Yellow Bird's work on indigenous liberation strategies (Waziyatawin & Yellow Bird, 2012); and indigenous social work around the world (Gray et al., 2008, 2013). Also to include would be articles that ground indigenous holistic views in social work research (Hertel, 2017) and social work with rural populations (Daley, 2015), as well as Indigenous Social Work Practice and Social Work

Competence, approved by the Alberta College of Social Workers Council (2013). Other works on indigenous people and the social work profession include Baskin (2016), Greenwood et al. (2018), Kennedy-Kish (Bell) et al. (2017), Simpson (2011), and Weaver (1999). Notable publications are the *Journal of Indigenous Social Development* and the *Indigenous Social Work Journal*.

Like the previous two groups, there is plenty of content that could be included from Latinx scholars—for example, works on Latino adolescents and youth (Bosma et al., 2017; Isasi et al., 2016; Ramirez et al., 2017), literature on criminal justice (Valera & Boyas, 2019; Valera et al., 2014), research on race and racism (Canizales & Vallejo, 2021; Cuevas et al., 2016; López et al., 2018; and Ortiz & Telles, 2012), cultural responsiveness (Hilton & Child, 2014; Hodge et al., 2013; Lipka, 2014; McGovern et al., 2020), healthcare access (Pérez-Escamilla, 2010), and immigration (Becerra et al., 2016; Franco, 2019; Popescu & Libal, 2018).

### **White Culture**

When we discuss issues related to culture in the social work profession, we often focus on the cultures of people of color. We don't usually name or characterize white culture (Sue, 2001). Yet, we know that American culture is white people's culture, and to a great extent American culture is Eurocentric. White culture is the dominant cultural framework because it defines America's norms, values, expectations, communication patterns, politics, the economy, and social practices across institutions and organizations (Sue, 2001). Although white superiority is not based in reality, the perception of superiority is pervasive in all aspects of American society; consequently, white culture defines what is considered normal and it sets the standards for judging values. Therefore, white culture is powerful because it is ever-present. At the same time, it is both invisible and the "status quo." Because of its subtle yet powerful presence, it promotes white privilege and internalized superiority among white-presenting Americans. At the same time, BIPOC's culture is minimized, disenfranchised, and marginalized, and by default influenced towards internalized inferiority.

The call to decolonize the curriculum systemwide will make some people in the dominant culture uncomfortable and defensive, a phenomenon otherwise known as "white fragility," because internalized superiority has conditioned many Americans in the dominant culture to believe that the Eurocentric perspective of education is normal, empirically sound, and therefore legitimate. Internalized racial superiority is unseen yet impactful (Potapchuk, 2012). It is a socialization process that teaches white people from one generation to the other to believe, accept, and live superior societal definitions of self—to the point where white culture is the universal standard and the norm. At the same time, it creates the standard for judging other cultures as inferior and promotes white supremacy (Potapchuk, 2012). Some characteristics of the white culture prioritize individuals instead of groups which means competitiveness is highly valued and there is less incentive to work as a team. White culture values objectivity and the belief that objectivity exists. It believes that emotions are destructive and irrational. It requires that people "think linear" while invalidating other ways of thinking (Gulati-Partee & Potapchuk, 2014). Another characteristic of the white culture is paternalism, which means decision-making is made by those in power (Gulati-Partee & Potapchuk, 2014). It should be noted that as people

of color living in America, many BIPOC people have adapted aspects of white culture in order to survive and thrive. White internalized superiority plays out in various ways, including perfectionism, cultural appropriation, meritocracy, sense of urgency, fear of open conflict, value of the written word, color blindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2015), entitlement, white savior complex (Hughey, 2011), and white fragility (DiAngelo, 2018). In order to decolonize the curriculum, it is just as essential to examine, shine light on, and explicitly scrutinize white culture and privilege and its manifestations in the social work profession and curriculum.

### **The Call to Decolonize the Curriculum**

A call for decolonizing the social work field means reimagining the social work curriculum from the beginning to present day. It means making social work education more inclusive and making room for non-European people and their contributions. It means challenging white dominant culture and calling it out. It means shifting the power paradigm to include those appointed to leadership roles in institutions like higher education, influencing which faculty gets hired, and tenured, in addition to radically changing the formal curriculum. It means providing a balanced perspective, where social work institutions, faculty, and field instructors must develop their knowledge of antiracism, focusing on anti-Black racism. Including terms like antiracism, diversity, equity, and inclusion in the CSWE competencies is not enough. Antiracism work dilutes the impact of racism directed at people with black skin. The social work curricula must be intentional about anti-Black racism, rooted in chattel slavery and European colonialism globally. The focus on anti-Black racism is based on the premise that all oppressions are rooted in a global legacy of white supremacy and that white supremacy has historically relied on the preservation of anti-Blackness (Cole, 2019).

Further, it is important to help students learn how structural racism manifests itself in today's racialized policies: for example, models like solitary confinement in criminal justice (Brinkley-Rubinstein et al., 2019); policies like redlining, contract sales, subprime loans, and de facto segregation in housing (Rothstein, 2017); and policies that contribute to poorly resourced urban schools, the disproportionate disciplining of Black preschool children, high suspension rates of Black children, low representation of gifted programs for children of color, and zero-tolerance policies, all of which contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline in education (Nittle, 2021). Moreover, an understanding of the impact of structural racism on child welfare policies and practices is critical to explaining and addressing the overrepresentation and poorer outcomes of Black children. The child welfare system will impact 53 percent of Black children in their lifetime (Samuels, 2020). When Black children interact with the child welfare system, they are more likely to be removed from their parents and caretakers and they have lower rates of in-home care and reunification; additionally, policies such as the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 have contributed to Black parents having significantly higher rates of their parental rights terminated (Simmons-Horton, 2020). Finally, the effects of institutional racism can be seen in the healthcare industry as well, with Black and Brown people continuing to have poorer outcomes, particularly in chronic diseases such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes, high blood pressure, and cancer (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017; National Center for Health Statistics, 2019). Additionally, the Black infant mortality is 2.3 times higher than the rate for white babies (Kochanek et al., 2017) and pregnancy-related death for

Black women is four times greater than for white women (Admon et al., 2018; Mujahid et al., 2020). And, finally, in policing, there is the modern-day version of lynching of Black people (D. Brown, 2020), which relies on the use of qualified immunity to protect law enforcement officers from individual liability when they kill (Schott, 2012).

Decolonizing the curriculum means countering the dehumanization of marginalized groups, particularly people of the African diaspora or people with black skin (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). It means identifying structural racism and its impact personally, institutionally, systemically, and culturally. It means reframing American history—to begin with, the colonization of the American Indian and Alaskan Native people, the enslavement of Africans by Europeans, and the impact of internalized racial superiority/inferiority. It means explicitly addressing the impact of white supremacy throughout the history of this country by addressing the structural advantages that white people have over people of color in systems (i.e., education, employment, housing, health care, income, wealth, and politics). It also means explicitly teaching about the disadvantages of people of color and the disproportionate representation of people of color in systems as described above.

Decolonizing the curriculum means that organizations should embark on a culture of appreciation where people's work and efforts are valued, where mistakes are not responded to in a punitive manner but as opportunities for learning. There should be a balance between quality and quantity, as well as an acceptance for many ways of knowing. Organizations should be more inclusive of the people who are impacted by the decisions made by leaders in these organizations. Instead of acting with a sense of urgency, people should be encouraged to conduct deeper analysis, allow for creativity, and be mindful that the best decisions are not necessarily made under extreme pressure. Power-sharing should be optimal, and raising challenging issues and engaging in problem-solving activities should be welcomed instead of avoiding conflict (Mayer, 2004). Most of all, discomfort is critical to growth and learning (Warrell, 2013).

## **Conclusion**

American racism has a long history that continues to flourish and thrive, fueled by individuals, collectives, institutions, and systems. According to Roberts and Rizzo (2021), the eradication of racism requires us to move from reactive antiracism (challenging racism when it appears) to proactive antiracism (challenging racism *before* it appears), which requires us to get comfortable with being uncomfortable. I'm calling on social work programs, faculty, field instructors, administrators, NASW, and CSWE to be courageous, bold, and explicit—to move from rhetoric to action. It is time for us to engage in collaborative projects supported by qualitative and quantitative research that explores people, communities, and social phenomena of the unheard, unseen, devalued and those left behind—in non-intrusive, respectful, and inclusive ways. I'm also calling all social work educators and field instructors to remove the veil of color blindness and come into the light, even though it is uncomfortable.

## References

- Admon, L. K., Winkelman, T. N. A., Zivin, K., Terplan, M., Mhyre, J. M., & Dalton, V. K. (2018). Racial and ethnic disparities in the incidence of severe maternal morbidity in the United States, 2012-2015. *Obstetric Gynecology*, *132*(5), 1158–1166. <https://doi.org/10.1097/aog.0000000000002937>
- Alberta College of Social Workers Council. (2013, April). *Indigenous Social Work Practice and Social Work Competence: Declaration of Guiding Responsibilities for Indigenous Social Work Practice*. <https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/0e82c931-59a3-45af-8887-2b7c1f25af44/downloads/Declaratiop%20of%20Guiding%20Responsibilities%20for%20In.pdf>
- American Psychiatric Association. (2021a, January). *APA's apology to Black Indigenous and People of Color for its support of structural racism in psychiatry*. <https://www.psychiatry.org/newsroom/apa-apology-for-its-support-of-structural-racism-in-psychiatry>
- American Psychiatric Association. (2021b, January). *Historical addendum to APA's apology to Black, Indigenous and People of Color for its support of structural racism in psychiatry*. <https://www.psychiatry.org/newsroom/historical-addendum-to-apa-apology>
- Bazargan-Hejazi, S., Shirazi, A., Hampton, D., Pan, D., Askharinam, D., Magda, S., Ebrahim, G., & Shervington, D. (2023). Examining racial disparity in psychotic disorders related ambulatory care visits: An observational study using national ambulatory medical care survey 2010–2015. *BMC Psychiatry*, *23*(601). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-023-05095-y>
- Baskin, C. (2016). *Strong helpers' teachings: The value of Indigenous knowledges in the helping professions* (2nd ed.). Canadian Scholars' Press.
- Becerra, D., Wagaman, M. A., Androff, D., Messing, J., & Castillo, J. (2016). Policing immigrants: Fear of deportations and perceptions of law enforcement and criminal justice. *Journal of Social Work*, *17*(6), 715–731. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017316651995>
- Bell, D. (1992). *Faces at the bottom of the well: The permanence of racism*. Basic Books.
- Berlinger, E. N. (2014). *Youth incarceration: Restorative justice and social work practice*. [Master's thesis, Smith College]. <https://scholarworks.smith.edu/theses/758>
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2015). More than prejudice: Restatement, reflections, and new directions in critical race theory. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, *1*(1), 73–87. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2332649214557042>

Bosma, L. M., Orozco, L., & Barriga, C. C. (2017). Promoting resilience during adolescence: Voices of Latino youth and parents. *Youth & Society*, 51(6), 735–755.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X17708961>

Brave Heart, M. Y., Chase, J., Elkins, J., & Altschul, D. B. (2011). Historical trauma among Indigenous Peoples of the Americas: Concepts, research, and clinical considerations. *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*, 43(4), 282–290. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02791072.2011.628913>

Briggs, E. C., Brownlow, B. N., Hargrove, S., Dinizulu, S. M., Tunno, A. M., & Woods-Jaeger, B. (2023). Historical and racial trauma: Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and Black Americans. In S. G. Portwood, M. J. Lawler, & M. C. Roberts (Eds.), *Handbook of Adverse Childhood Experiences* (pp. 153–165). Springer, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-32597-7\\_11](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-32597-7_11)

Brinkley-Rubinstein, L., Sivaraman, J., Rosen, D. L., Cloud, D. H., Junker, G., Proescholdbell, S., Shanahan, M. E., & Ranapurwala, S. I. (2019). Association of restrictive housing during incarceration with mortality after release. *JAMA Network Open*, 2(10), e1912516.

<https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2019.12516>

Brown, D. (2020, June). ‘It was a modern-day lynching’: Violent deaths reflect a brutal American legacy. History & Culture – Race in America. *National Geographic*.

Brown, V. (2020). *Tacky’s Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War*. Harvard University Press.

Burtenshaw, R. (2019). Grenada’s revolution should never be forgotten. *Jacobin Magazine*.

<https://jacobin.com/2019/09/grenada-revolution-maurice-bishop-reagan>

Canizales, S. L., & Vallejo, J. A. (2021). Latinos & racism in the Trump era. *Daedalus*, 150(2), 150–164. [https://doi.org/10.1162/daed\\_a\\_01852](https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01852)

Carlton-LaNey, I. B. (2001). Birdie Henrietta Haynes: A pioneer settlement house worker. In I. B. Carlton-LaNey (Ed.), *African American leadership: An empowerment tradition in social welfare history* (pp. 35–53). NASW Press.

Cohen, L. (2020, September 10). Police in the U.S. killed 164 Black people in the first months of 2020. These are their names. (Part II: May-August). *CBS News*.

<https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/black-people-killed-by-police-in-the-u-s-in-2020/>

Cole, N. L. (2019). The history of white supremacy. *ThoughtCo*.

<https://www.thoughtco.com/white-supremacy-definition-3026742>

Comas-Díaz, L., Hall, G. N., & Neville, H. A. (2019). Racial trauma: Theory, research, and healing: Introduction to the special issue. *American Psychologist*, 74(1), 1–5.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000442>

Constance-Huggins, M. (2012). Critical race theory in social work education: A framework for addressing racial disparities. *Critical Social Work*, 13(2), 1–16.

[https://journals.scholarsportal.info/pdf/15439372/v13i0002/nfp\\_crtiswe.xml](https://journals.scholarsportal.info/pdf/15439372/v13i0002/nfp_crtiswe.xml)

Crenshaw, K. W. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1229039>

Crenshaw, K. W. (2002). The first decade: Critical reflections, or “a foot in the closing door.” *UCLA Law Review*, 49(5), 1343–1373.

[https://scholarship.law.columbia.edu/faculty\\_scholarship/2955](https://scholarship.law.columbia.edu/faculty_scholarship/2955)

Crenshaw, K. W. (2011). Twenty years of critical race theory: Looking back to move forward. *Connecticut Law Review*, 43(5), 1253–1354.

[https://digitalcommons.lib.uconn.edu/law\\_review/117](https://digitalcommons.lib.uconn.edu/law_review/117)

Cuevas, A. G., Araujo-Dawson, B., & Williams, D. R. (2016). Race and skin color in Latino health: An analytic review. *American Journal of Public Health*, 106(12), 2131–2136.

<https://doi.org/10.2105%2FAJPH.2016.303452>

Daley, M. R. (2015). *Rural social work in the 21st century*. Oxford University Press.

Dechesnay, M. (1986). Jamaican family structure: The paradox of normalcy. *Family Process*, 25(2), 293–300. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1545-5300.1986.00293.x>

DeCuir-Gunby, J. T., Chapman, T. K., & Schultz, P. A. (2019). *Understanding critical race research methods and methodologies: Lessons from the field*. Routledge.

Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2012). *Critical race theory: An introduction*. New York University Press.

DiAngelo, R. (2018). *White fragility: Why it's so hard for white people to talk about racism*. Beacon Press.

Franco, D. (2019). This land is our land: Exploring the impact of U.S. immigration policies on social work practice. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10428232.2019.1583956>

Gardner, T. F., & Kohomban, J. D. (2020). The collective trauma of Black community in 2020. *Psychology Today*. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/psychological-trauma-coping-and-resilience/202012/the-collective-trauma-the-black-community-in>

Gray, M., Coates, J., & Yellow Bird, M. (Eds.). (2008). *Indigenous social work around the world: Towards culturally relevant education and practice*. Ashgate Publishing.

- Gray, M., Coates, J., Yellow Bird, M., & Hetherington, T. (2013). Conclusion: Continuing the decolonization agenda. In M. Gray, J. Coates, M. Yellow Bird, & T. Hetherington (Eds), *Decolonizing social work* (pp. 323–332). Ashgate Publishing.
- Greenwood, M., De Leeuw, S., Lindsay, N. M., & Reading, C. (2018). *Determinants of Indigenous Peoples' health: Beyond the social* (2nd ed.). Canadian Scholars' Press.
- Gulati-Partee, G., & Potapchuk, M. (2014). Paying attention to white culture and privilege: A missing link to advancing racial equity. *The Foundation Review*, 6(1), 25–38. <https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1189>
- Hankerson, S. H., Moise, N., Wilson, D., Waller, B. Y., Kimberly, T. A., Duarte, C., Lugo-Candelas, C., Weissman, M. M., Wainberg, M., Yehuda, R., & Shim, R. (2022). The intergenerational impact of structural racism and cumulative trauma on depression. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 179(6), 395–440. <https://ajp.psychiatryonline.org/doi/epdf/10.1176/appi.ajp.21101000>
- Hanna, J. H. (2022). *Archaeological background of Sauteurs Bay, Grenada (GREN-P-5): Settlement, burial, and disaster in the shadow of Leapers' Hill*. GNM Press.
- Helm, J. E. (2019). *Race is a nice thing to have: A guide to being a white person or understanding the white persons in your life* (3rd ed.). Cognella Academic Publishing.
- Hertel, A. L. (2017). Applying Indigenous knowledge to innovations in social work education. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 27(2), 175–177. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731516662529>
- Hill-Collins, P. (2009). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Unwin Hyman.
- Hilton, J. M., & Child, S. L. (2014). Spirituality and the successful aging of older Latinos: Counseling and values. *Wiley Online Library*, 59(1), 17–34. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-007X.2014.00039.x>
- Hodge, D. R., Wolosin, R. J., & Bonifas, R. P. (2013). Addressing older Latinos' spiritual needs in hospital settings: Identifying predictors of satisfaction. *Advances in Social Work*, 14(1), 65–81. <https://doi.org/10.18060/3743>
- Hohman, M. (2015). *Motivational interviewing in social work practice*. Guilford Publications.
- Hounmenou, C. (2012). Black settlement houses and oppositional consciousness. *Journal of Black Studies*, 43(6), 646–666. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934712441203>



Hud-Aleem, R., & Countryman, J. (2008). Biracial identity development and recommendations in therapy. *Psychiatry (Edgmont)*, 5(11), 37–44.

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/pmc2695719/>

Hughey, M. W. (2011). The white savior film and reviewers' reception. *Symbolic Interaction*, 33(3), 475–496. <https://doi.org/10.1525/si.2010.33.3.475>

Isasi, C. R., Parrinello, C. M., Ayala, G. X., Delamater, A. M., Perreira, K. M., Daviglius, M. L., Elder, J. P., Marchante, A. N., Bangdiwala, S. I., Van Horn, L., & Carnethon, M. R. (2016). Sex differences in cardiometabolic risk factors among Hispanic/Latino youth. *Journal of Pediatrics*, 176, 121–127. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpeds.2016.05.037>

Jacobs, C. (2015). Grenada, 1949–1979: Precursor to revolution. In W. C. Grenade, (Ed.), *The Grenada Revolution: Reflections and lessons* (pp. 13–36). University Press of Mississippi.

James, C. L. R. (1989). *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint Louverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. Vintage Books.

Kennedy-Kish (Bell), B. R., Sinclair, B., Carniol, B., & Baines, D. (2017). *Case critical: Social services and social justice in Canada* (7th ed.). Between the Lines.

Kochanek, K. D., Murphy, S. L., Xu, J., & Arias, E. (2017). *Mortality in the United States, 2016. NCHS Data Brief. No. 293*. National Center for Health Statistics.

<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db293.pdf>

Kolivoski, K. M., Weaver, A., & Constance-Huggins, M. (2014). Critical race theory: Opportunities for application in social work practice and policy. *Families in Society*, 95(4), 269–276. <https://doi.org/10.1606/1044-3894.2014.95.36>

Lipka, M. (2014, May 15). *Latinos in the U.S. have a strong belief in the spirit world*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2014/05/15/latinos-in-the-u-s-have-a-strong-belief-in-the-spirit-world/>

López, N., Erwin, C., Binder, M., & Chavez, M. J. (2018). Making the invisible visible: Advancing quantitative methods in higher education using critical race theory and intersectionality. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 21(2), 180–207.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2017.1375185>

May, V. M. (2015). *Pursuing intersectionality, Unsettling dominant imaginaries* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203141991>

Mayer, B. S. (2004). *Beyond neutrality: Confronting the crisis in conflict resolution*. Jossey-Bass.

- McGovern, G., Raffaelli, M., Moreno-Garcia, C., & Larson, R. (2020). Leaders' cultural responsiveness in rural program serving Latinx youth. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 35(3), 368–394. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558419873893>
- Meyer, I. H. (2003). Prejudice, social stress, and mental health in lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations: Conceptual issues and research evidence. *Psychological Bulletin*, 129(5), 674–697. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.129.5.674>
- Mujahid, M. S., Peiyi, K., Leonard, S. A., Hailu, E. M., Wall-Wieler, E., Abrams, B., Main, E., Profit, J., & Carmichael, S. (2020). Birth hospital and racial and ethnic differences in severe maternal morbidity in the state of California. *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology*, 224(2), 219.E1–219.E15. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajog.2020.08.017>
- National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2017). The state of health disparities in the United States. In *Communities in Action: Pathways to Health Equity* (pp. 58–98). The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/24624>
- The National Archives. (2018). *Bussa's Rebellion: How and why did the enslaved Africans of Barbados rebel in 1816?* <https://cdn.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/education/bussa.pdf>
- National Association of Social Workers. (2017). *Code of ethics*. <https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English>
- National Association of Social Workers. (2021, June 17). *NASW apologizes for racist practices in American social work*. <https://www.socialworkers.org/News/News-Releases/ID/2331/NASW-apologizes-for-racist-practices-in-American-social-work>
- National Association of Social Workers Foundation. (2004). *Dorothy Irene Height (1912-2010) – Social worker and civil rights activist*. Social Welfare History Project. <http://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/social-work/height-dorothy-irene/>
- National Center for Health Statistics. (2019). *Health, United States, 2018 [Internet]*. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31944640/>
- The New York Public Library. (1999). *The New York Public Library African American desk reference*. Trade Paper Press.
- Nittle, N. K. (2021, February). How racism affects children of color in public schools. *ThoughtCo*. <https://www.thoughtco.com/how-racism-affects-public-school-minorities-4025361>
- Okocha, V. (2007, March 19). Whitney M. Young Jr. (1921-1971). *BlackPast*. <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/young-jr-whitney-m-1921-1971/>
- Ortiz, V., & Telles, E. (2012). Racial identity and racial treatment of Mexican Americans. *Race and social problems*, 4(1). <https://doi.org/10.1007%2Fs12552-012-9064-8>

The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond. (n.d.) *Undoing Racism*® Community Organizing Workshop. <https://pisab.org/undoing-racism-community-organizing-workshop/>

Pérez-Escamilla, R. (2010). Health care access among Latinos: Implications for social and health care reforms. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 9(1), 43–60.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1538192709349917>

Pinderhughes, E. (1989). *Understanding race, ethnicity and power: The key to efficacy in clinical practice*. Free Press.

Popescu, M., & Libal, K. (2018). Social work with migrants and refugees: Challenges, best practices, and future directions. *Advances in Social Work*, 18(3), i-x.  
<https://doi.org/10.18060/22600>

Potapchuk, M. (2012). *White culture worksheet: Transforming white privilege: A 21<sup>st</sup> century leadership capacity*. Center for Assessment and Policy Development, MP Associates, World Trust Education Services.  
<https://www.seattle.gov/documents/Departments/RSJI/GRE/whiteculturehandout.pdf>

Quinn, C. R., & Grumbach, G. (2015). Critical race theory and the limits of relational theory in social work with women. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, 24(3), 202–218. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15313204.2015.1062673>

Ramirez, A. G., Gallion, K. J., Aguilar, R., & Dembeck, E. S. (2017). *Mental health and Latino kids: A research review*. Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Rensink, B. (2011). *Genocide of Native Americans: Historical facts and historiographic debates* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Nebraska-Lincoln].  
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/historydiss/34/>

Roberts, S. O., & Rizzo, M. T. (2021). The psychology of American racism. *American Psychologist*, 76(3), 475–487. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000642>

Rothstein, R. (2017). *The color of law: A forgotten history of how our government segregated America*. Liveright Publishing.

Samuels, B. (2020). *Addressing systemic racism in our child welfare system*. The Imprint Youth and Family News.

Schott, R. G. (2012, September 1). Qualified immunity: How it protects law enforcement officers. *The Law Enforcement Bulletin*, United States Department of Justice.  
<https://leb.fbi.gov/articles/legal-digest/legal-digest-qualified-immunity-how-it-protects-law-enforcement-officers>

Schwartz, R. C., & Blankenship, D. M. (2014). Racial disparities in psychotic disorder diagnosis: A review of empirical literature. *World Justice Psychiatry*, 4(4), 133–140. <https://doi.org/10.5498%2Fwjps.v4.i4.133>

Seligman, M. E. P., & Peterson, C. (2001). Learned helplessness. *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 8583–8586. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B0-08-043076-7/00378-8>

Shulman, L. (2017). Addressing internalized biases and stereotypes of the group leader: A life-long professional task. *Social Work with Groups*, 40(1–2), 10–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01609513.2015.1068103>

Simmons-Horton, S. Y. (2020, July 15). Ending anti-Black racism in child welfare and juvenile justice systems. *The University of Texas at San Antonio Today*. <https://www.utsa.edu/today/2020/07/story/ending-anti-black-racism.html>

Simpson, L. (2011). *Dancing on our turtle's back: Stories of Nishnaabeg re-creation, resurgence and a new emergence*. Arbeiter Ring.

Steele, B. A. (2003). *Grenada: A history of its people*. Macmillan.

Sue, D. W. (2001). Multidimensional facets of cultural competence. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 29, 790–821. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000001296002>

Sue, D. W., & Sue, D. (2013). *Counseling the culturally diverse: Theory & practice* (6th ed.). John Wiley.

Suneby, E. (2019, April 22). Ruth G. McRoy named Professor Emerita. *Boston College School of Social Work News*. <https://www.bc.edu/bc-web/schools/ssw/about/bcssw-news/2019/ruth-mcroys-named-prof-emerita.html>

Tatum, B. D. (2000). The complexity of identity: “Who am I?” In M. Adams, W. J. Blumenfeld, H. W. Hackman, X. Zuniga, & M. L. Peters (Eds.). *Readings for diversity and social justice: An anthology on racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, heterosexism, classism and ableism* (pp. 9–14). Routledge.

Terrell, M. C. (2005). *A colored woman in a white world*. Humanity Books.

Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2012). Decolonization is not a metaphor. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1(1), 1–40. <https://clas.osu.edu/sites/clas.osu.edu/files/Tuck%20and%20Yang%202012%20Decolonization%20is%20not%20a%20metaphor.pdf>

Valera, P., & Boyas, J. F. (2019). Perceived social ties and mental health among formerly incarcerated men in New York City. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 63(10), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306624X19832239>

Valera, P., Cook, S., Macklin, R., & Chang, Y. (2014). Conducting health disparities research with criminal justice populations: Examining research, ethics, and participation. *Ethics Behavior*, 24(2), 164–174. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10508422.2013.826581>

Warrell, M. (2013, April 22). Why getting comfortable with discomfort is crucial to success. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/margiewarrell/2013/04/22/is-comfort-holding-you-back/?sh=2069ffa174d4>

Waziyatawin & Yellow Bird, M. (Eds.). (2012). *For indigenous minds only: A decolonization handbook*. School of Advance Research Press.

Weaver, H. N. (1999). Indigenous people and the social work profession: Defining culturally competent services. *Social Work*, 44(3), 217–225. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/44.3.217>

Wilkerson, I. (2020). *Caste: The origins of our discontents*. Random House.

Williams, D. R., & Rucker, T. D. (2000). Understanding and addressing racial disparities in health care. *Health Care Financing Review*, 21(4), 75–90. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/11481746>

Yeager, K. A., & Bauer-Wu, S. (2013). Cultural humility: Essential foundation for clinical researchers. *Applied Nursing Research: ANR*, 26(4), 251–256. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apnr.2013.06.008>

Zoellner, T. (2020). *Sam Sharpe and the revolt that ended British slavery*. Literary Hub. <https://lithub.com/sam-sharpe-and-the-revolt-that-ended-british-slavery/>

**About the Author:** Christiana Best-Giacomini, PhD, LMSW is Associate Professor, Department of Social Work and Equitable Community Practice, University of Saint Joseph, West Hartford, CT ([cbest@usj.edu](mailto:cbest@usj.edu)).

# Who Positioned Social Work as the Noble Alternative to Policing?

Funke Oba and Samantha Zerafa

**Abstract:** Events of 2020 further illuminated policing’s history of oppression, white supremacy, ableism, sanism, and misogyny (Mohapatra et al., 2020). In response, calls to defund the police and abolish the carceral system that enables state-sanctioned violence became louder, and social workers were elevated as the noble alternative to police (Wilson & Wilson, 2020). This paper examines the positioning of social work as innocent of the surveillance, scrutiny, and criminalization of racialized populations associated with policing. Critically reviewing social work’s history with relevant vignettes from the classroom, research, as well as practicum and community settings, we lay bare the profession’s checkered history of complicity with racial subjugation. We deconstruct claims of benevolence, good intentions, and ignorance usually held up in defense of ills perpetrated by social workers and conclude that the collective amnesia created by whitewashing social work’s history forestalls accountability and transformative practice.

**Keywords:** policing, social work, racial oppression, accountability, transformative practice

## Introduction

In 2020, calls to defund the police and abolish the carceral system that enables state-sanctioned violence became louder in response to police brutality against Black people. Illuminating policing’s history of oppression, white supremacy, ableism, sanism, and misogyny (Mohapatra et al., 2020), social workers were elevated as the noble profession to address mental health (Wilson & Wilson, 2020). The collective amnesia that claims it is the anti-oppressive epitome of all helping professions allows the discipline to evade accountability for whitewashing its history as an agent of the colonial state with similar foundations to the police and the prison industrial complex. Thus, social work continues to resist countervailing views emanating from Black and other racialized populations.

This narrative reflection paper posits that social work in its current form is no alternative to policing and the carceral system, critically narrating the profession’s historical roots and contemporary manifestations of racism, to interrogate social work’s professed anti-oppressive focus with relevant vignettes from the classroom, practicum, research, and the community. Social work has inner work to do around the ways in which the profession upholds white supremacy and its corollary—anti-Blackness—by not dismantling systems and structures of racial domination. White supremacy is predicated on the inherent superiority of white people in mind, body, and spirit (Saad, 2020). It is legitimized through processes of racialization that mark non-white bodies as uncivilised, deficient, and needing regulation (Tuhiwai Smith, 2007) establishing itself as normal, denying humanity to Black and others deemed non-white (Sharpe, 2016). Whiteness is not colour but “a structurally advantaged position ... (privileged) standpoint from which White people view themselves, others, and society” (Bilge, 2013, p. 412). White supremacy makes whiteness the standard to which all (racial) “others” aspire but cannot be

(Delgado, 1995; Taylor et al., 2009; Yee, 2005). Whiteness and white supremacy portend overt racism; insidious racism (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001); and racist ideologies, systems, policies, and institutions—the logic that underlies them silences dissent (Yosso et al., 2010), facilitating social work’s positioning as innocent and guileless.

### **Social Work’s Roots in Canada: Colonialism and Racial Violence**

Social work in Canada has been both an active and passive supporter and facilitator of colonialism and racialization in Canada and the world. The profession has its foundation in Canada at a time when imperialist and colonialist ideas were the norm (Johnstone, 2016; Johnstone & Lee, 2020) and much of Canadian social work and welfare systems relied heavily on Anglo-Saxon fundamentalism. Discourses in social work centered around civilization, morality, and humanity suggest that these are things possessed only by those within the bounds of whiteness, especially British, high-class whiteness (O’Connell, 2009). Canadian social work’s roots lie in the charity organization societies (COS) and settlement house (SH) movements originating in Europe, predicated on surveillance, blaming, shaming, and notions of deserving and undeserving poor.

The COS model of “helping” emphasized support for the disadvantaged but offered the absolute minimum support necessary and only when all other options were exhausted (Skinner, 2015). COS worked from a framework of “scientific philanthropy” (Haynes & White, 1999, p. 385) which promoted science-based evaluation, education, and resolution for social problems, such as poverty. A practice that resulted from this view, which characterized the COS movement at the time, was *friendly visiting*—an in-person experience with families and communities that showed those “in need” that they were not alone (Haynes & White, 1999). Despite the stated purpose, the COS movement became philanthropic condescension, as workers disdained the “disadvantaged” through standards imbued with upper-middle class white norms, but which used the shroud of benevolent helping to mask racism (Haynes & White, 1999; Wenocur & Reisch, 1989). The friendly visiting practice facilitated surveillance and control, re-inscribing white privilege through dutiful moral authority to “help” the inferior “other.”

The SH approach to “helping” employed more structural approaches to community issues by living in the communities they served (Haynes & White, 1999). They positioned themselves as unlike the COS movement and its practice of friendly visiting, asserting that their approach was more effective in meeting the people’s needs (Becker, 1964). SH workers believed that they “[knew] what the poor were thinking” (Haynes & White, 1999, p. 386) and would therefore be better equipped to solve social problems with their “insider” knowledge. However, the SH movement fostered increased surveillance and control over the host community, foisting themselves as the experts even though, as Haynes and White (1999) note, they never fully integrated into the community or lived as community members did. They perpetuated the same norms as the COS movement as their interpretations of the community produced flawed understandings steeped in whiteness, ignoring the community’s definitions of the issues (Lundy, 2004). The SH workers’ perspectives elevated as truth portrayed a static community already known to the experts, rather than a dynamic, self-determining, creative, knowledge-producing community.

COS and SH movements as progenitors of social work shared a key focus of furthering the settler colonial project disguised as nation-building (Lee & Ferrer, 2014), protecting white sensibilities through essentializing reductionist views of “the other”—failing to challenge the fundamental systems they purported to reform, but rather fitting “others” into oppressive systems (Johnstone & Lee, 2020; Lundy, 2004). What is obscured in the literature on social work history is the role of race and racism in the profession’s policies and practices (Este, 2004; Yee & Dumbrill, 2003). Social work actively participates in promoting what Lee and Ferrer (2014) and Este (2004) call the *colour lines*, which separate those who fit into the normative Canadian body politic—white, middle, and upper class, cis and heterosexual, able-bodied, etc.—from those who do not. The resulting push for assimilation of those deigned “other” in the profession’s history (Johnstone & Lee, 2020) is social work’s active participation in Canada’s state-sanctioned targeting, control, and systemic marginalization of Black bodies positioned not just as non-white but as polar opposite of everything pristine and white.

As women dominated the emerging noble profession, it bestowed upon them the prestige that they hitherto lacked—and social workers began to be established as protectors of Canada’s (racial) purity (Johnstone, 2018). This process of settler feminism encompasses how white Canadian women (concentrated in social work to the present day) were integral to the management of those on the “wrong side” of the colour line, maintaining and enforcing racial hierarchies. Settler feminism was rife in social work as white women became deeply enmeshed in self-righteously solving the “Indian problem” (Lee & Ferrer, 2014, p. 8), “fixing” Black and Indigenous people considered “wretched and half civilized” (Woodsworth, 1909, p. 194), assimilating immigrants into the dominant Canadian identity (Johnstone & Lee, 2020), and being gatekeepers of resource allocation (Ahmed, 2000).

Social work’s participation in racializing and criminalizing builds on its authority to morally rate those seeking support, evaluating their productivity, moral character, and cleanliness (O’Connell, 2009, 2013). These distinctions continued alongside the extraction and monopolization of land by white settlers and the portrayal of Black and Indigenous people as inhuman, immoral, and in need of civilization (O’Connell, 2013). The profession was also plagued by a myth of scarcity, whereby finite resources can only be accessed by people deemed worthy (Brzuzny, 2002; O’Connell, 2013). This myth pitted poor white settlers against (racial) others, thereby actively recruiting them into colonial and racial conquests (O’Connell, 2013). Discourses of respectability and degeneracy in the profession, rooted in eugenics movements, position social workers as those who serve and protect (racial) purity and hygiene (Gibson, 2015; Lee & Ferrer, 2014). Social work, in its bid to achieve prestige as a profession, embraces Eurocentric positivistic fragmentation of communities, of heart and head, of worker and client, robbing them and those they serve of humanity.

Canada has established itself as peacekeeping, kind, and welcoming to all, regardless of their origins, and social work reflects that façade, subsuming Canada’s long history of colonial and racial violence under a collective erasure that Pon (2009) calls the ontology of forgetting. Ahistorical renditions of social work whitewash the history of colonial conquest, strengthening the associations between Blackness, savagery, and criminality, to maintain racial hierarchies



which guarantee white settlers land, citizenship benefits, and the rights to sanction others in sociopolitical, economic, and legal ways (Razack, 2002).

Social work is fundamentally an “arm of the state” (Johnstone & Lee, 2020, p. 78), like policing, but it has succeeded in weaving a cloak of exalted objectivity, portraying social workers (mostly, white women) as “responsible citizens, compassionate, caring, and committed to the values of diversity and multiculturalism” (Thobani, 2007, p. 4). They are given the benefit of the doubt and must answer neither for their active participation in white supremacist practices, nor their acquiescence. This positioning allowed social work to gain prestige and respectability while being custodians of the social order of whiteness. Black, Indigenous, and racialized community attempts to resist whiteness were labeled resistant, hostile, and non-compliant (Johnstone & Lee, 2020) because they defied notions of social work’s inherent goodness.

### **The Knee Upon the Neck: White Supremacy and Racism in Practice**

In this section, I (Oba, a Black woman) reflect on 14 years of directing a social work practicum program and teaching and conducting research in Canadian universities, both as a pre-tenured and tenured professor: an exhilarating and challenging journey captured in a few vignettes.

#### **Surprise Invalidation**

My practicum education role made me privy to challenges faced by Black MSW students seeking placement. For example, a student showed up for her placement interview and was met by a startled clinical director who, gasping in surprise, mumbled that he had not expected a Black student because she did not sound Black on the phone. After the interview, devastated and in tears, she met with me, saluting herself for staying composed but also berating herself for performing the smiling, grateful, subservient student. She questioned if she could ever be hired at that organization even if she completed her practicum there, considering the difficulties Black persons face even when, like herself, they were born and raised in Canada. She asked why he can take away her dream opportunity and how a director who interviews students and staff regularly was surprised at her Blackness, surmising that she would not have got an interview if he knew she was Black. She asked rhetorically, “If they heard an accent over the phone and never called me for an interview, would they admit it was the Black accent? What more must I do to be enough in this country?”

#### **Surprise Inspiration**

As a professor, students could not hide their surprise when they saw me walk into the classroom and head for the podium—they would whisper, even point, but the Black students lingered after class to express what seeing a Black professor meant to them. Some shared their scars and bruises from being in the academy, and inspired they wondered—“how did you get away from under the knee?” The theme of not being good enough re-echoed, amplified by tales of being streamed away from academic courses in high school, meandering through low-income jobs, high school remediation, diploma programs, to BSW and finally the master’s degree that had eluded them due to being misguided into taking non-academic courses. They spoke of realizing

later how guidance counsellors did them a disservice, while lamenting that the negative attitudes persist despite their tenacity and efforts to improve their lot.

### **Surprise Solidarity**

I became privy to burdens such as poor mental health, doubts about accessing services, and fear of marginalization in group work, or not being called on in class and being centered only in pathologizing discourses. Many incurred excessive student debts from years of meandering either due to the streaming they experienced or their deskilling as foreigntrained professionals. I found myself binding bruised hearts and souls who blamed themselves for financial, emotional, and health problems they faced due to racism. After George Floyd's death, a former student wrote me saying she cried bitterly, as the system had its knee on her neck for years and it took this murder for her to stop blaming herself and begin to breathe again. She said her children now have the vocabulary to openly acknowledge racism without fear which spares them the kind of trauma she faced. She expressed gratitude for the support she experienced from having a Black teacher and finding solidarity with indigenous peers to understand how colonialism dispossesses, and stifles, both racialized immigrant and the First Nations people.

Surprise of inspiration is thus fueled by the surprise of invalidation. People who are invalidated come to accept their erasure. It dawned on me that Black instructors are only considered exceptional because of their absence. Sadly, many have come to accept the abjection inherent in hegemonic discourses, viewing certain positions unattainable because society tells them so. Apart from the years and extra money they spend attaining their dreams, it is extra emotional labour to heal from the wound of the knee even if it gets off the neck. Recovering from invalidation and being inspired is a hard journey. The mainstream does not have to recover from the racial trauma of the knee. They are already always considered fit to attain.

### **Surprise Connections at the Knee**

The student in the first vignette feared she would not get the placement if she expressed her pain. Being labeled an angry Black woman could be grounds for further discrimination, depriving her of getting a foot in the door of the job she seeks at the end of the placement. Similarly, foreign-trained students faced impacts of factors such as gender, race, colonization, accent, and religion—they remain unnamed and unfronted. For example, a student said a professor gave back papers to other students but threw hers on the table, avoiding all contact in ways that others observed. Students also reported that professors ignore racism in the classroom, “being nice” but not knowing how to intervene when students rush to form groups with their white friends, whom they assume are the knowers, and avoiding Black peers deemed non-knowers, a belief professor appeared to share as they did not address it. I was aware of these issues as a mentor of the Students for Inclusion Diversity and Equity (SIDE) group and as graduate program director in Canadian universities. SIDE members self-organized to hold their school of social work accountable for addressing glaring oppression occurring under their noses. These roles galvanized my teaching about anti-blackness—the inhuman notion of human hierarchy that underlies oppressions and injustices against fellow humans. I teach with respect,

sensitivity, humour, and tenacity, but I ensure we jointly grapple with these tensions to become better social workers and humans.

### **Surprised by Knowledge**

Shock at Black knowledge is prevalent as white supremacy cannot fathom that Black people have anything to offer. It dismisses the sociocultural, professional, and intellectual assets of frontline social workers, instructors, or researchers. Today, I am involved in several prestigious grants, locally, nationally, and internationally, but it was not easy convincing anyone that Afrocentric theories had a place in research or that investigating Black youth perspectives of their experiences was a viable undertaking. I encountered cynicism about my research conceptualization and was told it could not be funded by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), Canada's highest humanities research funder.

In applying for my first SSHRC grant as principal investigator (PI), I applied successfully to the mentorship program at my former university. It matched emerging scholars (recent PhDs) with seasoned grantees, but no internal mentor was found for me. No one was studying Black youth, so I was on my own resisting pressures to change my topic to something that would resonate with funders. I was told it would be hard to convince reviewers to fund a study about Black youth when the "Indigenous problem" was the current priority. I found my own tribe of like-minded scholars and they took the risk with me to resist discourses that make Black and Indigenous people the problem, thus obscuring the "colonizers problem" which we sought to explore.

Furthermore, I had to explain why my proposal referred to "elders" when the study was not about Indigenous populations. I did some educating, explaining that Black communities have elders and that an approach I piloted in my doctoral study entails elders infusing Afrocentric teachings, proverbs and traditions into community participatory research. The thinking that we do racialized people a favour when we include their knowledge is flawed because diverse knowledges broaden our understanding of diverse human phenomena. This goes against current practices that places extra emotional/intellectual labour on those harmed in racial power play. Studying what is happening to Black youth at school was an untapped area as hardly anyone was asking about the knee on their necks. Behold, the study was funded by Canada's topmost humanities research funder, SSHRC, adjudicated by multidisciplinary reviewers belying any idea that social work is more emancipatory than other disciplines. SSHRC adjudicators adjudged it timely, relevant, and necessary to understand. Indeed, grant writing is in itself an opportunity to educate funders and interdisciplinary scholars though we have to master established grant writing protocols and then use them for subversive research by questioning received knowledge and asking the "so what" question. Grant writing was not the goal for me; my *raison d'être* continues to be why do I do what I do. Black people embrace double consciousness knowing that white people do not have to understand blackness, but we must honour lived experiences, not conflate performativity with inclusion and fundamentally understand the non-universality of Eurocentrism. Valuing plural epistemologies enhances research, transformative education, and reflexive praxis to the benefit to all.

## **Knees on Youth Necks: Undeniable and Unignorable**

To all Black youth with knees upon your necks, wriggling under the knee of unrequited longing for acceptance and belonging, discovering that social workers help keep the knee in place, I hear you, and this is what I heard.

When social workers come to the school  
Everyone whispers, who is going to foster care?  
They come and take away people's children,  
To strange homes, strange people, and strange ways  
People more powerful than your mother and your father  
Hydra-headed workers lurking in the shadows.  
Sighting them spells, gloom, and doom  
Reverberating back to our ancestors in the motherland.  
Shattered dreams of a better life, forever mired in shame.  
But social workers are supposed to help us, show that we can belong.  
Where were you when grief brought darkness at noon day?  
When news of yet another Black boy murdered rent the morning air  
When I dreaded another day in this place and space  
When they called us names, bullied, and punished us so hard.  
We wished the ground would open up, take us head long.  
Where were you to believe I was wronged, not in the wrong?  
When they treated me like charred, scary dirt?  
To tell me I am welcome and can belong.  
Tone down what?

My skin, name, accent, hair, food, or my parents  
Pray, what is left of me then?  
Still my parents make me go day after day,  
Education is the key, they say.  
We the children they prayed for,  
Gave thoughtful names amidst pomp and splendour.  
Names symbolizing dreams hopes and aspirations.  
Yes, my name is audacious and ambitious!  
It's my parents first gift to me, harbinger of destiny.  
Carrier of my family's hopes, beacon of my destiny.  
Tell social workers, don't ruin our families!  
Police, teachers have done their worst. Don't take from us our foundation.  
Rich or poor, they're our roots, their proverbs light our ways.  
Then you come and throw us into the abyss.  
Weaponizing social work's ability to control, discipline, and regulate.  
You may not incarcerate; but you might as well, because you snuff out our light.  
You kill viscerally without the guns.  
Social work and police uphold the same ideologies.  
Twin peas grown in the soil of white is best, it's all the same.  
Killing us softly with smiles or violently with guns.

### **Discussion: Surprise Social Work is Hardly the Alternative**

Although both social work and policing cause harm and are beholden to white supremacy (Kaba, 2021), social work benevolence is juxtaposed with the overt violence of policing, just as the popular rhyme says “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” The harm social work does is minimized relative to police brutality, and social work assumes the pedestal of nobility. The vignettes drawn from my (Oba’s) experience however demonstrate social work’s participation in discursive epistemic violence. Notions of solving the “Indian problem” (Blackstock, 2009, p. 29) are applied to all identities deemed inferior in culture, spirituality, language, education, and knowledge who must be fixed. To justify taking children from their homes, the government rationalized that Indigenous parents were unfit parents, therefore they were doing Indigenous children a “service” by removing them from their families (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC], 2015). This paternalism devastated communities, justifying abuse and deaths of children in residential schools (Blackstock, 2009; TRC, 2015). Today, Black parents are deemed unfit to parent, devaluing cultural practices and removing Black children disproportionately. Black youth today report social workers remain apathetic to them and work for the authorities rather than families (Oba, 2018).

Counternarratives can mitigate the unexamined dismissive nature of rhymes and ahistorical renditions that justify and perpetuate harm! Child welfare in Canada remains based on the same “white, middle-class normativity” (Pon et al., 2011, p. 401) the profession applied to further racial and colonial violence at its inception. It targets all others for surveillance and punishment (Gosine & Pon, 2011), manifesting in policy and practice that condones destruction of Black, Indigenous, and racialized families under the guise of “protecting” children, just like residential schools. The child welfare system purports to promote the best interests of Canada’s children, but Black, Indigenous, and racialized children are up against systems mired in norms of whiteness. “Race was a strong predictor of being reported, investigated, misdiagnosed, underserved, and placed in foster care” (Clarke, 2011, p. 277) among Afro-Caribbean families in Toronto, along with class (King et al., 2017), as race, capitalism, and classism are intimately connected (Gilmore, 2020). For Black children, who are overrepresented in child welfare, this means a higher likelihood of out-of-home placement, longer times in care, and lower chances of family reunification (Clarke, 2011).

Risk-based child welfare language disproportionately affects Black, Indigenous, and racialized communities (Featherstone et al., 2014). One recent example is the practice of birth alerts, where healthcare professionals were encouraged to bring families to the attention of child welfare authorities if they were deemed “at-risk” prior to the child even being born (Stueck, 2019). This practice disproportionately targeted Black, Indigenous, and racialized mothers.

White supremacy employs risk-obsessed discourses to discipline racialized families by regulating anything that is inconsistent with Euro-Western parenting approaches, in the absence of race-based analysis that interrogates racism, colonialism, poverty, and pathologizing discourses (Caldwell & Sinha, 2020; Pon et al., 2017). Child welfare, which employs a preponderance of social workers, perpetuates white supremacy by marking racialized families (Almeida et al., 2019; Chilisa, 2012; Giwa et al., 2020; Jeyasingham, 2012; Joseph et al., 2020;

Matias et al., 2019). Cull (2006) notes that the profession and its practices serve as “instrumental tools of assimilation and control” (p. 144). Social work, a tool of the colonial state, weaponizes white supremacy through “helping” practices that force service users to prove they “deserve” services, resources, and support (Maki, 2011). Comparing social welfare surveillance and Jeremy Bentham’s (1995) panopticon, social work maintains a white gaze on Black bodies, disciplining those who make missteps that deem them unworthy, being complicit in their early criminalization. For instance, in 2022, a school called police to remove a four-year-old Black boy from school in handcuffs (CTV News, 2022). Institutionalized state sanctioned racial violence remains an enduring threat to young Black lives (Oba, 2020).

Carceral social work is a “form of social work that relies on logics of social control, using coercive and punitive practices to manage BIPOC and poor communities” (Jacobs et al., 2021, p. 39). These practices and their underpinning assumptions maintain the profession as part of the colonial carceral state (Jacobs et al., 2021). From social work’s inception to its present, it has enforced racial and colonial violence in various forms in benevolent maleficence, making it insidious and worrisome. Black, Indigenous, and racialized communities are wary about trusting social workers because of this power-wielding profession’s benevolent guise.

### **Recommendations**

To begin to address these issues, we feel that there is no better place to start than the work of abolitionist scholars and activists across contexts that recognized the detrimental impacts of carceral logics. Defunding the police is a first step towards addressing institutionalized racism and state-sanctioned violence against Black youth. Culturally appreciative proactive strategies informed by Black-led research are needed to illuminate anti-Blackness across systems and professions. It is not just the police that have knees on the neck of the Black community. We live within societies where surveillance and punishment are extended outside the walls of carceral institutions (Palacios, 2016), of which social work is a key part. Beliefs that Black youth are criminal and delinquent, which are rooted in colonialism, contribute to differential treatment and criminalization of Black people across public institutions, including social work services/programs, hospitals, child welfare, and educational and mental health systems as well as academic or research settings. Racial inequity and disparities exacerbated by the global pandemic offer an opportunity to interrogate discriminatory practices that keep the knee on the neck of the “other” and to harness Black social and cultural capital for more meaningful and equitable helping.

While I (Oba) am a Black scholar whose journal entries inform the vignettes in this study, second author Zerafa is a recent MSW graduate whose graduate studies focused on whiteness and white supremacy. Black advocates and white allies may be labeled loud, non-collegial, and unpalatable, but we model the need for social workers to not ignore violence and harm. As co-authors we denounce the long history of racist atrocities, subterfuge wars, and Indigenous genocide in Canada (Chilisa, 2012), choosing to be no longer surprised at the racism in settler colonial Canada because bystanders only make the perpetrator’s knee imprint deeper on Black people. The new dawn sparked by George Floyd’s murder must go beyond Black cohort hires to intentionally presenting Black realities in policies, practices, and outcome measures. As a white

woman, I (Zerafa) recognize Black scholars may not be in a hurry to remove the coat of armour and hypervigilance required in a world waging war against Black people's humanity. I recommend that social work must decide on which side of the war it sits, rather than profiting from it with a shudder and a smile—otherwise we are helping to keep the knee of colonialism, imperialism, and benevolent maleficence on Black people's necks.

We are both determined to amplify what Black, Indigenous, and racialized communities have known for centuries. Further research that resists the silencing power of white supremacy is needed to integrate race-based data to inform needed policies, programs, and services that serve, rather than surveil and punish Black, Indigenous, and racialized people. COVID-19 and the Black Lives Matter Movement, videos, and social media shed light on Canada's culpability in white supremacy and anti-Black racism and invite white allies such as me (Zerafa) into enhanced solidarity. This can be challenging in academia, where structures at all levels are laden with white supremacy, including hiring, promotion, tenure, and research approval (Baffoe et al., 2014; Joseph et al., 2020). Nonetheless, Black researchers must feel secure to sustain research agendas on race issues. It is no passing fad but an enduring public health issue with grave impacts on the lives of Black, Indigenous, and racialized children, youth, families, and communities. Further, we will not study and celebrate "resilience" of those who survive the knee on their necks while ignoring the very knees that bruise them. In the first vignette, the student got access to an interview, but did not escape the heel of the accent police. At the interview, the heel emerged to crush their now visible blackness, marking them as unable to belong. The heel cannot continue to be downplayed as unconscious bias, because its "unconsciousness" harms and even kills others.

Cross-cultural collaborations like ours demonstrate the importance of surfacing repressed stories though we may not experience them directly. Exposure aids consciousness-raising. Social work education must shift away from layering on issues of race, racism, and white supremacy to courses, relegating them to electives only offered in specific schools or isolated workshops without concerted action to reflect, unlearn, and re-learn. Anti-Black racism courses are needed to shift social work from solely Euro-Western theoretical frameworks, methodologies, and outcomes measures that preclude epistemological diversity, marginalizing the knowledge, voice, and practices of those who do not fit narrow Eurocentric frames. Collaborations, group work, and Black-led research with identified allies recognized as such by the community can facilitate difficult conversations, giving fellow social workers the chance to demonstrate if they want to take the knee of humanity or keep the knee of oppression upon us.

We have feared the angry Black woman trope and the equation of Black masculinity with criminality for far too long to our own hurt and must now ask those horrified by seeing the knee, "What are you doing about it?" Doing nothing is not a choice. You cannot unsee what you have seen!

### **Conclusion**

Through vignettes, we, a Black professor and white research associate, reflect on social work's checkered racist history. These vignettes underscore the need for Black-led research on the

scholarship of teaching and learning in social work to ensure learning shapes praxis. The vignettes illustrate the importance of interrogating one's social subjectivities against the backdrop of justice and liberation in the classroom, the field, and larger society. Social work is not merely an academic discipline; it is a thinking, doing, profession. We must desist from the typical rush to innocence, surprise, or perfunctory statements about supporting equity, diversity, and inclusion or denouncing police brutality. These vignettes illuminate social work's accountability for harm unto others. It behooves those insulated from racial oppression to intentionally, reflexively interrogate their prejudices about differences. Eschewing the complacent belief that people are only punished for doing wrong, we begin to see the prevalence of racial oppression. Black-led research can equip future social workers to be global citizens ready to learn from knowledge holders and recognizing Afrocentric and other innovative research as salient and rigorous, embracing racial, cultural, and spiritual ways of knowing (Chilisa, 2012; Yee & Wagner, 2013).

Diverse lived experiences benefit the whole. At its core social work is complex; therefore simplistic, ahistorical, reductionist, or essentializing renditions of human phenomena are further metaphors of the knee. Injustice prevails in social work and academia, but the social work classroom must start dislodging the knee rather than being custodians of the social order. Adding anti-oppressive concepts to course syllabi and mission statements of schools of social work (Dominelli, 1994; Yee & Wagner, 2013) without naming whiteness and white supremacy merely helps people cope with oppression rather than dismantling its systemic and structural roots (Baines, 2017). Systems fraught with uncontested power and oppressive forces that are so "normal" they are taken for granted obfuscate "the other." The vignettes highlight nuanced experiences that racialized people navigate daily. This disrupts the notion that "the other" just needs to be resilient. Social work cannot be the alternative to policing (Yee & Wagner, 2013), or champion of "diversity," "inclusion," and "equity" (Ahmed, 2007) without addressing systematic subjugation that perpetuates racial and colonial structures of violence. It must model change in habitual practices and policies (Joseph et al., 2020). Whiteness allows organizations to make "empty mentions and discursive power-plays" (Zerafa, 2020, p. 42); they raise issues of oppression and use the language of critical theories without having to engage with them on a critical and meaningful level. Social work seeks to be progressive without disrupting hegemony (McLaughlin, 2005) or doing the hard work of democratizing, celebrating itself as progressive (Giroux, 2003) amidst neoliberal, neocolonial approaches wherein exchange of capital supersedes social justice in research funding and universities gain social currency by embracing anti-oppressive practice's "double comfort" and self-adulation that disavows the need to excavate, understand, and repair the harm state (Heron, 2005)

In conclusion, while the harm social work inflicts may not be caught on a webcam, the case note, eligibility/safety assessment, and child removal orders steeped in white supremacy and anti-Blackness can be weaponized. We argue that covert police brutality simply metamorphoses into social work's malevolent benevolence which is equally oppressive and unjust. Our narrative as a Black and white duo challenges artificial binaries, models balancing of power, and thoughtful reimagining of self/other dynamics, prioritizing our shared humanity. Together, we will not perpetuate, be silent about, or be surprised by anti-Blackness because we recognize white supremacy, universalism, and normalization discourses, and therefore amplify the Black



experience and the community's voice and insights into what must change to achieve equitable outcomes to the benefit of all people, thus repudiating the flawed white-black spectrum.

### References

- Ahmed, S. (2000). *Strange encounters: Embodied others in post-coloniality*. Routledge Publishing.
- Ahmed, S. (2007). 'You end up doing the document rather than doing the doing': Diversity, race equality and the politics of documentation. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30(4), 590–609. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870701356015>
- Almeida, R. V., Werkmeister Rozas, L. M., Cross-Denny, B., Lee, K. K., & Yamada, A. (2019). Coloniality and intersectionality in social work education and practice. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, 30(2), 148–164. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10428232.2019.1574195>
- Baffoe, M., Asimeng-Boahene, L., & Ogbuagu, B. C. (2014). Their way or no way: "Whiteness" as an agent for marginalizing and silencing minority voices in academic research and publication. *European Journal of Sustainable Development*, 3(1), 13–32. <https://doi.org/10.14207/ejsd.2014.v3n1p13>
- Baines, D. (2017). *Doing anti-oppressive practice: Social justice social work* (3rd ed.). Fernwood Publishing.
- Becker, D. G. (1964). Exit lady bountiful: The volunteer and the professional social worker. *Social Service Review*, 38(1), 57–72. <https://doi.org/10.1086/641537>
- Bell, D. A. (1992). *Faces at the bottom of the well: The permanence of racism*. Basic Books.
- Bentham, J. (1995). *The Panopticon Writings*. Verso.
- Bilge, S. (2013). Intersectionality undone: Saving intersectionality from feminist intersectionality studies. *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, 10(2), 405–424. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X13000283>
- Blackstock, C. (2009). The occasional evil of angels: Learning from the experiences of Aboriginal peoples and social work. *First Peoples Child & Family Review*, 4(1), 28–37. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069347ar>
- Brzuzny, S. (2002). Social welfare services: The resource scarcity myth. *Journal of Poverty*, 6(2), 121–124. [https://doi.org/10.1300/J134v06n02\\_07](https://doi.org/10.1300/J134v06n02_07)
- Caldwell, J., & Sinha, V. (2020). (Re) conceptualizing neglect: Considering the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in child welfare systems in Canada. *Child Indicators Research*, 13, 481–512. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-019-09676-w>

- Chilisa, B. (2012). *Indigenous research methodologies*. SAGE Publications.
- Clarke, J. (2011). The challenges of child welfare involvement for Afro-Caribbean families in Toronto. *Child and Youth Services Review, 33*(2), 274–283.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2010.09.010>
- CTV News. (2022, June 28). Family of Black 4-year-old removed from school by police sues Waterloo Catholic board. *CTV News Kitchener*. <https://kitchener.ctvnews.ca/family-of-black-4-year-old-removed-from-school-by-police-sues-waterloo-catholic-board-1.5967234>
- Cull, R. (2006). Aboriginal mothering under the state’s gaze. In D. M. Lavell-Harvard & J. Corbiere Lavell (Eds.), *“Until our hearts are on the ground”: Aboriginal mothering, oppression, resistance and rebirth* (pp. 141–156). Demeter Press.
- Delgado, R. (Ed.). (1995). *Critical race theory: The cutting edge*. Temple University Press.
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2001). *Critical race theory: An introduction*. New York University Press.
- Dominelli, L. (1994). *Anti-racist social work education* [Paper presentation]. 27th Congress of the International Association of Schools of Social Work (July 1994), Amsterdam, Netherlands.
- Este, D. (2004). The Black church as a social welfare institution: Union United Church and the development of Montreal’s Black community, 1907–1940. *Journal of Black Studies, 35*(1), 3–22. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4129288>
- Featherstone, B., Morris, K., & White, S. (2014). A marriage made in hell: Early intervention meets child protection. *British Journal of Social Work, 44*(7), 1735–1749.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bct052>
- Gibson, M. F. (2015). Intersecting deviance: Social work, difference and the legacy of eugenics. *The British Journal of Social Work, 45*(1), 313330. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bct131>
- Gilmore, R. W. (2020). *Geographies of racial capitalism: An Antipode Foundation film* [Video]. Youtube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2CS627aKrJI&ab\\_channel=antipodeonline](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2CS627aKrJI&ab_channel=antipodeonline)
- Giroux, H. A. (2003). Spectacles of race and pedagogies of denial: Anti-Black racist pedagogy under the reign of neoliberalism. *Communication Education, 52*(3/4), 191–211.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0363452032000156190>
- Giwa, S., Mullings, D. V., Adjei, P. B., & Karki, K. K. (2020). Racial erasure: The silence of social work on police racial profiling in Canada. *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work, 5*, 224–235. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41134-020-00136-y>

Gosine, K., & Pon, G. (2011). On the front lines: The voices and experiences of racialized child welfare workers in Toronto, Canada. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, 22(2), 135–159. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10428232.2011.599280>

Haynes, D. T., & White, B. W. (1999). Will the “real” social work please stand up? A call to stand for professional unity. *Social Work*, 44(4), 385–391. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23718663>

Heron, B. (2005). Self-reflection in critical social work practice: Subjectivity and the possibilities of resistance. *Reflective Practice*, 6(3), 341–351. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623940500220095>

Jacobs, L. A., Kim, M. E., Whitfield, D. L., Gartner, R. E., Panichelli, M., Kattari, S. K., Downey, M. M., McQueen, S. S., & Mountz, S. E. (2021). Defund the police: Moving towards an anti-carceral social work. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, 32(1), 37–62. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10428232.2020.1852865>

Jeyasingham, D. (2012). White noise: A critical evaluation of social work education's engagement with whiteness studies. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 42(4), 669–686. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcr110>

Johnstone, M. (2016). The pervasive presence of the discourse of white civility in early Canadian social work in immigration services (1900 – 30). *British Journal of Social Work*, 46(6), 1724–1740. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26363583>

Johnstone, M. (2018). Settler feminism, race making, and early social work in Canada. *Affilia: Journal of Women in Social Work*, 33(3), 331–345. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109918762518>

Johnstone, M., & Lee, E. (2020). Shaping Canadian citizens: A historical study of Canadian multiculturalism and social work during the period from 1900 to 1999. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 29(1), 71–82. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijsw.12379>

Joseph, A. J., Janes, J., Badwall, H., & Almeida, S. (2020). Preserving white comfort and safety: The politics of race erasure in academe. *Social Identities*, 26(2), 166–185. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2019.1671184>

Kaba, M. (2021). *We do this 'til we free us: Abolitionist organizing and transforming justice*. Haymarket Books.

King, B., Fallon, B., Boyd, R., Black, T., Antwi-Boasiako, K., & O'Connor, C. (2017). Factors associated with racial differences in child welfare investigative decision-making in Ontario, Canada. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 73, 89–105. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.09.027>

Lee, E. O. J., & Ferrer, I. (2014). Examining social work as a Canadian settler colonial project: Colonial continuities of circles of reform, civilization, and in/visibility. *Critical Journal of Anti-*

*Oppressive Social Inquiry*, 1, 1–20.

<https://caos.library.ryerson.ca/index.php/caos/article/view/96/100>

Lundy, C. (2004). *Social work and social justice: A structural approach to practice*. University of Toronto Press.

Maki, K. (2011). Neoliberal deviants and surveillance: Welfare recipients under the watchful eye of Ontario Works. *Surveillance & Society*, 9(1/2), 47–63.

<https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v9i1/2.4098>

Matias, C. E., Walker, D., & del Hierro, M. (2019). Tales from the ivory tower: Women of colour's resistance to whiteness in academia. *Taboo*, 18(1), 35–58.

<https://doi.org/10.31390/taboo.18.1.04>

McLaughlin, K. (2005). From ridicule to institutionalization: Anti-oppression, the state and social work. *Critical Social Policy*, 25(3), 283–305. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018305054072>

Mohapatra, M., Raven, L., Amuchie, N., Sultan, R., Agbebiyi, K., Hamid, S. T., Herskind, M., Purnell, D., Dru, E., & Kuo, R. (2020). *#8toAbolition: Abolitionist policy changes to demand from your city officials*. 8toAbolition.

[https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5edbf321b6026b073fef97d4/t/5ee0817c955eaa484011b8fe/1591771519433/8toAbolition\\_V2.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5edbf321b6026b073fef97d4/t/5ee0817c955eaa484011b8fe/1591771519433/8toAbolition_V2.pdf)

Oba, O. (2018). *It takes a village—schooling out of place: School experiences of Black African youth in Waterloo region* (Publication No. 5726040) [Doctoral Dissertation, Wilfrid Laurier University]. Wilfrid Laurier University Theses and Dissertations.

Oba, O. (2020). For a fairer education system, get the police out of schools. *The Conversation*.

<https://theconversation.com/for-a-fairer-education-system-get-the-police-out-of-schools-141552>

O'Connell, A. (2009). The pauper, slave, and Aboriginal subject: British parliamentary investigations and the promotion of civilized conduct (1830s). *Canadian Social Work Review*, 26(2), 171–193. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41669911>

O'Connell, A. (2013). The deserving and non-deserving races: Colonial intersections of social welfare history in Ontario. *Intersectionalities: A Global Journal of Social Work Analysis, Research, Polity, and Practice*, 2, 1–23.

<https://journals.library.mun.ca/ojs/index.php/IJ/article/view/371/616>

Palacios, L. (2016). Challenging convictions: Indigenous and Black race-radical feminists theorizing the carceral state and abolitionist praxis in the United States and Canada. *Meridians*, 15(1), 137–165. <https://doi.org/10.2979/meridians.15.1.08>

Pon, G. (2009). Cultural competency as new racism: An ontology of forgetting. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, 20(1), 59–71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10428230902871173>

Pon, G., Gosine, K., & Phillips, D. (2011). Immediate response: Addressing anti-Native and anti-Black racism in child welfare. *International Journal of Child, Youth, and Family Studies*, 2(3–4), 385–409. <https://doi.org/10.18357/ijcyfs23/420117763>

Pon, G., Phillips, D., Clarke, J., & Abdillahi, I. (2017). Who's protecting whom? Child welfare and policing Black families. In D. Baines (Ed.), *Doing anti-oppressive practice: Social justice social work* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., pp. 70–84). Fernwood Press.

Razack, S. H. (2002). When place becomes race. In S. H. Razack (Ed.), *Race, space and the law: Unmapping of a white settler society* (pp. 1–20). Between the Lines.

Saad, L. F. (2020). *Me and white supremacy: Combat racism, change the world, and become a good ancestor*. Sourcebooks.

Sharpe, C. E. (2016). *In the wake: On blackness and being*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1134g6v>

Skinner, A. (2015). An exploration of the work of the Charity Organization Society in Oxford, 1878–1880. *Midland History*, 40(1), 74–94. <https://doi.org/10.1179/0047729X15Z.00000000049>

Stueck, W. (2019, September 16). B.C. ends controversial birth alert system that affected Indigenous mothers disproportionately. *The Globe and Mail*. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/british-columbia/article-bc-ends-controversial-birth-alert-system-that-affected-indigenous/>

Taylor, E., Gillborn, D., & Ladson-Billings, G. (Eds.). (2009). *The foundations of critical race theory in education*. Routledge.

Thobani, S. (2007). *Exalted subjects: Studies in the making of race and nation in Canada*. University of Toronto Press. <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442685666>

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). *Honouring the truth, reconciling for the future: Summary of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*. Government of Canada. [http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Honouring\\_the\\_Truth\\_Reconciling\\_for\\_the\\_Future\\_July\\_23\\_2015.pdf](http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Honouring_the_Truth_Reconciling_for_the_Future_July_23_2015.pdf)

Tuhiwai Smith, L. (2007). Imperialism, history, writing, and theory. In T. D. Gupta, C. E. James, R. C. A. Maaka, G. Galabuzi, & C. Andersen (Eds.), *Race and racialization: Essential readings* (pp. 328–338). Canadian Scholars' Press.

Wenocur, S., & Reisch, M. (1989). *From charity to enterprise: The development of American social work in a market economy*. University of Illinois Press.

Wilson, A., & Wilson, M. (2020, November 20). *Reimagining policing: Strategies for community reinvestment*. National Association of Social Workers: Social Justice Brief. <https://www.socialworkers.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=GjXJr6rDzss%3D&portalid=0>

Woodsworth, J. S. (1909). *Strangers within our gates*. Frederick Clarke Stephenson.

Yee, J. (2005). Critical anti-racism praxis: The concept of whiteness implicated. In S. Hick, J. Fook, & R. Pozzuto, (Eds.), *Social work: A critical turn* (pp. 87–103). Thompson Education Publishing.

Yee, J., & Dumbrill, G. (2003). Whiteout: Looking for race in Canadian social work practice. In A. Al-Krenawi & J. Graham (Eds.), *Multicultural social work in Canada: Working with diverse ethno-cultural communities* (pp. 98–121). Oxford University Press.

Yee, J. Y., & Wagner, A. E. (2013). Is anti-oppression teaching in Canadian social work classrooms a form of neo-liberalism? *Social Work Education*, 32(3), 331–348. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2012.672557>

Yosso, T. J., Smith, W. A., Ceja, M., & Solórzano, D. (2010). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate for Latina/o undergraduates. *Harvard Educational Review*, 79(4), 659–691. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17763/haer.79.4.m6867014157m7071>

Zerafa, S. (2020). *Whiteout and the reproduction of (fat) white normativity: A critical discourse analysis of the presence of whiteness in fat studies literature* [Master's thesis, Ryerson University]. Ryerson University Library Digital Repository. <https://digital.library.ryerson.ca/islandora/object/RULA%3A9028/datastream/OBJ/view>

### Recommended Reading

Auger, M. D. (2016). Cultural continuity as a determinant of Indigenous peoples' health: A metasynthesis of qualitative research in Canada and the United States. *The International Indigenous Policy Journal*, 7(4), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.18584/iipj.2016.7.4.3>

Barnoff, L., & Moffatt, K. (2007). Contradictory tensions in anti-oppression practice in feminist social services. *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work*, 22(1), 56–70. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109906295772>

Brave Heart, M. Y. H., Chase, J., Elkins, J., & Altschul, D. B. (2011). Historical trauma among Indigenous Peoples of the Americas: Concepts, research, and clinical considerations. *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*, 43(4), 282–290. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02791072.2011.628913>

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. (2019). *Canada Research Chairs Program: CAMH Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan*. <https://www.camh.ca/-/media/files/camh-crc-equity-diversity-inclusion-action-plan.pdf>

Choate, P., & Lindstrom, G. (2017). Parenting capacity assessment as a colonial strategy. *Canadian Family Law Quarterly*, 37(1), 41–60.

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323268756\\_Parenting\\_Capacity\\_Assessment\\_as\\_a\\_Colonial\\_Strategy](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323268756_Parenting_Capacity_Assessment_as_a_Colonial_Strategy)

De Montigny, G. (2011). Beyond anti-oppressive practice: Investigating reflexive social relations. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, 22(1), 8–30.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10428232.2011.564982>

Dominelli, L. (1996). Deprofessionalizing social work: Anti-oppressive practice, competencies and postmodernism. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 26(2), 153–175.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.bjsw.a011077>

Dryer, R. (2008). The matter of whiteness. In P. S. Rothenberg (Ed.), *White privilege: Essential readings on the other side of racism* (pp. 9–14). Worth Publishers.

Frayme. (2019). *Rapid response report: Training resources relevant to the principles, policies, and practices within integrated youth mental health and substance use services.*

[https://frayme.ca/sites/default/files/rrs\\_response\\_-\\_iymhsu\\_training\\_resources\\_1.pdf](https://frayme.ca/sites/default/files/rrs_response_-_iymhsu_training_resources_1.pdf)

Henderson, J. (2003). *Settler feminism and race making in Canada*. University of Toronto Press.

Hunter, M. (2002). Rethinking epistemology, methodology, and racism: Or, is White sociology really dead? *Race & Society*, 5(2), 119–138. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.racsoc.2004.01.002>

Kemshall, H. (2010). Risk rationalities in contemporary social work policy and practice. *British Journal of Social Work*, 40(4), 1247–1262. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43687518>

McLaren, A. (1990). *Our own master race: Eugenics in Canada, 1885–1945*. McClelland and Stewart.

Mullaly, B. (1997). *Structural social work: Ideology, theory, and practice* (2nd ed.). Oxford Publishing.

Mullaly, B. (2002). *Challenging oppression: A critical social work approach*. Oxford Publishing.

Sakamoto, I., & Pitner, R. O. (2005). Use of critical consciousness in anti-oppressive social work practice: Disentangling power dynamics at personal and structural levels. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 35(4), 435–452. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bch190>

Simpson, L. B. (2011). *Dancing on our turtle's back: Stories of Nishnaabeg re-creation, resurgence, and a new emergence*. ARP Books.

Sotos LLP. (2019, March 8). Class action against the Government of Canada brought on behalf of First Nations youth. *Cision: Newswire*. <https://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/class-action-against-the-government-of-canada-brought-on-behalf-of-first-nations-youth-816218905.html>

Tester, F. J. (2003). Anti-oppressive theory and practice as the organizing theme for social work education. *Canadian Social Work Review*, 20(1), 127–132.

Wagner, A., & Yee, J. Y. (2011). Anti-oppression in higher education: Implicating neo-liberalism. *Canadian Social Work Review*, 28(1), 89–105.

Zhang, H. (2018). How ‘anti-ing’ becomes mastery: Moral subjectivities shaped through anti-oppressive practice. *British Journal of Social Work*, 48(1), 124–140.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcx010>

**About the Authors:** Funke Oba, PhD is Associate Professor, School of Social Work, Toronto Metropolitan University, Toronto, ON ([funoba@torontomu.ca](mailto:funoba@torontomu.ca)); Samantha Zerafa, MSW is Research Associate, School of Social Work, Toronto Metropolitan University, Toronto, ON ([samantha.zerafa@torontomu.ca](mailto:samantha.zerafa@torontomu.ca)).



# Guilty Until Proven Innocent: Reflections on Encounters with Whiteness in an Academic Institution

Victor Chikadzi

**Abstract:** Using selected personal experiences, this article reflects on my lived experiences of being a young black academic at an institution that is considered “white” in character and composition. From selected encounters with colleagues and students, I reflect on how blackness tacitly exposes black people to presumed incompetence and criminal culpability within the zone of whiteness and white privilege. Through these selected incidences, I also show how being white insulates white people from systemic and systematic injustices.

**Keywords:** race, racism, South Africa, academia, university

## Introduction

I largely grew up in a “black world,” and encounters with white people in my first 23 years of existence were rather brief and occasional. It was a rarity. As a result, I was largely oblivious to issues of race and racism. Racism was in my view a past lived reality of our parents who had lived under colonialism. I assumed that with the coming of independence and black majority rule in all African countries, we had managed to usher in a new era of race relations in which equality for all races was assured. So, in my mind, I was existing in a fair world in which all races co-existed and lived amongst each other in peace and harmony. I was rather naive and failed to even realise that my existence in largely “black spaces” (township, schools, churches, and sports facilities) was actually reflective of the racial disparities and privileges that existed. I had failed to realise that I had largely inhabited spaces that were unworthy of white existence. I knew very little about “white spaces” and the white world that existed within the dual racial societal arrangements. I had not seen the other world, so in my mind it did not exist.

At the age of 19, I packed my bags and left my country, Zimbabwe, to go to a university in South Africa. I did my first degree at what is considered a historically disadvantaged black institution—the University of Fort Hare. By its nature and character, it was very much black. The student body was almost completely black apart from a few international exchange students that would occasionally enroll at the institution. The only time I encountered white persons was when we had a white lecturer or when I saw them from a distance in their offices and at staff restaurants. Thus, in many ways, my first four years of undergraduate studies mirrored my past 19 years in Zimbabwe. I was inhabiting predominantly black spaces, and I lived in a black world. I assumed it was a fair world after all.

The context I framed above is important as far as it demonstrates how I had hardly ever looked at the world through a racial lens. I was oblivious to the multiple realities that existed based on racial differences. In a few modules of my undergraduate degree in social work, I had covered a few topics on racism, but this was largely historical reflections on apartheid. Most textbooks that we used did not highlight the systemic and systematic discrimination against blacks as a lived reality, causing structural imbalances that continue to exist despite the end of apartheid as an

official government policy. For most scholars, the fall of the apartheid government in South Africa ushered in a new era, and they pointed to the new policies that were formulated based on principles of racial equality and justice as evidence that the curtain of apartheid had completely fallen. Looking back at it now, I realise that it was largely white scholars telling the story from their vantage points of white privilege. Books or academic articles from black scholars were non-existent. It is only recently that critical black scholarship in social work is beginning to emerge within the South African and African context. The lack of critical scholarship made many of us as students oblivious to systemic, institutional, and structural racism. I failed to realise that my existence in a historically disadvantaged black university was itself a reminder of the ugly apartheid phenomenon in terms of not only its historical past, but also as a current lived reality due to its enduring consequences.

### **The Innocence Broken**

After completing my Bachelor of Social Work degree, I moved from a rural setting to a major city in South Africa. For the first time in my life, I began to see a new world and new realities based on racial lines that had hitherto not existed in my consciousness. For the first time I realised that as a black person my existence had been at the margins, which I had mistakenly come to normalise as a universal reality. I had enrolled at a bigger institution of higher learning—an institution considered to be historically advantaged. It was predominantly a space of “whiteness.” I had long appreciated what I thought were high standards (infrastructure, ambiance, and services) at the University of Fort Hare. However, my new reality at a historically advantaged university that had benefited from the apartheid government’s preferential support as a white space made me realise my naivety. It was worlds apart compared to my alma mater. For the first time, I was inhabiting a space in which whites seemed to outnumber blacks. Outside of the university, my place of residence was largely “white” in its composition and character. Slowly, the glaring disparities of the black and white world became very clear. Everywhere I looked, I could not help but see the contrasting difference of whiteness and blackness. The race of students streaming from car parks at the university, to the race of those going to wait for the bus, told a story. It was from these observed realities that my consciousness about racial privileges began to develop. I moved from “magical consciousness” (Ledwith, 2016, p. xiv) and later to “critical consciousness” (Ledwith, 2016, p. xi). At the level of magical consciousness, I thought of myself as largely an unaffected observer. However, I was soon to experience racism at a personal level both systemic and systematic. It was at this point that a shift from false consciousness to critical consciousness was birthed (Ledwith, 2016).

### **Guilty Until Proven Innocent (Even Blacks Internalised Inferiority)**

Soon after completing my postgraduate qualification in social work, I was recruited to join the social work department at the same institution I had enrolled in for my postgraduate studies. It was a rare privilege indeed. I would never have expected this in my wildest imagination. I had been awed by the reputation of the institution compared to many other universities in Africa. As such, it was a privilege to be a student at this great institution. Being recruited as part of the faculty was unexpected, albeit welcome. A majority of lecturers in most departments of the university were white, and it was not uncommon to find only one person of colour or none at all

in many departments. As noted by Mabokela (2000), the demographics in the higher education landscape in South Africa are still dominated by whites and not reflective of the national demographics. This is why I would never have thought it possible that I could one day work in such a space. Nevertheless, I found myself employed at this great institution a few months after the completion of my post graduate qualification.

My very first day in the lecture hall was a baptism of fire and a dose of reality which told me I did not belong in the space that I was. Consistent with the assertions of Sian (2017), who notes that black people often occupy the position of “outsiders” (p. 2) within white dominated academic contexts, I realised that as a black person at a white university, I occupied the role of an outsider. The role of the “other.”

I was a 25-year-old black man standing in front of a class of mixed race, with many of the students being of the same age as I was, and a few older than me. As soon as I finished introducing myself as the lecturer for the module that I had been assigned, a number of students began to murmur. Some burst into laughter. While I may not have been able to hear what was being said, there was no doubt that the students never expected such a young black person to stand in front of them as a lecturer. I could see some expressions on their faces, which seemed to show doubt and despondency. Instinctively, I knew that they doubted my ability, suitability, and competence to teach. It did not matter that they had never been taught by me before; the colour of my skin was enough reason to be pronounced guilty until proven innocent. As argued by Puwar (2004), black people are an unusual and unexpected phenomenon within universities and are thus often doubted whenever and wherever they are found. I really felt doubted, belittled, and struggled to hide my nervousness. After a few minutes of their mumbling, I calmed the class down and began my lecture.

I favour a student-centred approach to teaching which encourages active participation, but I was not going to take a chance with that. In that first lecture, I realised that I was on trial and I had to acquit myself. As such, I made the lecture about me rather than them. For the next 30 minutes of the lecture, it was a monologue, and I was simply “downloading data” from my brain to the students as I introduced the module. I discarded the use of PowerPoint slides and simply spoke from my mind to try and prove that I knew what I was doing. Each concept that I explained was punctuated with some use of big words which I knew they did not understand. The idea was to prove to them that I knew better than them. The whole essence of the lecture was lost as it became about me rather than them, and at that point, I couldn’t care less. I felt that I was fighting for my reputation and survival in a space of whiteness.

As I used more big words and complex theory to explain simple things, I could see the shift in expressions on many students’ faces. Most of the black students were smiling; my focus was however largely on the white students. I saw no smiles from them. Theirs was an expression that seemed to portray some confusion and disbelief. It was as if they were saying, “Ok, let’s hear you out,” and hear me out they did! As soon as I finished my adumbration, I paused and asked if anyone had a question. I was given a standing ovation by the black students. I did not know what it meant at the time, but I soon came to understand. Two white students raised their hands in response to my invitation for questions and comments. Three questions were asked. The way

the students asked the questions never seemed to be a genuine desire to understand. It seemed to be an issue of testing my knowledge—somehow you can tell by the expressions not just of the person asking but of the neighbouring students. I could see these were deliberately planned questions coming from a group of students that were seated together. Whether or not I was right in my interpretation, I had to keep my guard up and go on the intellectual offensive to acquit myself. I cheekily started by correcting the way of questioning and clarified to the student more clearly what she wanted to say. This was deliberate. I wanted to assume intellectual higher ground. As soon as I finished correcting her in the way she was asking the question, the black students laughed. I did not know why at the time, but I also soon came to know. I then proceeded to give what I thought was a brilliant articulation of issues in response to the questions posed. As soon as I finished, I got another standing ovation from the black students and with that, I exited the lecture hall and started my long walk to the office.

A few black students followed me on my way out. They wanted to shake my hands and congratulate me. “Sir, you have done us proud,” one of them said. “You know what, sir, we gave you a standing ovation because you proved those white students wrong. They always assume that black lecturers know nothing. But today you made us proud. When you introduced yourself at first, we were really worried if you were really competent enough. We thought you would really embarrass us as black students. We have had a few black lecturers that did not speak English well, and this has always been used against us. You black lecturers in this university are seen as undeserving equity candidates, and you are just here to make up the numbers.”

“Oh really,” I responded.

“Yes sir, and you know why we laughed when you corrected the question before answering it?” I didn’t. “These students always do it to black lecturers,” the student told me. “They plan to ask what they think are difficult questions to try and embarrass the lecturer if they think one would not be able to deal with the questions. It is not the first time they have done this. At some point a black lecturer failed to answer the questions and wanted to do some research first. The white students used this as a reason to prove to us that black lecturers are not competent and are therefore undeserving to be at this institution.”

When I asked how sure the student was about these claims, he said, “Hundred percent, sir. We always discuss these issues with white students, and today we will be laughing at them.” One white student later remarked, “I never thought you could be that good. You teach better than our white lecturers, and I can’t believe it.”

I was not flattered. This was not a compliment, but rather an insult to black people. Such was my reality as a black person. In the eyes of many white students, before I even uttered a word, I had been judged to be not good enough because of my race. The colour of my skin was enough measure to pass “judgement before trial.” If not racism, what would this be? As the days went by and I started teaching new classes, this same pattern was replicating itself in almost every class that I taught. For me, this experience was a confirmation of the fact that “the university

classroom is not race-neutral” (Sian, 2017, p. 11) and that it is a highly politicised space and a struggle terrain for race wars (Chan et al., 2014).

Beyond the classroom, I would periodically be asked by some colleagues whether or not I was going to be able to meet my probation requirements. “Why are you asking me such a question?” I would ask. “You know what Victor, there are many black lecturers who have failed to meet their probation requirements and were released by the university.” We existed in a context where one had to publish, have excellent teaching evaluations, be part of administrative activities, and have community engagement reflective of the ever increasingly neoliberalised context in which universities operate—a space in which “academics of colour are at greater risk, who alongside keeping up with new needs and demands, must also continue to put up with embedded practices of racism” (Sian, 2017, pp. 2–3). My colleagues who would often ask if I would meet the requirements knew about the struggles black academics faced. I am however not sure of how they interpreted them, which could either be from the perspective of structural and institutional disadvantage or a racist blaming approach which looked at blacks as being not good enough for academia.

I was very appreciative of the opportunity I was given to be at this great institution, and I still am grateful to this day. The reality however is that for many black people navigating white dominated spaces like the institution I was at, it is a daily struggle. The perception of black incompetence is real. Policies such as affirmative action which are meant to transform these institutions to be representative of the national demographics have been weaponised against black people. For many white people (students and faculty), black people who exist in these white dominated institutions are nothing more than quota candidates that are recruited to meet employment targets for transformation. As such, my existence in this space of whiteness was an undeserved one. I was guilty of incompetence until proven innocent. I had to constantly deliver and work under pressure to ensure that I not only met targets but had to excel. In such spaces, no one invites you for co-authored articles or other developmental opportunities. You have to swim or sink alone. Over the years, I saw how new white lecturers would be easily integrated into the networks of senior academics who also happened to be white. Within one semester of being at a university, some white colleagues can easily have more than three academic papers on which they were simply invited as co-authors by experienced academics. Such invitations are hardly ever forthcoming for many black academics. In this regard, many white academics get ahead easily because the system is in their favour. The colour of one’s skin determines the level of tacit institutional support that one gets. It is easy for my colleague to get five invitations for co-authoring and thereafter get a promotion. Whilst I have to write those five papers alone. As such, we progress differently. What I need two years to achieve, a fellow colleague may need only five months to attain. These are some of the unspoken manifestations of white privilege. On the surface of it, many people get ahead because they worked hard for it. However, on closer analysis, it is because of extraordinary support that comes from networks which provide easy access and better mentoring. Such is the face of systemic racism. I learned that as a black person I have to fight so many extra battles to survive within white spaces (institutions) that allow entry but fail to provide adequate support for black people to thrive.

This is why some of my colleagues were worried about me being able to meet my probation requirements. In the face of it they assumed it was not easy to do so. However, the reality was that there wasn't enough tacit support given to black academics. If you cannot be part of a "club" (white networks) you have to work extra hard to achieve what some colleagues manage without a drop of sweat. This is so because beyond getting entry into the system (academic institution), they also got access (informal opportunities for support, which leads to success). It is access that is most critical. As a new academic, no one taught me how to write an academic article, how to apply for a research grant. No one taught me about academic conferences and how to access funding. These are "simple tricks of the trade" that one needs in order to be established as an academic. By the time you get to know, it is often too late.

### **The Missing Milk**

A year into my employment, rumours began circulating in my department that someone was illegally helping themselves to the milk from the "staff tea club." I never really bothered myself with these rumours. After all, I did not use milk, and my family did not use milk either. Never in my wildest imagination would I have ever thought that anyone could suspect me of being responsible for the missing milk. Moving from just overhearing the rumours, some colleagues began to ask me if I knew anything about the missing milk. I simply said no and left it at that. I was oblivious to the fact that I was a suspect in this case. I was naive to not realise it when I was first asked. Later on, another white colleague came to me and asked again, "Victor, are you really sure that you know nothing about the missing milk? Someone has been stealing some milk from the cupboard." At this point, I realised that I was actually a suspect in this case. When you ask me if I am really sure that I do not know after I have already said "I do not know," what does that imply? I really felt offended, but I had to hide my emotions. Several of my white colleagues had asked me about the missing milk, and I could sense that they thought I was actually responsible or that I knew what was happening. Daily, I walked the corridors of my department with shame. The shame of knowing that deep down these white colleagues think that this "black boy" is stealing milk.

The secretary later whispered to me that "these people think it is you who is taking the milk." She also told me that she knew who was responsible and was fearful to speak out. It was a fellow white colleague. Their whiteness was, however, enough of a shield to never be a suspect in this case. The person used their white privilege to the fullest extent knowing that some "black boy" would be held accountable. I really felt disgusted by this but could not speak out. When you are black, you have to be pliable and navigate the system delicately in order to survive in it. You have to walk on eggshells daily just to avoid ruffling feathers. Such was the burden of my existence in the white space. I really reflected long and deep. These guys know I do not use milk, and I am not even part of the tea club though I give my monthly contribution. Why then suspect me? Such is the burden of blackness. These are some of systemic biases against people of colour. When things went wrong in the department, it had to be that black boy—he was presumed guilty until proven otherwise. When I saw on the news the incident in New York of Keyon Harrold's 12-year-old son being falsely accused of having stolen an iPhone (Zavari, 2020), it really triggered me. I felt a deep sense of shame. I had to relive the shame of being suspected of stealing milk. I thought I had managed to achieve some "high status" of being at

such a glamorous institution of higher learning, only to realise that it was not enough to rid white people around me of prejudice. My existence was at the margins. An outsider to the system and never fully accepted and integrated.

### **But We Are Always the Best**

One afternoon three white students came to my office. They indicated to me that they were not happy at all with my marking. They said, “Look Victor, in most of our modules we usually are top of the class. Why is it that in your module black students are doing better than us?” I was really shocked with such a claim. I asked them if they thought that black students cannot perform better than them to which one of them responded, “We are not saying that, but it’s worrying that in the modules we are taught by white lecturers we perform very well and the few modules we are taught by black lecturers we do not do that well.”

“Have you ever bothered to compare your marked scripts with the ones of students who did better?” I asked.

“No,” one student responded. “We are the better students so there is not much to learn from them.” I asked the students to come back at a later time for us to map a way forward.

When the students came back, I had collected several scripts from black students, and I gave them the scripts and asked them to compare and tell me if my marking was biased. After several minutes of scrutinising the papers, I asked them what they thought, to which one of them remarked, “I never thought these guys can write like this. Look, to be honest their work is good. I see areas that I could have improved.” That was my cue to give them a brief lecture on racial prejudice. I thought to myself, “Is it possible that some black students were not getting the marks they deserved in these other modules?” After all, some black students had complained that white lecturers always favour white students. I could not prove this so I had to let sleeping dogs lie, notwithstanding my many unanswered questions. I was however satisfied that at least the prejudice that these students had against their fellow colleagues had been unmasked. I could not do much about the situation though. Silence is safety. One has to know when to speak and what to speak about.

### **What Is to Be Done?**

I could go on and on about the racist encounters I experienced at my workplace, but the key question is about finding answers to the problem of systemic and systematic racism. Below I provide a few suggestions about what can be done to tackle racism in institutions of higher learning.

#### **Introduce a Compulsory Module on Race Relations in Schools and Institutions of Higher Learning**

Racial prejudice is a learned behaviour and attitude. In most instances white people who grow up in white dominated spaces learn and internalise racism from an early age. These racial

prejudices picked up in the early stages of life go unchallenged and never get reflected on. It then becomes “truth” until people do the deeper work on race and racism without which they may carry prejudice throughout life. To this end, the education about race and critical race relations needs to be introduced in the schooling system at both lower and higher levels. This will create better awareness and tolerance. It will also unmask structural and institutional factors that advantage other races while causing the oppression of people of colour. White privilege will likely endure until the end of time, but awareness about it for all races is important as it can lead to tolerance and better institutional reforms that lead to enhanced racial parity.

### **Tackling Systemic Racism and Appealing to Conscience**

In many institutions, it is a given that white people have had access to the system for a long time and are the gatekeepers of the same. To this end, policies need to be formulated to tackle systematic and systemic discrimination. This may among other things include the following: creating mentorship mechanisms for persons of colour which go beyond mere formalities, providing incentives for mentorship of persons of colour, and eliminating negative recruitment practices where less qualified black persons are employed to perpetuate the myth of black incompetence. Tackling systematic racism requires the willingness and cooperation of those who are beneficiaries of white privilege. Thus, beyond the changes in policy, procedures, and practises, the willing cooperation of whites is necessary. This is especially true in instances where informal institutional networks exist to perpetuate white privilege. This is difficult to deal with apart from appealing to the conscience of individuals. This can be done through debate platforms, educational programmes, and seminars that deal with the race question.

### **Create Black Networks of Support**

In most institutions of higher learning, there are now enough black academics to start black-owned initiatives to support each other. Highly experienced academics should worry less about fighting to be included at the “white table.” They will never fully belong. Rather, focus should be placed on grooming the next generation of black academics and professionals who will excel at what they do. Such initiatives should happen within and across several institutions. With enough effort and possible government support, there will be a massive pool of black academics that will scale the academic ladder and also take positions of leadership in what is currently a white dominated higher education landscape in South Africa.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The issue of racism within white dominated institutions in South Africa is a lived reality that continues to affect many black academics and students. Blackness in and of itself is a factor enough to lead to prejudice in white dominated spaces. While a lot can be done at the structural and institutional levels to tackle the problem of racism, there is a need to acknowledge the tacit advantages that whites will always have which cannot be tackled by any means apart from individual decisions to change. White privilege is a lived reality that has endured since time immemorial, and it is therefore important to realise that change will not happen overnight. A gradual systemic and systematic dismantling of economic arrangements that sustain and



perpetuate white privilege in Africa is needed. White privilege was birthed and is sustained in the womb of colonial and neo-colonial dispossession which led to the economic marginalisation of blacks and economic empowerment of whites. In this regard, a transformation of African economies is needed. The means of production cannot remain in the hands of the privileged minority while the majority of black people live in conditions of squalor and economic deprivation. The process of economic restructuring needs to start with land redistribution and ensuring that blacks participate in commerce and industry. Increased access to better equipped schools and medical facilities for the black majority is vital. As such, African governments need to prioritise the funding of rural and township schools where the majority of blacks live to ensure parity of access to opportunities for early childhood development, primary schooling, and secondary schooling which are vital foundations for future success. Many universities in Africa and South Africa in particular remain white enclaves in terms of both the faculty and student composition. In this regard, it is important for the government to push for equitable access to such universities for all race groups. Such measures need to be codified into law and policy. Punitive measures such as defunding non-complying institutions should be considered.

On the other hand, more research efforts that look at the lived experiences of black academics in institutions of higher learning is needed, especially in a context such as South Africa where many institutions remain largely untransformed. Such studies are vital in not only bringing better awareness, but also in informing policy changes that are needed in order to decisively deal with institutionalised racism.

Future research can also focus on the formal and informal arrangements which perpetuate racism within the higher education landscape and how these arrangements can be dismantled. For example, it is my experience that many black graduates are first generation degree holders who cannot afford to stay in universities and pursue post graduate studies. They have pressure from their family to find work and help to relieve the financial burden. In this regard, access to fully paid scholarships for part time studies by black people is vital. This will ensure that a significant portion of the black population can gain industrial experience while at the same time furthering their studies to be able to take up positions at universities. Recruitment strategies can also be changed to ensure that priority is given to black candidates when vacancies arise. It is common that informal networks largely determine who gets to be employed in many universities and other workplaces. Thus, a dismantling of such networks and the development of new pathways for recruitment which give a fair chance to black candidates, who largely lack social capital to access such privileged spaces, is needed.

## References

- Chan, A., Dharmoon, R., & Moy, L. (2014). Metaphoric representations of women of colour in the academy: Teaching race, disrupting power. *Borderlands*, 13(2), 1–26.  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305468777\\_Metaphoric\\_Representations\\_of\\_Women\\_of\\_Colour\\_in\\_the\\_Academy\\_Teaching\\_Race\\_Disrupting\\_Power](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305468777_Metaphoric_Representations_of_Women_of_Colour_in_the_Academy_Teaching_Race_Disrupting_Power)
- Ledwith, M. (2016). *Community development in action: Putting Freire into practice*. Policy Press.

Mabokela, R. O. (2000). 'We cannot find qualified blacks': Faculty diversification programmes at South African universities. *Comparative Education*, 36(1), 95–112.  
<http://doi.org/10.1080/03050060027782>

Puwar, N. (2004). Fish in and out of water: A theoretical framework for race and the space of academia. In I. Law, D. Phillips, and L. Turney (Eds.), *Institutional racism in higher education* (pp. 49–58). Trentham Books.

Sian, K. (2017). Being black in a white world: Understanding racism in British universities. *Papeles del CEIC: International Journal on Collective Identity Research*, 2017(2), 1–26.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1387/pceic.17625>

Zavari, M. (2020, December 27). Video shows black 14-year-old falsely accused of theft in a SoHo hotel. *The New York Times*.

**About the Author:** Victor Chikadzi, PhD is Associate Professor, Department of Social Work, University of Namibia, Windhoek, Khomas, Namibia ([victorchic@gmail.com](mailto:victorchic@gmail.com)).

# My Reckoning

Sanjana Ragudaran

**Abstract:** This is a personal reflection of my work as a macro social work academic in 2020–2021. As a migrant woman of color, I reflect on how my lived experiences intersect with that of my professional work through the global lens of critical race theory. I reflect on the evolution of my work around teaching, scholarship, and service during this time and address strategies on how to move forward.

**Keywords:** belonging, macro social work practice, personal intersects professional, academic

In trying to comprehend the events of 2020, I need to provide some context. When people look at me, they presume that I am from India. When I begin to speak, they realize that I do not have an Indian accent, but neither is it American. I see their struggle of trying to place me in a box—but which one? Having lived in three different countries spanning three continents, I have come to the daunting realization that racism and discrimination exist everywhere. I have experienced racism and discrimination since my childhood, and it has continued into my adult life. I have never felt like I belonged anywhere. I grew up in one country, but my grandparents constantly reminded me that my identity was always tied to another, their homeland, Sri Lanka. When I finally visited Sri Lanka, the country that I perceived to be home, I was made to feel like a tourist, an outsider. These lived experiences of racism and discrimination, along with the internal battle with my sense of belonging, intersect with my professional life daily. Critical race theory from a global lens recognizes how my race (Ceylonese Tamil), gender (female), and social class intersect daily with my professional and personal life (Burrell-Craft, 2020; Simatele, 2018; Weiner, 2012).

I accepted my first and only academic position at a small private university in the northeast, which was and is predominantly white, about seven years ago. My first semester at the University was intimidating. As I stood in front of my class, I felt my brown skin pop out. This heightened sense of awareness was present during the entire semester. I was comfortable teaching about white privilege, oppression, and discrimination, but I did not realize how uncomfortable it would be doing so in a class with a majority of white students. One of the five themes of critical race theory is to challenge dominant ideology (Solorzano, 1997). I constantly challenge students around their “I am not a racist” mindset along with their color blindness and notions around equal opportunity in every class I teach. This has been a constant struggle for me every semester, but I persist in the hopes of doing it better with practice. Regardless, it is a mentally draining task, especially for a person of color. I simultaneously realized as my children were going through the education system locally that the history taught in schools is whitewashed. My children, for example, were taught to celebrate Thanksgiving and were told stories of the natives and pilgrims, and I had to constantly counter these stories at home. So, in class students and I would discuss the version of history they were taught, and I realigned aspects of history, especially facts that have impacted black communities and communities of color, in the hopes that these discussions would raise further curiosity and the will to further their personal understanding of history. I was ready to quit by the end of the semester. After a month of processing, I realized that I would probably have to “beat this drum” regardless of the

academic setting as a macro social worker. So, I stayed. But it has been a journey that I reflect on in this essay.

2020 has been a reckoning for me, but the last four years have been a living hell. I cannot discount the years under the Trump presidency when discussing 2020 as it provides vital context for me. I watched in utter dismay as events unfolded after the 2016 elections. I could see this country becoming openly divided under the Trump administration. It was equally worrying when nationalistic policies gained prominence overseas as this has implications on social policies such as immigration (Bieber, 2018). Born and raised in a country that was once colonized, I did not have to live through colonization to experience the racist discriminatory and oppressive practices that still manifest today.

My first series of tasks revolved around the curriculum and my teaching. I reviewed the curriculum that I was responsible for in 2018, as I did most summers, but from a different angle. My goal when teaching has always been to both challenge students with the content and to provide space for introspection. When teaching a course on “Global Human Rights and Social Justice,” I covered global social problems. In the first couple of weeks, we discussed the Declaration of Human Rights, the functions of the United Nations, and the roles of international organizations. I realized that it was insufficient. Students needed to understand what European nations did when they explored, conquered, and exploited countries. The impact of colonization, slavery, and neocolonialism and the resulting race-based discriminatory practices are very much alive today (Weiner, 2012). My curriculum needed to reflect this fact. So, I changed the readings and tweaked assignments accordingly. I also started prefacing the class by asking students to apply their knowledge from other core general education classes such as English, history, or anthropology to the content in this class where appropriate. Interestingly, students have been more vocal in this class since the changes to this curriculum, applying their general knowledge or information around certain topics or stories they read about in another class or worked on for an assignment. Talking about the content in class provides simultaneous opportunities to pause and work on introspection, giving space to challenge students’ ideology. In doing this work, I have shared not only personal experiences of racism and discrimination but also my implicit biases that give students the space in the classroom to challenge and engage in discussions around their own experiences and ideologies (Solorzano, 1997).

My next charge came when I had to review the social welfare policy curriculum, as we were reducing it to one course in Fall 2020. Something had to give, but I had to be very thoughtful in what had to be taken away. Providing historical context was important but including narratives on how we continue to oppress and discriminate was equally important. In doing so, I also realized that I needed to teach policy practice through various lenses such as feminist policy and trauma informed policy. We definitely needed to discuss the historical contexts but having lived under the Trump administration (2016–2020), I wanted to ensure we taught our students to be activators, not just allies. I do not want another thought and prayer after a shooting. This meant incorporating action assignments. I found that attending macro social work conferences and presentations in the past, along with engaging in the Voting is Social Work campaign (<https://votingissocialwork.org>), was useful in adopting and creating action assignments. Having taught this class twice to date, I have observed that students begin the class overwhelmed with

the content and work but are appreciative of the skills they develop by the end of the semester, which has been noted in their reflection of the action assignments.

In Spring 2020, as I was juggling transitioning class to online synchronous learning and having my family learn and work from home, I literally “looked up” one day and realized the expanse of this pandemic, and the glaring racial, economic, and environmental disparities that bubbled to the surface very quickly. There was a brief moment of helplessness, but I very quickly started thinking about opportunities to learn and use my skills. With respect to teaching, I first tweaked the curriculum in the remaining weeks of class. It was critical to incorporate the disparities that the pandemic brought to the forefront nationally and globally since April 2020. This was especially important as the majority of students were dealing with issues of their own during this time. The discussion started with the recognition that the pandemic had unsettled most of us to varying degrees, giving students a space to reflect on how it impacted them from the loss of their waitressing job to losing grandparents. We then shifted the discussion towards the clients they served at their internships and then more broadly addressing the disparities locally, nationally, and internationally. Students reflected at the end of the semester that they appreciated the class discussions around the pandemic as many of them were struggling to cope with the changes themselves and were unaware of the inequalities. I realized that students were more engaged in discussions and assignments became relevant when incorporating current problems around the pandemic. Teaching being one aspect of my profession, I naturally turned my attention to other possible projects as classes wound down at the end of the semester.

With scholarship interests around migrant experiences, I connected with an agency working with migrant communities through the school’s networks. They expressed various concerns such as access to healthcare, lack of protective equipment, and food insecurity that their clients were facing and expressed the need to document these experiences. After multiple discussions around the methodology and creation of the survey, I obtained Institutional Review Board approval and started the process of data collection. Migrants have been deeply impacted by the pandemic globally. Attending webinars organized by the Civil Society and other international organizations has been vital to my growth and learning on this topic and, in return, has informed my scholarship and service to the field. During this time, I also became more engaged with the Non-Governmental Organization Committee on Migration (<https://ngo-migration.org/>). In May of 2020, a horrific event would have a dramatic impact on the coming months and a change in my sense of purpose.

The passing of George Floyd and what followed changed me. I have participated in the Black Lives Matter, climate, and immigration protests in the past, but this felt very different. In those four years, I had been processing my personal identity and sense of belonging, and this moment triggered something in me. It felt like a reckoning. It was now or never. I felt inapt to deal with this, but I had to figure it out. I had to learn, engage, and practice. Conversations mattered to me over the summer of 2020. I had many conversations with colleagues within the School of Social Work, across departments on campus, and beyond. It helped me process my feelings and experiences and learn about what others were planning and doing, looking ahead to the work to be done. This was also my way of seeking support and mentorship which has been vital during this time (Robinson et al., 2019).

The renewed awareness around systemic racism across the nation spilled into our campus community during this time as well. Students on campus were engaged and formed a new organization fighting for systemic change. Social Work Society (a student group on campus) board members were equally engaged with this newly formed group, simultaneously planning their annual “Teach In” on the timely topic of how the global pandemic shed light on pertinent issues. Student engagement was key for me during this time as this was an opportunity for me to engage them outside the classroom. By July 2020, the university had an anti-racism commitment statement and there have been changes since. I participated on a panel of faculty of color discussing our research and struggles. It felt like these were initial efforts towards creating a more integrated racial space on campus (Burrell-Craft, 2020; Kendi, 2019). My work over the summer may have been mostly outside of the classroom, but my learning from these experiences has informed my teaching.

The 2020 elections were also looming in my mind, and I knew I could not live through another four years of the Trump presidency. I had been learning about voter engagement, and having attended webinars on voter registration thanks to the National Social Work Voter Mobilization Campaign, I conducted one-hour “lunch and learn” sessions on the importance of voting in social work directed at field agencies. These conversations continued into the fall and involved sharing information with faculty and encouraging field professors to engage in conversations around voting rights. Although there was some relief from the election outcome, something inside me was unsettled: January 6th solidified that our work is far from over. This was the first time I took interest in watching the electoral college vote count after a presidential election. I watched with interest, but this turned to shock and horror as the events unfolded that afternoon. As I started processing this event, a part of me strongly felt that I had failed as an educator. This is a failure on our education system. If only people truly understood slavery, colonization, and how policies historically and today continue to impact Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color. I have been thinking a lot about my teaching since.

As a school, our mission is driven by human rights and social justice. It never occurred to me that we needed to have an anti-racism statement until recently. I am glad that in the last year our school came together to initially do work around introspection and are now working towards an anti-racism statement. Introspection was a struggle in 2020 as everything was very raw personally, which intersected professionally. I could not complete the required activities, and I asked to be excused from the group. I was not even sure if I could participate in the creation of the statement, but I slowly but surely started engaging. In addition to these various tasks, I took on an organizing role with our faculty union. We are undergoing contract negotiations and core concerns have come to the foreground that intersect with the current problems. Organizing around union-related issues with faculty from various departments has provided another space for race-related conversations. I have also established working relationships with colleagues from various departments through my involvement with the union, and this has led to working together on non-union-related projects. I have been able to connect with faculty of color to reflect, process, and discuss the work that lies ahead of us. Reflecting on this last year, I am cautiously hopeful. Here’s why.

Black Lives Matter. Having listened to multiple webinars on migrant issues including racism and discrimination, along with my humbling knowledge on Black history, I see clearly that we need to explicitly fight around issues of systemic racism, especially that against Black and Indigenous populations. The University has established an anti-racism commitment statement, and the School of Social Work is in the process of creating our own statement. I am very mindful that we need to have action beyond the statement and will continue to advocate for implementation in all space across campus. Ongoing introspection is vital during this time. I need to continue to check my personal implicit biases and work on addressing microaggressions when they do take place. In addition to ongoing introspection, I will continue to work on the curriculums that I teach, looking for ways to incorporate content and activities around anti-racist policies. There is a definite need to engage further in voter registration and mobilization. My plans include further outreach to social service agencies in engaging social work interns to do this work at their placement. These are just a couple of examples of the work that can be done in the short term. There is also much to be done across the campus such as continuing my organizing and advocacy work with the faculty union and ongoing engagement in dialogue that leads to action and implementation around the university's commitment to anti-racism.

The global landscape around immigration policies and the race discourse that has come to the forefront is one that I also cannot dismiss. In working with the mixed migration subcommittee on the Non-Governmental Organization Committee on Migration, I will be mindful in reviewing the work from a global race theory perspective (Weiner, 2012) and what the implications of this mean in terms of migration policies and practice. Doing this work through my teaching, scholarship and service, ongoing personal training, and education when I see gaps in my knowledge is vital to this process. Participating in various activities has provided support and mentorship in the past, and I believe will continue to do so as I maintain my work in these spaces.

I do not want to be a check box. Reflecting on the past year, there is a resurgence on the work around anti-racism. However, I am increasingly feeling that the wheels are turning too quickly. I caution that the attitude around anti-racism has become a check box in need of ticking off to maintain relevance rather than any substantive changes in social work practice and beyond. In keeping with the concept of *interest convergence* in critical race theory, which denotes that race equality is used to maintain White interests, I question if we are moving towards inclusivity to serve the current dominant system (Burrell-Craft, 2020). With everything that has taken place this last year, I have been involved in various efforts to bring awareness on this topic to the campus community. I would like to process as a group, where we are and how we should move forward. This requires the commitment for integrated racial spaces (Kendi, 2019) for honest conversations which then I feel provides opportunities towards organizing and action.

This has been a period of turmoil personally and professionally. I realize that it is not going to get better anytime soon or even in my lifetime. However, I strongly believe that the time is now, and I need to act! I have become increasingly mindful that I do not have the time and energy to actively participate in multiple activities. Working on the process of tenure, I struggled with how best to spend my time this last year. From a traditional standpoint of requirements for the tenure process, I am struggling to justify how my actions this last year have contributed significantly to

my scholarship and especially to my service. While being involved in these various nontraditional service activities, I have continued to uphold my roles in the typical service requirements. This is an issue that other faculty of color also grapple with (Baez, 2000). I have come to realize that race-related service on campus and beyond is something I cannot sacrifice. This will be an interesting balancing act and hopefully will be looked upon with approval during my tenure process. As I have mentioned throughout this essay, my lived experiences intersect with my professional work in every aspect. Similarly, I am realizing that my teaching, scholarship, and service are interconnected, informing the work in each of these areas.

### References

- Baez, B. (2000). Race-related service and faculty of color: Conceptualizing critical agency in academe. *Higher Education*, 39(3), 363–391. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3447916>
- Bieber, F. (2018). Is nationalism on the rise? Assessing global trends. *Ethnopolitics*, 17(5), 519–540. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2018.1532633>
- Burrell-Craft, K. (2020). Are (we) going deep enough? A narrative literature review addressing critical race theory, racial space theory, and black identity development. *Taboo*, 19(4), 9–26. <https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/taboo/vol19/iss4/2>
- Kendi, I. X. (2019). *How to be an antiracist*. Penguin Random House.
- Robinson, N. C., Thea, W. B., Smith, K. V., & Harges, A. (2019). It all started with a picture: Reflections on existing as women of color in a PWI. *Multicultural Perspectives*, 21(1), 41–42. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15210960.2019.1573065>
- Simatele, M. (2018). A cross-cultural experience of microaggression in academia: A personal reflection. *Education as Change*, 22(3), 1–23. <http://dx.doi.org/10.25159/1947-9417/3132>
- Solorzano, D. G. (1997). Images and words that wound: Critical race theory, racial stereotyping, and teacher education. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 24(3), 5–19. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23478088>
- Weiner, M. (2012). Towards a critical global race theory. *Sociology Compass*, 6(4), 332–350. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2012.00457.x>

**About the Author:** Sanjana Ragudaran, PhD is Assistant Professor, School of Social Work, Monmouth University, West Long Branch, NJ ([sragudar@monmouth.edu](mailto:sragudar@monmouth.edu)).



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

Rosalyn Denise Campbell, Dashawna J. Fussell-Ware, and Madison R. Winchester

**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 white<sup>1</sup> 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.

---

<sup>1</sup> 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.

### **References**

- Abrams, L. S., & Moio, J. A. (2009). Critical Race Theory and the cultural competence dilemma in social work education. *Journal of Social Work Education, 45*(2), 245–261.  
<https://doi.org/10.5175/JSWE.2009.200700109>
- Ashley, W., Santracruz-Cervantes, S., & Castro, T. K. (2016). Professional conflict in social worker development: Transdisciplinary challenges for women of color. *Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping, 22*(1), 11–16.  
<https://reflections narratives of professional helping.org/index.php/Reflections/article/view/1279>
- Bauman, D. (2018, February 16). After 2016 election, campus hate crimes seemed to jump. Here’s what the data tell us. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.  
<https://www.chronicle.com/article/after-2016-election-campus-hate-crimes-seemed-to-jump-heres-what-the-data-tell-us/>
- Boyer, P. G. (2013). Introduction. In D. J. Davis & P. G. Boyer, P. G. (Eds.), *Social justice issues and racism in the college classroom: Perspectives from different voices* (pp. 3–10). Emerald Group Publishing Limited. <http://proxy-remote.galib.uga.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=513325&site=eds-live>

- Buila, S. (2009). The white educator's role in teaching about discrimination and oppression: where do I begin? *The International Journal of Diversity in Organisations, Communities, and Nations*, 8(6), 97–104. <https://doi.org/10.18848/1447-9532/CGP/v08i06/39680>
- Cerezo, A., McWhirter, B. T., Peña, D., Valdez, M., & Bustos, C. (2013). Giving voice: Utilizing Critical Race Theory to facilitate consciousness of racial identity for Latina/o college students. *Journal for Social Action in Counseling and Psychology*, 5(3), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.33043/JSACP.5.3.1-24>
- Davis, C. L. (2004). Black in the twenty-first century: A student's reflection on racial conflict in a BSW Program. *Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping*, 10(1), 96–102. <https://reflections narratives of professional helping.org/index.php/Reflections/article/view/1186>
- Feize, L., & Gonzalez, J. (2018). A model of cultural competency in social work as seen through the lens of self-awareness. *Social Work Education*, 37(4), 472–489. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2017.1423049>
- Harwood, S. A., Mendenhall, R., Lee, S. S., Riopelle, C., & Hunt, M. B. (2018). Everyday Racism in Integrated Spaces: Mapping the Experiences of Students of Color at a Diversifying Predominantly White Institution. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 108(5), 1245–1259. <https://doi-org.proxy-remote.galib.uga.edu/10.1080/24694452.2017.1419122>
- Hollingsworth, L. D., Patton, D. U., Allen, P. C., & Johnson, K. E. (2018). Racial microaggressions in social work education: Black students' encounters in a predominantly White institution. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, 27(1), 95–105. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15313204.2017.1417942>
- King, M. L. (2010). *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*. Beacon Press. (Original work published 1958).
- Kishimoto, K. (2018). Anti-racist pedagogy: from faculty's self-reflection to organizing within and beyond the classroom. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 21(4), 540–554. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2016.1248824>
- Nakaoka, S., & Ortiz, L. (2018). Examining racial microaggressions as a tool for transforming social work education: the case for critical race pedagogy. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, 27(1), 72–85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15313204.2017.1417947>
- Pérez Huber, L., & Solorzano, D. G. (2018). Teaching racial microaggressions: implications of critical race hypos for social work praxis. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, 27(1), 54–71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15313204.2017.1417944>
- Smith, M. (2019). NYU social work school acknowledges “institutional racism” after classroom episode. *The Washington Post*.

Vakalahi, H. F. O., Sermon, M., Richardson, A., Dillard, V., & Moncrief, A. (2014). Do you see me? The complex experiences of women of color MSW students. *Intercultural Education*, 25(5), 418–427. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2014.967973>

Villalpando, O. (2004). Practical considerations of critical race theory and Latino critical theory for Latino college students. *New Directions for Student Services*, 105, 41–50. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.115>

**About the Authors:** Rosalyn Denise Campbell, PhD, LMSW is former Associate Professor, School of Social Work, University of Georgia, Athens, GA, and current independent researcher, educator, and mentor ([dr.rdcampbell.phd@gmail.com](mailto:dr.rdcampbell.phd@gmail.com)); Dashawna J. Fussell-Ware, PhD, LSW is Assistant Professor, College of Social Work, University of Tennessee-Knoxville, Nashville, TN ([fdubs@utk.edu](mailto:fdubs@utk.edu)); Madison R. Winchester, MSW/MPH, LICSW is Clinical HIV Case Manager, Washington State Department of Health, WA ([mrosewinchester@gmail.com](mailto:mrosewinchester@gmail.com)).



# “Black People Are Not My Thing”: Microaggressions Experienced by Black Graduate Students in Social Work Programs

Joan M. Blakey, Quenette Walton, and Sheara Jennings

**Abstract:** Black students do not receive an equitable education to that of White students despite attending the same schools and receiving the same instruction (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009). An inequitable education is primarily due to White supremacy, ongoing racism, microaggressions, and anti-Black sentiments that Black students experience in institutions of higher learning, which impacts their educational experiences, overall health, and well-being (Nakaoka & Ortiz, 2018; Smith et al., 2020). The social work profession should lead efforts to dismantle racism, given the profession’s code of ethics. However, the profession must look inward and address its racism and white supremacist attitudes and beliefs. The purpose of our paper is to explore microaggressions Black graduate students in social work programs have endured in institutions of higher learning and to issue a call to action for the social work profession to strengthen its commitment to the profession’s core values and ethical code.

**Keywords:** Black students, graduate students, microaggressions, schools of social work

In 1896, the Supreme Court decided in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that racial segregation of public resources was legal as long as what Black people received was equal to Whites (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1895). Although this Supreme Court decision was reversed in 1954 by *Brown v. the Board of Education*, integrating schools has not addressed the fact that Black students do not receive an equitable education to that of White students despite attending the same schools and receiving the same instruction (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009). An inequitable education is primarily due to White supremacy, ongoing racism, microaggressions, and anti-Black sentiments that Black students experience in institutions of higher learning, which impacts their educational experiences, overall health, and well-being (Nakaoka & Ortiz, 2018; Smith et al., 2020).

White supremacy, racism, microaggressions, and macroaggressions are harming Black graduate students in social work programs nationwide (Nakaoka & Ortiz, 2018). What makes the injury worse is students do not expect to be harmed in programs that purport to believe in social justice, critical self-reflection, dignity and human worth, and antiracist and anti-oppressive practices (Gregory, 2021). Many Black graduate students seek out social work programs because they are believed to be safe havens from a racist world to provide them with the knowledge, skills, and tools needed to fight systemic racism and oppression. Additionally, Black graduate students also encounter curricula that perpetuate the same White supremacist ideologies as other professions by failing to offer complex, critical understandings of race, Whiteness, and privilege (Jeyasingham, 2012; Nylund, 2006). Taken together, these experiences leave Black graduate social work students disillusioned, angry, and feeling betrayed by the profession, causing them to question their choice of life work.

White supremacy and racism need to be dismantled in the United States. Social work educators and professionals should lead the effort given the profession’s code of ethics and beliefs in social justice (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2021) and antiracist and anti-oppressive practices (Brown et al., 2019; Nakaoka & Ortiz, 2018; NASW, 2021). Instead of leading the charge to become antiracist and anti-oppressive, the social work profession has, at best, drifted further away from this charge and, at worst, is complicit with and benefits from the harmful effects of racism (Aldana & Vazquez, 2020). However, before social work can dismantle and abolish racism, social work educators and professionals must look inward and first do the work of addressing their racism and white supremacist attitudes and beliefs (Gregory, 2021; NASW, 2020). Only then is there hope that microaggressions and other forms of oppression will no longer exist (Aldana & Vazquez, 2020). The purpose of this paper is to explore the various kinds of microaggressions Black graduate students in social work programs have endured in institutions of higher learning and to issue a call to action for the social work profession to strengthen its commitment to the profession’s core values and ethical code. Despite a great deal of literature on microaggression in higher education, microaggressions in social work programs need to be explored, particularly given a focus on antiracist social work practice.

### **Definition of Microaggression and Types of Microaggressions**

Microaggression has been defined in various ways. Pierce (1970) proposed the term *microaggressions* in the 1970s to highlight the ongoing “subtle, stunning, often automatic, verbal and non-verbal exchanges towards minorities” (p. 266). Scholars have built on and extended Pierce’s work. According to Pinderhughes (1989),

Microaggressions are small acts, often subtle and out of the awareness of both people of color and Whites, that exploit, degrade, put down, and express aggression against people of color. These acts require people of color to monitor their helplessness and rage constantly—a necessity that takes a toll in terms of stress and health problems. (p. 84)

Miller and Garran (2007) equate microaggressions to “1,000 papercuts instead of one deep wound” (p. 97). Finally, Ogunyemi et al. (2020) defined microaggressions as

Brief commonplace, daily, verbal, nonverbal, behavioral, and environmental slights, insults, invalidations, and indignities, intentional or unintentional, directed toward a marginalized group, which are categorized as microassaults, microinsults, microinvalidations, and institutional microaggressions. (p. 97)

Scholars have identified six types of microaggressions:

- *Microinsults* often are subtle or unconscious to the perpetrator as they verbally and behaviorally make insulting, insensitive, rude, or demeaning comments or gestures toward another person racially different or otherwise (Ogunyemi et al., 2020; Sue et al., 2007).

- *Microinvalidations* are verbal or behavioral acts—intentional or unintentional—that exclude, deny, negate, invalidate, or nullify people of color’s ideas, beliefs, feelings, presence, or lived or experiential reality (Ogunyemi et al., 2020; Sue et al., 2007).
- *Microassaults* are verbal and behavioral derogatory or demeaning acts intended to physically, psychologically, or emotionally hurt individuals of color, which can range from name calling to willfully discriminatory actions to assault (Ogunyemi et al., 2020; Sue et al., 2007).
- *Institutional microaggressions* are institutional strategies used by individuals that intentionally or unintentionally create a hostile environment, use institutional avenues to harm or shut down another person, or engage in practices that privilege one group at the expense of another. Institutional microaggressions affect individuals’ success, satisfaction, or ability to benefit from and gain access to institutional services and resources (Ogunyemi et al., 2020; Sue et al., 2007).
- *Macroaggressions* are the cumulative effect of a life of microaggressions, which many would consider is a macro issue. Forrest-Bank and Jenson (2015) focused on longitudinal effects of the “type and nature of microaggression over time and find ways to account for the cumulative effect of microaggressions over the life course as well as intergenerationally” (p. 158). Druery et al. (2018) defined macroaggressions as “large scale or overt aggression toward those of another race, culture, gender, etc.” (p. 75). They believe this distinction is necessary, as in recent years, nothing has been minor or unintentional in the attacks on people and communities of color.
- *Mega-aggressions* is a term coined by Compton-Lilly (2020) that “describes particularly insidious and devastating enactments of micro/macroaggressions” (p. 1319).

### **Prevalence of Microaggressions**

Studies report 90 percent of Black students experience microaggressions and racial discrimination daily compared to 20 percent of White students (Nakaoka & Ortiz, 2018; Ogunyemi et al., 2020). Overwhelmingly, Black students reported more negative, hostile, and racially charged campus environments. Ogunyemi et al. (2020) stated, “the prevalence of racial microaggressions in higher education is not decreasing, and all studies seem to suggest that it is highest for Black students” (p. 114). College campuses have become increasingly diversified, yet these environments have not changed their practices or curricula to reflect this shift. In many cases, colleges and universities are the first-time students confront cross-racial interactions, which provide ongoing opportunities for individuals to realize the world is multicultural and become comfortable with cross-racial interactions (Ogunyemi et al., 2020).

### **Various Incidents of Microaggressions**

Microaggressions can range from being subtle to blatant, overt acts of racism. Studies have identified various types of microaggressions Black graduate students experience:

- Black students often endure speculation about their legitimacy in graduate programs, whereas White students are automatically assumed to be there because of merit (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009; Nakaoka & Ortiz, 2018; Williams et al., 2020).
- Black students received rude stares from non-Black people (Gomez et al., 2011; Shoge, 2019).
- Non-Black people avoid interactions with Black students (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2020; Ogunyemi et al., 2020).
- Black students are excluded from study groups and other campus spaces (Karkouti, 2016; Mirza, 2018; Soloranzo et al., 2000).
- Non-Black students had and expressed doubts about Black students’ academic ability (Nakaoka & Ortiz, 2018; Ogunyemi et al., 2020; Soloranzo et al., 2000; Williams et al., 2020).
- White students often have been afforded the right to comfort at the expense of other non-White students’ discomfort (Ogunyemi et al., 2020).
- If and when White students cry or express any negative emotions or feedback, people often come to the aid of the White student, even if the person harmed was a Black student (Wilson, 2012).
- Black students indicated their talents and abilities were often called into question, considered irrelevant, not valued, or considered unimportant because of the color of their skin (Espitia, 2016; Shoge, 2019).
- Black students were assumed to be less competent in some cases, so professors lowered expectations of those students, believing they could not excel in the same way as White students (Nakaoka & Ortiz, 2018).
- Black students often have not been given access to scholarships and financial help White students have been given (Walkington, 2017).
- Black students have been reported to administrators or university-level officials for expressing their opinions or perspectives (St. Amour, 2020).
- Black students have been excluded from events, clubs, and activities, which would make their overall graduate experience more meaningful (Williams et al., 2020).
- Black students must act in ways beyond reproach to be seen positively by White peers (Smith et al., 2020).

Scholars have noted microaggressions Black graduate students experience are innocuous and could be done by well-meaning individuals (Brown et al., 2019; Sue, 2010; Sue et al., 2007). Nonetheless, they have long-lasting psychological, emotional, behavioral, and physical effects on Black students’ wellbeing (Blume et al., 2012; Espitia, 2016; Sue et al., 2011).

### **Effects of Microaggressions on Black Students**

Widespread research has documented the effects of persistent racism and microaggressions on Black students who attend predominantly White institutions (PWIs; Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009; Walkington, 2017). Microaggressions are often subtle, making them difficult to detect, particularly when the insult or invalidation is delivered with a smile or nonthreatening gesture or gaze (Ogunyemi et al., 2020; Sue et al., 2008). Identifying and calling attention to microaggressions is challenging for Black students because it may be embarrassing, particularly if their ability or mental state is called into question. Admitting someone’s verbal or nonverbal actions may have hurt them exposes Black students’ innermost vulnerabilities. Moreover, Black students often are afraid they may be accused of being in denial, blamed, or considered responsible for racial incidents (Espitia, 2016), all of which can make it challenging to identify a particular incident as racism or a microaggression.

The effects of repeated exposure to racist and discriminatory microaggressions tend to be cumulative and harmful to Black students (Ogunyemi et al., 2020). Microaggressions often contribute to Black students feeling *psychologically homeless* (i.e., Black people find it difficult to fit in, which leaves them without safe places to be themselves), invisible, silenced, and voiceless (Espitia, 2016; Hardy, 2017; Nakaoka & Ortiz, 2018). Torres-Harding et al. (2012) defined invisibility as “being treated as if one is not visible and being dismissed, devalued, ignored, and delegitimized by others because of one’s race” (pp. 155–156). Because White people’s experiences are considered normative, experiences or ideas different from “the norm” tend to render individuals invisible (Nakaoka & Ortiz, 2018). Consequently, invisibility resulted in Black students feeling a lack of trust and suspiciousness of other non-Black students (Kim et al., 2017).

Additionally, microaggressions result in Black students feeling silenced or voiceless. Microaggression constantly diminishes individuals’ self-esteem, fosters self-doubt, and promotes persistent feelings of incompetence (Espitia, 2016; Hardy, 2013). Finally, microaggressions also lead to Black students feeling psychologically homeless, which results from a lack of belonging, a lack of acceptance, always having their thoughts, ideas, and perspectives scrutinized, and feeling emotionally and personally unsafe (Espitia, 2016; Hardy, 1997). According to Espitia (2016), microaggressions are real encounters with a cumulative impact, increasing and eroding individuals’ psychological, emotional, and physical health and wellbeing.

### **Psychological and Emotional Effects**

According to Morales (2014), Black students are tasked with negotiating racial microaggressions at PWIs, including feeling overburdened with the responsibility to educate

others. This task can lead to mental and physical exhaustion (Sue et al., 2008). Mental exhaustion is also associated with Black students having to prove themselves or work harder than their White counterparts (Ogunyemi et al., 2020). Though some faculty argue they treat all students the same—which is a form of colorblindness—denying there is an anti-Black sentiment even in social work programs is an extra burden Black students face. Blume et al. (2012) found an increased risk of anxiety, underage binge drinking, and adverse consequences of alcohol use among students of color experiencing high numbers of microaggressions. Black students also reported crying, leaving class, anger, hostility, needing to protect themselves, helplessness, and sadness (Ogunyemi et al., 2020). Microaggressions affect Black students’ overall quality of life (Sue et al., 2008).

Black students often experience stress and isolation connected to being one of a few Black students on campus. They are frequently subjected to hostile racial climates, often leading to depression, anxiety, and other types of mental health challenges (Hope et al., 2018). Microaggressions also exacerbate the stigma associated with seeking help for psychological and emotional health and well-being, compromising Black students’ mental health (Cheng et al., 2014). This situation is particularly challenging given the existing stigma in the Black community around mental health. According to Chatmon (2020), Black people who experience mental health challenges often are considered “weak, broken or not strong enough” (p. 1), which is problematic for cultures already inundated with negative stereotypes. Stigma—whether internally or externally imposed—leaves vulnerable people to shy away from seeking help, so they suffer in silence. As a profession, social work has been committed to eliminating barriers that limit access to services; understanding the role stigma plays in the Black community, particularly related to mental health, is critical.

Microaggressions also exacerbate the stigma associated with Black students’ experiences in programs of social work. Because stigma represents a stereotypical view of groups that are not a part of the dominant culture, disadvantage is assumed to have a stigmatizing effect (Burke, 2007). Within programs of social work, the curricula that is taught is often grounded in white supremacy and white cultural norms that serve as gatekeeping and stigmatizing among those who are different, such as Black students (Yearwood et al., 2021). Additionally, white supremacy within programs of social work holds whiteness as the default to which all groups, including Black students, are compared (Gooding & Mehrotra, 2021). Thus, the theories that are learned and practices engaged in, such as practicum educational experiences, perpetuate stigma.

Gooding and Mehrotra (2021) conducted a qualitative study with racially diverse students. Their findings revealed two types of microaggressions shared by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) student participants: They felt tokenized and invisible. Additional findings from this study highlight how attitudes from clients and other students (White students) impacted their psychological wellbeing. In fact, participants recalled racial microaggressions that minimized their identities and were disrespectful, patronizing, and dismissive of their experiences and knowledge. What these findings illustrate are the ways in which the attitudes of non-Black students are grounded in stigma about those who are different and that they affect Black students’ professional sense of self, as well as their psychological and emotional wellbeing. “If social work would ... take an honest look at our practices, our theories, our

policies, and our underlying worldview, we must admit that social work is guilty of perpetuating white supremacy” (Yearwood et al., 2021, p. ii).

### **Behavioral and Physical Effects**

In addition to psychological and emotional effects, microaggressions can affect people behaviorally and physically. Fuller-Rowell et al. (2021) found subsequent sleep problems increased on days when participants experienced more discrimination. Among those who also experienced higher scores of internalized racism, the daily impact of discrimination on sleep problems was strongest. Microaggressions also left Black students exhausted and physically depleted (Ogunyemi et al., 2020).

Additionally, Smith et al. (2016) found microaggressions often make Black students susceptible to sickness and compromised immune systems, headaches, uneasiness, irritation, chronic pain, and elevated blood pressure. Microaggressions, racism, and racial battle fatigue among Black students caused anxiety, ulcers, cardiovascular disease, obesity, increased risk of heart disease, nightmares, erratic mood swings, and emotional and social withdrawal (Goosby et al., 2018; Soto et al., 2011). Black bodies can break down due to prolonged, ongoing exposure to microaggressions (Brondolo et al., 2009). These long-term health consequences can lead to premature death (Smith et al., 2016, 2020).

### **Gaps in Literature**

Countless studies have documented the microaggressions Black students face in institutions of higher learning (Nakaoka & Ortiz, 2018; Ogunyemi et al., 2020). However, there is a dearth of studies which have looked at microaggressions in social work programs and other helping professions, as the harm caused to Black students could impact service delivery and the ability to help individuals and families (Ogunyemi et al., 2020).

### **Incidents of Microaggressions**

The incidents presented in the next two sections are a combination of experiences drawn from the authors and other social work professionals affiliated with different institutions. These incidents are current, ongoing, constant, and have a cumulative effect. All of them have occurred at PWIs in social work programs located in the Midwest, West Coast, and Southern regions of the United States. To illustrate our point, the examples provided focus on the microaggressions that Black students and professors experienced primarily by White professors and colleagues. However, some incidents involved Black students who microaggressed against other Black students.

Consistently, Black students are being harmed in social work programs across the nation. The harm takes many forms, including microinsults, microinvalidations, microassaults, institutional microaggressions, macroaggressions, and mega-aggressions. Additionally, Black students have identified ways to react to microaggressions to mitigate and navigate the harm, stress, and anxiety related to these experiences.

## **Microinsults**

Examples of microinsults in social work programs are:

- A White professor told Black students “Black people are not my thing” when the student asked how a theory applied to people of color.
- A White classmate indicated that a Black student was “hostile” and “aggressive” when they disagreed with the classmate.
- Several Black students were told by their White peers that they were “not like other Black people.” They are “different,” as if that was a compliment.
- Black students were called “Oreos”: Black on the outside but White on the inside by other Black students.
- Non-Black students and faculty put the onus and responsibility on Black students to teach them about Black people. They said to Black students, “How are we supposed to learn about Black issues if the Black students do not teach us?”
- White classmates asked Black students if they could use the “N” word. A student said, “Many of the songs I like, say it. I am just singing the song. It is not targeted at anyone. I do not mean anything by it.”
- White students dressed up in Blackface as a “ghetto” Black girl for Halloween.
- Black students faced challenges in their field placements or internships, not because they could not do the work, but because of differences in how Black students see the world from their White colleagues and supervisors. Thus, Black students have been penalized (e.g., lower grades, labeled as combative students) and deemed incompetent.

## **Microinvalidations**

Examples of microinvalidations in social work programs are:

- Black students were excluded from social gatherings because they did not want the event to become “ghetto.”
- A White professor stated she understood Black people’s plight because she is vegetarian, and she “often is in spaces that do not offer nonmeat food options.”
- A Black student had a White classmate state in class that she “could relate to a wounded animal more than a Black person.”



- A White professor told Black students she “understands what it is like to be Black” because some of her aunts were considered witches.
- Black students told students or professors they were offended by a racist or offensive comment. They accused Black students of overreacting and being hypersensitive to the point of paranoia. In other instances, the offenders told Black students it did not happen the way they were portraying it, which Black students felt was a form of gaslighting.

### **Microassaults**

Examples of microassaults in social work programs are:

- A White classmate touched the braids of a Black classmate and stated her hair “looked like cat hair.” When the Black student told the White student it was rude to touch her and say that, the White student started crying as if she was victimized.
- Black students talked about being verbally ganged up on in class and ostracized by White students and this carried over outside the classroom. For example, Black students passed White students in the hall, and they laughed or whispered about the Black students.
- Black students were called the “N” word and harassed by White classmates.
- White students with opposing opinions verbally and emotionally assaulted Black students during class discussions.

### **Institutional Microaggressions**

Examples of institutional microaggressions in social work programs are:

- White students falsely reported Title IX violations to bring Black students up on charges, which ultimately were dismissed, but not before damage was done to students. One student was so distraught over the charges and potentially getting kicked out of school that they attempted suicide.
- Campus leaders did not want to enforce race and inequity training because they did not want to make White people feel uncomfortable or wronged in any way.
- Social work programs only provided resources (i.e., scholarships, class choices) to traditional students (i.e., on campus, full time, main campus), which happened to serve predominantly White students in those venues, leaving out nontraditional students (i.e., online, part time, and satellite campuses) who are predominantly Black students.
- Several White students intentionally tried to get a Black student dismissed from the program by submitting false reports and publicly “smearing the student’s name” and reputation. As a result, the Black student attempted suicide.

- White students told other White students to meet with their Black professor and cry at their meeting to get a better grade after failing a test.
- White students intentionally tried to get a Black female professor fired because she graded too rigorously and pushed White students beyond their comfort zone.

### **Strategies Students Used to Deal with Microaggressions**

Black students have used various strategies to minimize the ongoing, daily microaggressions experienced in social work programs. Many students reported being resilient in the face of these microaggressions. Though resilience is noble, Black students should not have to be resilient to cope with hostile and indifferent campus climates.

#### **Self-Blame and Self-Depreciation**

Self-blame and self-depreciation are strategies Black students used to deal with microaggressions. Black students felt shame and guilt. They often blamed themselves for the treatment, believing the microaggression would not have happened if they were somehow different. These experiences often left Black students to feel unworthy and like imposters who only accidentally got into the program.

#### **Emotional Breakdown and Suicidal Attempts**

Black students were crying and breathing heavily in class. One student experienced such extreme harassment and bullying from White students they attempted suicide and were committed to a psychiatric unit.

#### **Created Safe Space for Black Students**

Black students were not welcomed or allowed in White spaces, so they created their own spaces for Black students. They created separate networks and took care of one another.

#### **Tried Even Harder to Gain Acceptance**

Black students worked hard to gain the respect and acceptance of White peers and faculty. Some went beyond what was expected to prove to other students and faculty they belonged, which often resulted in perfectionism and anxiety to prove themselves worthy.

#### **Searched for Resources**

Black students sought out resources to help them deal with stress connected to a hostile racial climate. Often, these resources were other Black faculty and staff. They sought out Black faculty and staff for support, solace, information, and help to navigate White spaces.

## **Disengaged**

Black students disengaged and gave up trying to get the School of Social Work to change. Black students were frustrated professors did not interject and protect Black students in the same ways they interjected and protected White students. Disengagement often led to students biding their time and focusing on graduating from the program, which often resulted in not caring about changing the program for students who came after them. It was too painful for many Black students to remain engaged.

## **Left the Program**

Black students left the program, which is significant because many students left with student loan debt and no degree in exchange for the debt. Nonetheless, their experiences were so difficult and challenging they could not remain in the program.

## **Left the Profession and Changed Their Major**

Some Black students decided to leave the social work profession. They changed their major to STEM careers and, in other instances, to education or other kinds of helping professions that did not profess to have social justice as a core value.

## **No Longer Want to be Associated with the Social Work Profession**

Some Black students finished the requirements and graduated from the program but decided not to pursue licensure or any social work-related job. These students felt they had given enough to the social work profession and refused to give any more. They want nothing to do with the social work profession or their social work degree. Though some students have displaced anger and rage at the social work profession, many Black students are indifferent. They no longer desire to be associated with the social work profession in any way.

## **Summary**

Students reported these strategies as those used most often to deal with microaggressions. These strategies should not be classified as healthy or unhealthy because these strategies were in direct response to microaggressions and racism. According to Smith et al. (2020), “although higher education institutions tout their welcoming environment for students of color ... their predominantly White culture are settings that still enable racial microaggressions and discrimination toward African Americans” (p. 83).

## **Discussion**

Many studies have found Black students experience microaggressions in PWIs (e.g., DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby Jr., 2016; Franklin, 2019; Ogunyemi et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2016, 2020). Black graduate students’ most commonly experienced microaggressions have been microinsults,

microinvalidations, microassaults, and institutional microaggressions (Ogunyemi et al., 2020; Sue et al., 2007).

This study makes two contributions. This study offers a slightly different definition of institutional microaggressions. The second contribution of the study is the focus on social work programs. The addition of institutional microaggression as a form of microaggressions is an important contribution. Ogunyemi et al. (2020) did not define institutional microaggressions, but they indicated institutional microaggressions resulted in “cultural starvation of minorities” and “institutional maintenance of an apartheid of knowledge, which tends to marginalize, discredit, and devalue the scholarship, of other cultures” (p. 107). In this study, institutional microaggressions referred to how non-Black students and those in leadership roles used institutions or hid behind institutions to mistreat or disregard Black students and faculty. On the surface, these acts may seem harmless or well within the rights of individuals; however, the intent behind the actions was to harm, exclude, or punish Black students and faculty who misbehaved or were deemed unworthy.

Social justice is a core value of the social work profession. Many students come to social work programs hoping these spaces would be a safe haven from racial harm because of the programs’ mission and core values (Nakaoka & Ortiz, 2018). When students are injured in places they believed safe, they often leave social work programs deeply wounded and disillusioned about the profession. In some cases, Black students left social work programs and changed their majors or career goals.

Though many people believe social workers should be leading and advocating for antiracist practices, the social work profession must first deal with its reluctance to embrace antiracist practices. There have been multiple calls to action: a NASW (2007) report titled “Institutional Racism and the Social Work Profession: A Call to Action” and a report from the Social Work Policy Institute (2014) titled “Achieving Racial Equity: Calling the Social Work Profession to Act.” According to NASW (2020), social work “cannot maximize its mission and fully actualize its core values without advocating to reform, dismantle, or even abolish the racist and oppressive systems we may work within and beside” (para. 2).

Many strategies Black students used to deal with microaggressions have been identified by other studies. Yosso et al. (2009) found Latino students created counter spaces in response to microaggressions they experienced in educational environments. Several studies identified emotional and psychological reactions to microaggressions. Ogunyemi et al. (2020) reported African American students experienced “self-doubt, discouragement, frustration, and exhaustion, which further negatively affected academic performance and goals” (p. 100). Ogunyemi et al. (2020) also found students searched for resources to help alleviate any problems associated with microaggressions. Sanchez et al. (2018) found Asian and Latinx students disengaged from academic environments to cope with microaggressions. That some students changed their major or refused to be associated with the social work profession is a new contribution to the study of microaggression experienced by students in higher education environments.

Overall, many microaggressions stem from anti-Blackness. The anti-Blackness not only comes from White students but also from other students of color. Despite being considered a student of color, many take solace because at least they are not Black. The fact this anti-Blackness occurs in social work programs is not a new occurrence. According to Haley (2020),

U.S. social workers have played an integral role in anti-Black sentiment as evidenced by (1) Endorsing the logic of Indigenous erasure in the U.S. and Canada by upholding the mythology that White people came first and were the developers of the land; (2) Endorsing the logic of anti-Blackness in the U.S. by upholding Black segregation policy required by organized White philanthropy; and (3) Endorsing the paradox of inclusion in respectability politics by being complicit with equal but separate treatment of Black women. (p. 217)

Black students encounter microaggressions and unsafe classroom spaces, which interfere with Black students’ learning and opportunities to receive an equitable education. Often, when a microaggression occurs in the classroom, Black students begin thinking about correcting the offender or letting it go. The stress and anxiety from these incidents often leave Black students wondering if they are too sensitive or whether their complaint is legitimate. If they decide to speak up, they are constantly worried about addressing the harm without crying, appearing angry or aggressive, or giving people more reasons to discredit them (Robinson, 2013). While Black students are processing this situation, instruction is still happening. Microaggressions can cause Black students to miss valuable education as they tend to the constantly reopened wounds throughout their time in graduate school (Nakaoka & Ortiz, 2018).

Though Black students can access the same educational environments as White students, they are not receiving an equitable education because microaggressions often cumulatively inflict “trauma, stress and emotional exhaustion” (Dennis, 2020, p. 10). The extra energy and internal resources students need to navigate microaggressions often cause hostile environments that can negatively impact and interfere with Black students’ educational experiences (Ogunyemi et al., 2020).

### **Implications for Social Work Education**

According to Aldana and Vazquez (2020), “the attention social work education has given to racism has been sporadic and inconsistent throughout its history” (p. 137). Given the social, political, and cultural contexts in which they live, Black students’ experiences with racism and microaggressions in social work programs are often the antithesis of what they expect to experience in graduate programs grounded in social justice. Social work programs cannot ignore the amount of energy Black students exert, given their constant and cumulative experiences with racism and microaggressions. If social work programs fail to address racism and microaggressions Black students face, schools may begin to see decreases in the recruitment and retention of Black students.

Further, Black students suffer for remaining silent, ignoring, reporting, or taking any action to address the injustices they have experienced because of racism and microaggressions. In taking

action, Black students find themselves taxed and unable to remain committed to the field of social work because the fight to earn their degree was wrought with frequent and harmful exchanges. Various examples of microaggressions described by the authors are not unlike narratives from other Black students. For example, other studies described the psychological harm Black students experienced with microaggressions on campuses and how they undermine their sense of worth and belongingness (Minikel-Lacocque, 2013; Soloranzo et al., 2000; Williams et al., 2020).

Historically, limited attention has been given to the experiences of racism and microaggression in social work education (Aldana & Vazquez, 2020). Social work programs have an overwhelming responsibility to educate a diverse student body. However, social work programs can no longer miss critical opportunities to improve their understanding of Black students’ lived experiences with racism and microaggressions that occur in their buildings. Suggestions for students to submit complaints to offices of institutional equity or file a grievance are passive. Additionally, this redirection can cause further harm to Black students through isolation, intimidation, and even more severe psychological and physical health outcomes. By understanding the impact racism and microaggressions have on Black students inside and outside of the classroom, social work programs will be better positioned to address Black students’ complaints regarding such challenges. To address institutional microaggressions and create a positive racial climate on campuses for Black students, social work programs need a critical mass of Black students, faculty, and administrators that recognize the importance of their role to effectively alleviate the problem (Ogunyemi et al., 2020). Furthermore, social work programs need curricula that include the historical and contemporary experiences of Black people; offer programs institutionalized and support the recruitment and retention of Black students; and have an institutional mission that enforces a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (Ogunyemi et al., 2020).

According to the NASW (2020), “social workers have an ethical duty to dismantle racism, both personally and professionally, and to demonstrate what it means to be anti-racist” (para. 1). Now is an ideal time for schools to define what it means to no longer engage in racist practices in their programs. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021) declared racism a serious public health crisis. Surely social work programs can declare racism a serious social justice issue and begin to address this massive problem. We hope social work programs can actively work toward eradicating its complicity in racism and microaggressions by enhancing social workers’ ability to perceive, scrutinize, and challenge racial oppression (Aldana & Vazquez, 2020).

## References

Aldana, A., & Vazquez, N. (2020). From colour-blind racism to critical race theory: The road towards anti-racist social work in the United States. In G. Singh & S. Masocha (Eds.), *Anti-racist social work: International perspectives* (pp. 129–148). Red Globe Press.

Blume, A. W., Lovato, L. V., Thyken, B. N., & Denny, N. (2012). The relationship of microaggressions with alcohol use and anxiety among ethnic minority college students in a

historically White institution. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 18(1), 45–54. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0025457>

Brondolo, E., Ver Halen, N. B., Pencille, M., Beatty, D., & Contrada, R. J. (2009). Coping with racism: A selective review of the literature and a theoretical and methodological critique. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 32(1), 64–88. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10865-008-9193-0>

Brown, S. L., Johnson, Z., & Miller, S. E. (2019). Racial microaggressions and Black social work students: A call to social work educators for proactive models informed by social justice. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 38(5), 618–630. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2019.1594754>

Burke, P. (2007). Disadvantage and stigma: A theoretical framework for associated conditions. In P. Burke & J. Parker (Eds.), *Social work and disadvantage: Addressing the roots of stigma through association* (pp. 11–26). Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021, April 12). *Racism and health*. <https://www.cdc.gov/healthequity/racism-disparities/index.html>

Chatmon, B. N. (2020). Males and mental health stigma. *American Journal of Men’s Health*, (July–August), 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1557988320949322>

Cheng, C., Lau, H. P. B., & Chan, M. P. S. (2014). Coping flexibility and psychological adjustment to stressful life changes: A meta-analytic review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 140, 1582–1607. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0037913>

Compton-Lilly, C. (2020). Microaggressions and macroaggressions across time: The longitudinal construction of inequality in schools. *Urban Education*, 55(8–9), 1315–1349. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085919893751>

DeCuir-Gunby, J. T., & Gunby, N. W., Jr. (2016). Racial microaggressions in the workplace: A critical race analysis of the experiences of African American educators. *Urban Education*, 51(4), 390–414.

DeCuir-Gunby, J. T., Johnson, O. T., Edwards, C. W., McCoy, W. N., & White, A. M. (2020). African American professionals in higher education: Experiencing and coping with racial microaggressions. *Race, Ethnicity, and Education*, (23)4, 492–508. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2019.1579706>

Dennis, T. (2020, August 17). Creating anti-racist spaces where Black students can breathe and thrive. *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education*. <https://diverseeducation.com/article/187698/>

Druery, D. M., Young, J. L., & Elbert, C. (2018). Macroaggressions and civil discourse. *Women, Gender, and Families of Color*, 6(1), 73–78. <https://doi.org/10.5406/womgenfamcol.6.1.0073>

- Espitia, B. B. (2016). Micro-aggressions and their violent impact on low-income Latinos in the US: Reflections of a therapist. *Hispanofila*, 178, 135–151. <https://doi.org/10.1353/hsf.2016.0064>
- Forrest-Bank, S., & Jenson, J. M. (2015). Differences in experiences of racial and ethnic microaggression among Asian, Latino/Hispanic, Black, and White young adults. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, 42, 141–161. <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3891&context=jssw>
- Franklin, J. D. (2019). Coping with racial battle fatigue: Differences and similarities for African American and Mexican American college students. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 22(5), 589–609. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2019.1579178>
- Fuller-Rowell, T. E., Nichols, O. I., Burrow, A. L., Ong, A. D., Chae, D. H., & El-Sheikh, M. (2021). Day-to-day fluctuations in experiences of discrimination: Associations with sleep and the moderating role of internalized racism among African American college students. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 27(1), 107–117. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000342>
- Gomez, M. L., Khurshid, A., Freitag, M. B., & Lachuk, A. J. (2011). Microaggressions in graduate students’ lives: How they are encountered and their consequences. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 27(8), 1189–1199. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2011.06.003>
- Gooding, A. R., & Mehrotra, G. R. (2021). Interrupting white supremacy in field education: Experiences of microaggressions in field placement settings. *Advances in Social Work*, 21(2/3), 311–330. <https://doi.org/10.18060/24095>
- Goosby, B. J., Cheadle, J. E., & Mitchell, C. (2018). Stress-related biosocial mechanisms of discrimination and African American health inequities. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 44, 319–340. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-060116-053403>
- Gregory, J. R. (2021). Social work as a product and project of Whiteness, 1607–1900. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, 32(1), 17–36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10428232.2020.1730143>
- Haley, J. M. (2020). Intersectional and relational frameworks: Confronting anti-Blackness, settler colonialism, and neoliberalism in U.S. social work. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, 31(3), 210–225. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10428232.2019.1703246>
- Hardy, K. V. (1997). Not quite home: The psychological effects of oppression. *The Family*, 2(3), 6–8.
- Hardy, K. V. (2013). Healing the hidden wounds of racial trauma. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 22(1), 24–28. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/545cdfce4b0a64725b9f65a/t/54da3451e4b0ac9bd1d1cd30/1423586385564/Healing.pdf>



- Hardy, K. V. (2017). How far have we come? Ken Hardy weighs in. *Psychotherapy Networker*. <https://www.psychotherapynetworker.org/blog/details/1114/race-matters>
- Hope, E. C., Velez, G., Offidani-Bertrand, C., Keels, M., & Durkee, M. I. (2018). Political activism and mental health among Black and Latinx college students. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 24*(1), 26–39. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000144>
- Jeyasingham, D. (2012). White noise: A critical evaluation of social work education’s engagement with Whiteness studies. *British Journal of Social Work, 42*(4), 669–686. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcr110>
- Johnson-Bailey, J., Valentine, T., Cervero, R. M., & Bowles, T. A. (2009). Rooted in the soil: The social experiences of Black graduate students at a southern research university. *The Journal of Higher Education, 80*(2), 178–203. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2009.11772138>
- Karkouti, I. M. (2016). Black students’ educational experiences in predominantly White universities: A review of the related literature. *College Student Journal, 50*(1), 59–70.
- Kim, P. Y., Kendall, D. L., & Cheon, H. S. (2017). Racial microaggressions, cultural mistrust, and mental health outcomes among Asian American college students. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 87*(6), 663–692. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000203>
- Miller, J., & Garran, A. M. (2007). The web of institutional racism. *Smith College Studies in Social Work, 77*(1), 33–67. [https://doi.org/10.1300/J497v77n01\\_03](https://doi.org/10.1300/J497v77n01_03)
- Minikel-Lacocque, J. (2013). Racism, college, and the power of words: Racial microaggressions reconsidered. *American Education Research Journal, 50*(3), 432–465. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831212468048>
- Mirza, H. S. (2018). Racism in higher education: ‘What then, can be done?’ In J. Arday & H. S. Mirza (Eds.), *Dismantling race in higher education: Racism, Whiteness, and decolonising the academy* (pp. 3–23). Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-60261-5\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-60261-5_1)
- Morales, E. M. (2014). Intersectional impact: Black students and race, gender, and class microaggressions in higher education. *Race, Gender, and Class 21*(3/4), 48–66.
- Nakaoka, S., & Ortiz, L. (2018). Examining racial microaggressions as a tool for transforming social work education: The case for critical race pedagogy. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work, 27*(1), 72–85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15313204.2017.1417947>
- 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. (2020, August 21). *Social workers must help dismantle systems of oppression and fight racism within the profession.*

<https://www.socialworkers.org/News/News-Releases/ID/2219/Social-Workers-Must-Help-Dismantle-Systems-of-Oppression-and-Fight-Racism-Within-Social-Work-Profession>

National Association of Social Workers. (2021). *Code of ethics of the national association of social workers.* <https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English>

Nylund, D. (2006). Critical multiculturalism, Whiteness, and social work: Towards a more radical view of cultural competence. *Journal of Progressive Human Services, 17*(2), 27–42.

[https://doi.org/10.1300/J059v17n02\\_03](https://doi.org/10.1300/J059v17n02_03)

Ogunyemi, D., Clare, C., Astudillo, Y. M., Marseille, M., Manu, E., & Kim, S. (2020). Microaggressions in the learning environment: A systematic review. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 13*(2), 97–119. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000107>

Pierce, C. (1970). Offensive mechanisms. In F. B. Barbour (Ed.), *The Black seventies* (pp. 265–282). Porter Sargent.

Pinderhughes, E. (1989). *Understanding race, ethnicity, and power: The key to efficacy in clinical practice.* Simon and Schuster.

Robinson, O. V. (2013). Telling the story of role conflict among Black nurses and Black nursing students: A literature review. *Journal of Nursing Education, 52*(9), 517–524.

<https://doi.org/10.3928/01484834-20130819-04>

Sanchez, D., Adams, W. N., Arango, S. C., & Flannigan, A. E. (2018). Racial-ethnic microaggressions, coping strategies, and mental health in Asian American and Latinx American college students: A mediation model. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 65*(2), 214–225.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000249>

Shoge, K. E. (2019). *Black female graduate students' experiences of racial microaggressions at a Southern university* (Publication No. 328) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Arkansas]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

Smith, W. A., Franklin, J. D., & Hung, M. (2020). The impact of racial microaggressions across educational attainment for African Americans. *Journal of Minority Achievement, Creativity, and Leadership, 1*(1), 70–93. <https://doi.org/10.5325/minoachicrealead.1.1.0070>

Smith, W. A., Mustaffa, J. B., Jones, C. M., Curry, T. J., & Allen, W. R. (2016). ‘You make me wanna holler and throw up both my hands!’: Campus culture, Black misandric microaggressions, and racial battle fatigue. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 29*(9), 1189–1209. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2016.1214296>

Social Work Policy Institute. (2014). *Achieving racial equity: Calling the social work profession to action*. National Association of Social Workers.

<http://www.antiracistalliance.com/SWPIRacialEquityReport.pdf>

Soloranzo, D., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students. *Journal of Negro Education*, 69(1/2), 60–73.

Soto, J. A., Dawson-Andoh, N. A., & BeLue, R. (2011). The relationship between perceived discrimination and generalized anxiety disorder among African Americans, Afro Caribbeans, and non-Hispanic Whites. *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, 25(2), 258–265.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.janxdis.2010.09.011>

St. Amour, M. (2020, June 11). California’s community colleges unite on racial equity. *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/06/12/california-community-college-alliance-aims-improve-racial-equity-higher-education>

Sue, D. W. (2010). *Microaggressions in everyday life: Race, gender, and sexual orientation*. John Wiley & Sons.

Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., & Holder, A. (2008). Racial microaggressions in the life experience of Black Americans. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 39(3), 329–336. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0735-7028.39.3.329>

Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A., Nadal, K. L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice. *American Psychologist*, 62(4), 271–286. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.62.4.271>

Sue, D. W., Rivera, D. P., Watkins, N. L., Kim, R. H., Kim, S., & Williams, C. D. (2011). Racial dialogues: Challenges faculty of color face in the classroom. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 17(3), 331–340. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0024190>

Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537 (1895). <https://www.loc.gov/item/usrep163537/>

Torres-Harding, S. R., Andrade, A. L., Jr., & Romero Diaz, C. E. (2012). The racial microaggressions scale (RMAS): A new scale to measure experiences of racial microaggressions in people of color. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 18(2), 153–164. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0027658>

Walkington, L. (2017). How far have we really come? Black women faculty and graduate students’ experiences in higher education. *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*, 39, 51–65.

Williams, M. T., Skinta, M. D., Kanter, J. W., Martin-Willett, R., Mier-Chairez, J., Debreaux, M., & Rosen, D. C. (2020). A qualitative study of microaggressions against African Americans

on predominantly White campuses. *BMC Psychology*, 8(111), 1–13.

<https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-020-00472-8>

Wilson, S. (2012). They forgot mammy had a brain. In G. G. Muhs (Ed.), *Presumed incompetent: The intersections of race and class for women in academia* (pp. 65–77). University Press of Colorado. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt4cgr3k.11>

Yearwood, C. C., Barbera, R. A., Fisher, A. K., & Hostetter, C. (2021). Dismantling white supremacy in social work education: We build the road by walking. *Advances in Social Work*, 21(2/3), i–vii. <https://doi.org/10.18060/25652>

Yosso, T., Smith, W., Ceja, M., & Solórzano, D. (2009). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate for Latina/o undergraduates. *Harvard Educational Review*, 79(4), 659–691. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.79.4.m6867014157m7071>

**About the Authors:** Joan M. Blakey, PhD, LGSW is Gamble-Skogmo Endowed Chair, School of Social Work, University of Minnesota Twin Cities, Minneapolis, MN, and St. Paul, MN ([blak0014@umn.edu](mailto:blak0014@umn.edu)); Quenette Walton, PhD, LCSW is Associate Professor, Graduate College of Social Work, University of Houston, Houston, TX ([qwalton2@central.uh.edu](mailto:qwalton2@central.uh.edu)); Sheara Jennings, PhD, is Associate Professor and Humana Endowed Chair in Social Determinants of Health, Graduate College of Social Work, University of Houston, Houston, TX ([swillia8@central.uh.edu](mailto:swillia8@central.uh.edu)).

# **Dilate: A Reflection on How My Marginalized Experiences in Education Created My Call for Equity in Social Work Education**

Nathaniel L. Currie

**Abstract:** Creating anti-oppressive social work education and practice begins at the front door with admissions to social work school. Having had the unique perspective of being a child and adolescent that received social work services and later becoming a licensed social worker—then social work academic—myself, there is a direct connection between my experiences in public education, my experiences in social work education, and equity in social work school admissions. This piece seeks to demonstrate such.

**Keywords:** developing identity, equity, public education, social work education, race, poetry

After about seven years of unstable living environments and foster care—a blur of different beds, different school playgrounds, and no continuous attachment—I was adopted. I was born to a teen mother and absent father. My biological mother is White, the daughter of Greek immigrants. My father is Black and some part Native American. Neither one of them had an interest in or the ability to care for me or keep me safe, and this more than anything led to my foster care experience and eventual adoption. In some ways, race is like early childhood trauma in that it sets you apart from, and behind, your peers, then you spend much of, if not the rest of, your life trying to catch up—healing and learning, or self-sabotaging and yearning. I was adopted at the age of seven and spent my childhood with my adoptive family in a majority white suburban town in southern New Hampshire, about 50 minutes north of Boston. In my earliest elementary school years, I did not see myself as different from the other children, at least not by my race. I knew I was different because I had a new family, and I was sad and cried often, while the other children did not. Today I know I was living with significant trauma from early years of abuse, broken attachments, frequent changes in homes, and school disruptions. I was the only Black child in my first-grade class in Manchester, NH. The only Black child in my second-grade class, and in my third-grade class, and only one or two in each grade thereafter through to college.

Because I “acted out” often, cried often, daydreamed or “seemed distant, or had trouble following along during lessons and would ask the teacher to repeat questions or directions, I was sent to Special Education. Not because I had a learning disability, but because I was displaying trauma symptomatology. In the late 1980s and early 1990s this was where you were sent when you learned differently. Once or twice a week during the teacher’s regular lesson I was fetched by a school aide and walked to the Special Education room across a long corridor. I hated going. I felt even more different... even stupid. Why was a first grader who read at a third-grade level being walked down to the Special Education room? Was it because I self-isolated from the other children during recess? Because I did not trust adults? Because I would rush through my assigned schoolwork so I could take my book to the reading rug? At the time, books were the only place I felt safe. They were also the only place I saw Black and Brown people.

At home I struggled too, but not like I did at school. At school I did not trust what anyone said; at home I at least had my adopted mother, and I trusted her. Before I was ever aware of my race and how that marked me as “other” in America, I was aware of where I came from. What happened to me before my adopted home made me different. People do not understand different, especially my kind of different. Black and different. But was I different, though? Says who? On what authority?

In elementary school, these feelings of difference made me hypervigilant and aware, especially around fairness. I often thought the way I was treated was unfair. I had a sense that I was being treated differently by adults at school. Singled out. I was told it was because of my behavior. I did struggle with my behavior; I was unattached, living with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and often overstimulated. I was also Brown or Black, depending on who you asked. When you are a Brown child, you must behave better than your White peers, or you are “trouble.” You must perform better, faster, in reading, in sports, and group activities, or you are struggling. Whiteness is the baseline for which we are all measured as children, and thereafter. When you are a Brown child, White adults see you as Brown first, especially when you are the only Brown child in a classroom that is a blur of alabaster. You are Brown, and then you’re everything else. I wrote a haiku (pictured below) inspired by personal reflections of my early education as I researched and wrote this article. I so enjoy parallel therapeutic process and critical scholarship, as well as the intersections of the arts and academia. Including my scholarship and my art cohesively in this piece felt within the spirit of the work.

Often, I would report moments I experienced as “unfair” to adults and would be met with resistance, gaslighting, and redirection. I was not wrong. I would be disciplined more regularly and more severely for engaging in the same behavior as my White male peers. In fact, as a child, White boys were my only friends and my accomplices in mischief. However, I would often be the only one punished, made to sit in the hall during lessons, or miss recess. My White male peers rarely stood up and took responsibility for their part in said mischief. I was both the troublemaker and the whipping boy. On one occasion in sixth grade, my teacher, fed up with incessant chatter between two classmates and myself, reprimanded us. She took it a step further with me, moving my desk out of the classroom and down the hallway, then placed a screen partition around the desk. My desk and I sat in this hallway location for over a week. I was literally segregated from the classroom. I was humiliated. Between classes, other students passed my desk, they would peek in and laugh, poke fun, giggle.

**haiku for me in 1994**

fragile like a bomb  
skullduggery and my brown  
body demarcate

“Nathan, what did you do?”

“I was talking during class.”

“Oh. But then why are you here?”

“I don’t know...”

No White student during my time at this school was ever segregated from their peers, especially not in a public space for others to scrutinize or gawk at. Humiliation was not an uncommon experience in both primary and secondary school. Racist microaggressions showed up in not just the aforementioned cases, but more blatantly and more frequently as I progressed through grade school. Comments were often made about my kinky/curly hair, larger nose, and lips. Some comments were more blatant like “don’t forget to smile or we won’t be able to see you in the picture.” These kinds of comments would be racist and damaging to any Black student, but the fact that I am light skinned, and frankly not much darker hued than many of my olive complexion White peers made it clear the intent was to use my race to demean and belittle me.

As a teenager, I wore my hair in an afro style and later in short dreadlocks. Outside of my home, I was self-conscious about my hair. Middle-aged White women would ask to touch my “beautiful curls,” sometimes running or swirling their hands in my hair without permission. Even worse would be people, sometimes grown adults, describing my hair as nappy, or comparing it to a Q-tip or Brillo pad. One day in eighth grade, my cisgender White male math teacher stated to me in front of a classroom full of my White peers that my hair looked “like a rat nest.” Many students laughed. I was mortified and ashamed. I was humiliated. I felt powerless. And small. By the time I was in college, discriminatory attacks went from teasing and microaggression to clear dislike or disdain for me because of my race or my queerness. On one occasion during undergrad while watching Beyoncé sing the national anthem for a baseball game in a room full of White students, a White male commented aloud “Why does she have to niggify the national anthem?” The majority of the room laughed, or agreed, or continued to sit complacent drinking their Coors Light. I felt angry. Unsafe. Hurt. Disgusted. Alone.

Through college I became more aware of the racial inequities and privileges between myself and my White peers. Comments or moments of discrimination or racism became less covert and more overt. I became accustomed to them. I thought, “As long as they don’t call me a nigger or faggot, it’s not that bad.” Black and Brown people in White spaces, or in spaces where whiteness is centered, learn to even gaslight ourselves. I often found myself wishing that experiences of discrimination were the covert kind, so as to save me from the embarrassment and fear of the overt kind. I would mentally rank and even prepare for the impending experiences of discrimination. In some ways, the overt experiences of discrimination served to make allowance for the covert experiences of discrimination—in and of itself another type of discrimination; it highlights what we understand in anti-oppressive work, that race-based discrimination is endemic in the social fabrics of American culture (Delgado et. al., 2017); as it has been in my experiences.

Even as a social work major (where I expected White professors and other students majoring in the subject would be far better in terms of racial difference), I felt again and again that my field supervisors preferred White people (particularly White women), over me and over what I had to contribute to the field. It was as though my Blackness and queerness did not have as valuable or as needed a place in social work practice. My first field supervisor often suggested that I was less motivated or able, as compared to White women she supervised. Other times she would ascribe aspects of my behavior that she perceived as problematic to represent that of my entire race. She actually said to me on at least two occasions, “In the future I am going to request a

[White] woman; they just work harder.” In response, I worked harder to prove myself, causing myself more stress and anxiety in the process, while never actually feeling valued. But did she understand that I worked two jobs while in college, in addition to taking full-time classes and arriving at my (unpaid) internship on time every day? Who was really working harder? Me or the privileged white women she was comfortable working next to?

Institutional, systemic, and intrapersonal forms of racism, that are embedded in society through laws, organization, racial preference, inequity, bias and so forth (Miller & Garran, 2007; Miller & Garran, 2017), had showed up in my personal experience from elementary school and remained intact and often undisrupted through each level of formal schooling including social work school. It was the frequency and magnitude of my discriminatory experiences that began my interest in learning both about my own racial identity and its development and the endemic nature of race discrimination in learning environments.

By the time I began my matriculation to social work school in Boston, where I pursued a Master of Social Work degree, I already had a keen lens for evaluating unfair and inequitable practices—skills that were refined in that very program, and later advanced in my Doctor of Social Work program, which I completed in 2017 at the University of Pennsylvania. Audre Lorde (1979) once wrote “The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house” (p. 25). I find this true in almost every area of life except possibly social work education. A field and scholarship ubiquitous for teaching the values of diversity and concepts and practice of empowerment and social justice.

“The purpose of playing, whose end,  
both at the first and now,  
was and is,  
to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature:  
to show virtue her feature,  
scorn her own image,  
and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.”  
(Shakespeare, 1603/1825, 3.2.21–25)

In other words, contemporary social work education has told on itself. The very social justice, equity, and power analysis tools we use to evaluate environments, systems, and human experiences have shown us that social work remains quite colonized and severely inept at holding itself completely accountable to, well, itself. Many social workers, aligned with a liberation movement, and with motivation of our own lived experiences, have taken “the master’s tools” and shown the mirror directly towards the profession of social work. I would be remiss and guilty of perpetuating the colonial values that center whiteness and create oppression for those outside whiteness if I didn’t use the tools and skills achieved in social work school not just on my understanding of and action in the world outside, but, perhaps more importantly, to the world inside. The world that is social work education, which continues to center whiteness and uphold its idealized privilege.



For example, in my observation and engagement with peers while earning my Master of Social Work degree, it was clear that White applicants who never experienced intergenerational racial trauma, who were recipients of intergenerational wealth, and who had privileges I had never known, received merit and other scholarships, advanced standing, and even preferential treatment in practicum placement. This claim is large, but I can explain, and will, as these experiences have incited my call to action for the benefit and equity of all social work graduate students and the institutions for which they matriculate.

First, in examining the concept of equity, the condition of fair and just inclusion into a society: Equity exists when those who have been most marginalized have equal access to opportunities, power, participation, and resources. Equity requires restructuring deeply entrenched systems of power, privilege, and oppression that have led to the uneven distribution of benefits and burdens over multiple generations (Dyer, 2020). We can begin the application of equity principles to social work education admissions by conceptualizing who most benefits from advanced standing status, how they benefit, how others might hold deficit without the benefit, and the effects of offering the benefit to some while excluding others. We must look at advanced standing status as an institutional and consumer benefit.

When social work schools do not consistently if at all evaluate aid and benefits to students based on need, histories of oppression, or socially engineered trauma experience, they are in fact perpetuating the very systems responsible for inequity and relinquishing true equity. A universal requirement for advanced standing is GPA. GPA is often used to measure a student candidate's academic ability, success, and potential in an accelerated program. At Boston College in Chestnut Hill, MA, the required GPA for advanced standing in their Master of Social work program is 3.3—at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles it is 3.0, and other Master of Social Work programs at universities such as Washington University in St. Louis, The University of Illinois, and so on have similar criteria. What is in a GPA? Is a GPA a true measurement of intellect? Of motivation and resiliency? Of potential for contribution to the profession of social work? If GPA does predetermine these factors, how so?

GPA cannot measure perseverance or insight or overall ability. It can measure one's ability to use readily available resources to learn and comply with deadlines; it can measure scores on assignments; GPA cannot measure trauma history but can allude to the existence of trauma, or poverty, or barriers. I am not saying GPAs are null and void. I am saying that social work schools must look beyond the GPA number to explore factors that contribute to said GPA and, if appropriate, waive GPA requirements based on applicable histories and efforts shown. We know GPAs are influenced by student employment, trauma, or mental/emotional health histories or presence, and social abilities. Considering these factors coupled with achievement ability and potential future field contributions would be more inclusive. This is done in some part with admissions essays in traditional two and three-year programs but rarely in advanced standing when GPA criteria is pre-set. Social work programs have also used GPA to determine qualification for scholarship, again rewarding the factors that create high GPAs: rewarding privilege, and thus perpetuating colonial White supremacy ideologies.

There are socioeconomic benefits awarded to those receiving advanced standing status too, and that is what makes this a compounded equity issue. Advanced standing status often translates to

a major reduction in tuition cost for those that qualify for the program by allowing qualified students to complete a program in three semesters instead of four to eight. This reduction in education costs in the form of loans and their subsequent acquired interest and fees creates financial benefits to students that receive them. Further, students who leave graduate school with few financial burdens are well positioned for future homeownership and in the acquisition of business loans. Crippling student loan debt often results in major delays in home ownership and other ways of acquiring wealth (Elliott & Lewis, 2016).

I did not receive advanced standing in social work school because I did not meet the GPA requirement for my school of admission, despite having a BSW and impressive employment and volunteer experience. I even won an award from my undergraduate social work degree program for my outstanding community service contributions. I acquired this all prior to my MSW admission application. My GPA was just under the 3.0 requirement, but my work and volunteer experience were greater than many of the students awarded Advanced Standing. Things that make you go hmmm?? My academics always suffered when I was a pupil. I had to work multiple jobs just to afford to show up. It was not an option for me not to work. If I was going to go to school, I would have to work. I had to do without the resources, materials, and TIME that many of my privileged peers had afforded to them. I had to devote a portion of my time to therapy, to student support services, to academic guidance and planning, and to figuring out each month how I was going to financially “make it.” None of these realities are reported or recorded in my GPA records and were hardly able to serve as qualifiers in my admission application. I would never have received advanced standing in social work school because social work school could not see how my GPA was not a representation of my intellect or academic ability, but of my socioeconomic circumstance, lived trauma, and lack of resources.

The truth is, while I applied to social work school, and was not eligible for advanced standing therefore I did not apply for it, my application showed more resiliency, more determination, more work and volunteer experience, more passion for social work, and more importantly more insight into the populations and systems that social workers are charged with working with than most 3.5 GPA applications. Many of my colleagues today, of all diverse factors, who share a similar upbringing have shared with me their similar stories of admission, which says this is perhaps a more common phenomenon that is not limited to my experience alone. Social work schools must understand that there is a dire need to reevaluate admission criteria to include true equity, and that advanced standing in addition to being a marker of assumed ability within a program for success, thereafter, is also a huge economic and social advantage. We as faculty admission decision makers are choosing who shall be advantaged over others, who will be the recipients of post-graduation privileges, and if we will continue to perpetuate inequitable advantaging of the advantaged. Black and Brown people recognize this, applicants who come from less resources recognize this—we understand we have been victims of inequity, and we are feeling a disloyalty and distance with our schools of social work; it is grim and sometimes dubious.

I often use the example of advanced standing in social work schools to highlight missed opportunities to address equity (again, the condition of fair and just inclusion into a society), inclusion (the active, intentional, and ongoing engagement with diversity), and marginalization

(both a condition and a process that prevents individuals and groups from full participation in social, economic, and political life enjoyed by the wider society) (Dyer, 2020), because it is a relatable example for social workers. The admissions process to social work school is truly the beginning of social work systems—the front door of social work—and dismantling systemic inequity should begin at the front door.

A colleague at Clark Atlanta University noted that from her professional experience, even when candidates from traditionally oppressed or marginalized communities are offered a place in advanced standing programs, candidates often cannot accept the offer of admission because the demand for full time school and (UNPAID) practicum placement are unable to coexist with their full-time work needs and personal obligations. Additionally, students often experience fear, anxiety, and self-doubt at the prospect of having to struggle further. Many of these students delay admissions or opt instead for the two and three-year programs, relinquishing the economic benefits advanced standing carries. This is another barrier to break and piece to dismantle.

Dismantling means that we must take apart environments and systems that are harmful to people: systems that shame, embarrass, weaken, reduce, stigmatize, perpetuate false narratives, or oppress. I have sat with my experiences as a multiracial person in America, as a social work student, as a practicing clinician, and today as a social work educator and understand the dire need to not just reassess and readdress social work systems but to decolonize, dismantle, and rebuild them using a true anti-oppressive lens. Frameworks such as Critical Race Theory (CRT) and diversity, equity, inclusion, intersectionality, power analysis, anti-racist (DEIPAR) allow us to thoroughly evaluate environments, systems, and instances. Even something as seemingly simple or unimpactful as social work degree admissions hold oppressive factors, and that is what our CRT and DEIPAR frameworks show us. Further action also includes the creation of social work admission, education, and support systems that are truly equitable—where DEIPAR initiatives do not exist symbolically or superficially, but are rooted, embedded, and steadfast.

The DEIPAR framework, particularly in social work practice and social work education, is not designed to be static in definition, but to evolve with the changing social definitions of each of its facets (Dyer, 2020). Social work practice/education must do the same: evolve with changing definitions. Social work has major work to do in radically revising and decolonizing social work curricula, centering healing and social justice interventions that are rooted in shared humanity, while alleviating structural constraints. It is my hope we can confront equity and all the DEIPAR facets in social work education so that new social work professionals will propagate these values and changes into all systems. It will be future social workers who will be charged with decolonization and anti-oppressive learning in public school systems. It will be future social workers who will be charged with advocating for the needs and humanity of students who otherwise would be treated unfairly, or even violently. It will be future social workers who create a safe and brave space for a future multiracial, adopted, queer, young boy in public school, and see that he is not punished more severely than his White peers, or separated from the learning environment for simply existing. Lastly, it will be future social workers who will most benefit from having had equitable access to affordable higher education, fair and equitable admission standards, and evaluation of their potential for field contribution over their historical

GPA. If social work faculties are the gatekeepers of the field, we must begin our anti-oppressive and equitable work at the front door of social work, social work degree admissions.

### **Some Final Thoughts for the Reader**

- How does the idea of Whiteness create undue burden?
- How do White people participate, often unknowingly, in racism, holding of power, and inequity?
- How are schools of social work (and social work practice) addressing DEIPAR facets wholly and not just superficially?

### **References**

Delgado, R., Stefancic, J., & Harris, A. (2017). *Critical race theory: An introduction* (3rd ed.). New York University Press.

Dyer, J. (2020) *DEIPAR framework*. Unpublished manuscript.

Elliott, W., & Lewis, M. (2016). Student debt effects on financial well-being: Research and policy implications. In E. Claus & I. Claus (Eds.), *A Collection of Reviews on Savings and Wealth Accumulation* (pp.33-57). Wiley. <https://www.doi.org/10.1002/9781119158424>

Lorde, A. (2003). The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. In R. Lewis & S. Mills (Eds.), *Feminist postcolonial theory: A reader* (pp. 25–28). Edinburgh University Press.

Miller, J., & Garran A. M. (2007) The web of institutional racism. *Smith College Studies in Social Work*, 77(1), 33–67. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J497v77n01\\_03](http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J497v77n01_03)

Miller, J., & Garran, A. M. (2017). *Racism in the United States: Implications for the helping professions*. Brooks Cole.

Shakespeare, W. (1825). *The tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Payne and Foss. (Original work published 1603).

**About the Author:** Nathaniel L. Currie, MSW, DSW, LCSW is Assistant Professor, Whitney M. Young Jr. School of Social Work, Clark Atlanta University, Atlanta, GA, and adjunct faculty and course developer, Doctor of Social Work program, School of Social Work, Simmons University, Boston, MA ([ncurrie@cau.edu](mailto:ncurrie@cau.edu)).

# Participatory Program Evaluation: Centering Critical Perspectives in Developing Socially Just and Collaborative Solutions

Laurie A. Walker

**Abstract:** MSW students take research and program evaluation courses designed to develop their research-informed practice and practice-informed research skills. Textbooks center Euro-western ways of knowing, which can be supplemented by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) approaches to research, evaluation, and community-engaged change processes. My article describes and analyzes organizational contexts, course structure, and critical pedagogies that enable authentic justice-centered graduate student co-creation of egalitarian learning communities that seek to name, challenge, and dismantle structures of exclusion, injustice, and marginalization. My insights as an instructor focus on what perspectives are centered and transformative approaches that acknowledge holistic (including affective) engagement in change processes. My pedagogy normalizes feeling unsettled with relational and dynamic collaborations that require students develop the elasticity to accept community partner feedback and revise research methods and practices accordingly, which are essential skills when working with BIPOC communities seeking justice.

**Keywords:** community engagement, decolonizing, research methods

“Stephanie” is the fifth MSW student in office hours this semester wrestling with a mismatch between practicum and classwork. She is a white middle-class student who was working with autonomy on iterative assignments; however, she is experiencing resistance in practicum. She read widely, responded to required online discussion prompts, workshopped ideas weekly with peers in class, and consulted with me as her instructor. Her practicum supervisor demanded her work take a more Euro-western approach with a narrow definition of evidence-based practice that does not use the available cultural adaptations (LaFrance & Nichols, 2010; Royse et al., 2016). She is disillusioned and looking for motivation and direction in finishing her program evaluation proposal, which requires some sort of care and tools for navigation (Berg & Seeber, 2016). I realize in hindsight that I needed to adjust the course content to include 21st-century learning that incorporates holistic self-regulation and motivation in social justice–focused practice for “self-directed learners who have a heightened ability to adapt to changing social and contextual conditions” (Brandt, 2020, p. 3). Holistic approaches are more in alignment with critical, decolonizing, and Indigenous curriculum; however, these intellectual (i.e., cognitive) curriculum changes require acknowledging the associated emotional labor in the implementation process (Brandt, 2020; Linklater, 2014).

## Naming Social Work Practice Contexts

Stephanie’s cohort of students was wrestling with developing collaborative solutions to problems experienced by local communities with high numbers of Native Americans. Student projects focused on high rates of child welfare cases and family separation, child placement in group homes and non-Native families upon termination from the programs, high suicide rates

with younger and younger incidents, substance abuse, incidents of violence and sexual assault, as well as diseases such as cancer and the associated grief and loss (Linklater, 2014). Students often work in non-social work host systems and agencies including schools, after-school programs, campus student services, medical and mental health settings, shelters, treatment centers, in collaboration with lawyers and judges in courtrooms, crisis intervention and treatment centers, research centers, senior centers, and hospice (Netting et al., 2004).

The agencies are situated within different practice and legal contexts in small cities and Native American reservations. Each of these settings have their unique practice and mental models that originate from the controlling systems and their associated positivistic approaches to prevention, intervention, and evaluation of programs such as medical models in hospital, assimilation-focused education settings, as well as the rule of law in legal settings (Linklater, 2014; Netting et al., 2004; Royse et al., 2016; Senge, 1994). MSW-level practicum students' schoolwork is often tied to program implementation within existing systems, and students may quickly grow their sphere of influence in leadership roles (Netting et al., 2004). As a result, I work with students on paying attention to the way they and others in their agency think (Berg & Seeber, 2016; Senge, 1994). MSW-level graduates frequently work in transdisciplinary environments with the potential to develop solutions that transcend any specific discipline; however, working together across fields and knowledge bases takes considerable time, effort, and commitment to centering various ways of knowing and practicing (Fricker, 2007; Marsh et al., 2016).

Many students are new to social work and are learning basic competencies and practice behaviors, critical thinking, and inclusive practices that have the potential to create individual, family, group, community, and societal healing and change. Students are ready to embrace and implement critical perspectives and frequently notice their practice environments struggle to work well with Native American clients. Some practice settings utilize evidence-based prevention and interventions; however, many organizations do not have the capacity to implement cultural adaptations, culturally grounded or embedded practices, and more holistic approaches (Linklater, 2014; Marsh et al., 2016; Royse et al., 2016). Yet, academic research describes high dropout rates among Native American populations utilizing Euro-western treatment approaches that do not incorporate traditional healing, cultural identity, or community resources and supports (Linklater, 2014; Marsh et al., 2018; Quinn, 2019).

I want to support our practicum students as they develop the skills to more effectively work with Native Americans. I notice the patterns in program evaluation topics in a déjà vu manner as students shuffle in and out of agencies, but the issues remain consistent. I spent many hours debriefing BIPOC and occasional Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Two Spirit, Queer, and Intersex (LGBTQI+) practicum student experiences and played an advocacy role within both field agencies and our program field office. As a field liaison conducting site visits and as assessment committee chair monitoring our data for accreditation, I see field instructors regularly mark "not applicable" or "no basis to judge" on student evaluations of practice behavior questions focused on diversity and practice-informed research and research-informed practice.

I worked in two other academic communities where I gained an understanding of regional dynamics and local histories in rural and urban contexts. Students and sometimes staff populations often represent these identities in our programs and assert their voices as groups experiencing and working towards liberation from oppression. However, faculty leadership from diverse groups is often less representative, as our institutions are slower to recruit, hire, and retain diverse faculty without concerted effort (Jacobson, 2012; Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2008). I went to school in an institution with diverse faculty representation, so I know it is possible but has not been my experience within my former institution. As a result, I regularly needed to reflect on their academic institutional context.

### **Owning Institutional and Departmental Histories and Realizing Responsibilities**

The students enrolled in the course represent the diversity of the institution and program—such as students who are Asian, Black, Latinx, Native American, white, LGBTQIA+, and have disabilities. My former institution is situated on land that is the ancestral territories of the Salish and Kalispel people, who were forcibly removed and relocated from the land. The university was among the first with a Black Student Union, African American and Native American Studies (NAS) programs, and an annual student-led powwow that all formed over fifty years ago. Student demand for an NAS program and course offerings began in the 1960s and was implemented in 1970. The university has had Native American faculty in mental health–focused professional degrees (including social work) since the 1970s; however, it has low promotion, tenure, retention, and rehiring for Native American faculty in some disciplines despite institutional commitments to diversity, as well as social justice efforts and commitments at the departmental level (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016; Jacobson, 2012).

The university graduate program in psychology emphasizes recruiting and training Native American students via the Indians into Psychology (a federally funded program formed in 1992 and locally in 2000) and also informal LGBTQIA+ mentoring. However, most graduate students who are BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ in other disciplines at the institution—including social work—must navigate two worlds of their identity without formal mentoring, peers in the program, or programming designed to help them navigate institutional structures (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000; Jacobson, 2012). BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ students experience marginalization and oppression within the dominant culture of the campus and practicum settings, but rarely receive support as they need to integrate culturally relevant practices within their substantive area.

The social work department that is the focus of this reflection generally has eight tenure-track lines with a high turnover rate. I ranked third in terms of seniority after seven years in the department. Five new tenure-track faculty were hired in the last five years to replace two faculty who retired, two who resigned within six years of being hired, and one who moved into a center director role. Eight additional faculty left their tenure-track positions in the previous eight years. Many of the faculty who were not retained represented diverse perspectives including Native American, African, Jewish, and LGBTQIA+. Many of the prior faculty included critical pedagogy and Indigenous approaches in their classrooms; however, the high turnover had an impact on the consistent implementation of the stated social justice focus of the MSW curriculum (Harris & González, 2012; Jacobson, 2012). Faculty generally acknowledge that the

high faculty turnover rate is rooted in long-term departmental climate issues that impact faculty retention for those either playing ally roles or representing diverse identities (Jacobson, 2012). A former faculty member archived the institutional governance process and district court records since the 1970s and 1980s at the campus library, which document the stories behind the high turnover patterns, as well as the correlated conflicts and tensions associated with diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts (Jacobson, 2012).

As a result of high turnover, the department faculty have both sets of expertise and persistent shortcomings rooted in the decades of departmental DEI history that consistently repeat themselves. The department is in a small city and a state that some describe as having one long “main street,” so we remain connected relationally to former faculty in informal ways within the organizations and social networks that we participate in professionally and personally. We may not have worked directly with the 19 or more tenure-track faculty who worked in the department over the last 14 years; however, the departmental history is “baked into” the way we conduct our daily practices and processes. Harris and González (2012) describe, “the culture of academia, ultimately, is impervious to change because its power structure is designed to reproduce itself” (p. 7). Our inclusion of critical and Indigenous perspectives in our curriculum varies from year to year, but we had the roots of community-engaged and Native American faculty-led initiatives in the department since the 1970s (Jacobson, 2012). I did not learn of these efforts from within the institution; rather, the stories emerged in more casual ways like recognizing the name of a former Native American faculty member in photos posted on social media with her peers from the 1970s who have since become a part of my national mentoring and support network.

Prior to making these national connections, I found myself standing in a void, without the institutional memory and mentorship from other diverse faculty within the department who had successfully navigated the dynamics within this context. I found my company among books and articles by Harris and González (2012) in *Presumed Incompetent*; Jacob (2012), who described departmental faculty dynamics through a small group theoretical lens; and Rockquemore and Laszloffy (2008), whose case examples served as a testimonio to me (Burciaga & Cruz Navarro, 2015). These authors served as mentors—as words on a page—that provided the stories that I needed to hear to know how to navigate my current context. A national BIPOC colleague also named my sense of survivor’s guilt, as I chose to stay in the department in a similar diverse embodiment and gained tenure despite facing similar challenges. My family wanted to stay in the area, so I had to chart a course that enabled me to stay when others chose to leave or were pushed out due to the tensions related to DEI efforts. I worked within a broader campus, state, and national network of community-engaged and diverse scholars, so I was able to find mentorship and build my own social network that kept me grounded. As a result, I was able to continue to rebuild the community-engaged and critical perspectives (Harris & González, 2012) in my own teaching despite the continued revolving door of faculty and course staffing.

### **Research Course Sequence**

The high changeover rate resulted in course instructors that changed frequently in our department, which means sometimes course sequences are synced up and sometimes disjointed when another instructor or departmental climate issues make collaboration unrealistic. The



previous instructor of a required introductory research course worked with me to ensure students had a grasp on key research concepts and included an introduction to decolonizing research methods via readings from Tuhiwai Smith (2008) to prepare them for expectations to design a community-engaged and critically informed program evaluation in my course. The research course faculty left after working as an ally on DEI issues and the course was then taught by someone resistant to the DEI efforts. As a result, informal student complaints asserted the courses did not smoothly align now that the course was taught by a heterosexual white cisgender male who taught a “basic research course.” His course undoubtedly privileged Euro-western ways of knowing—given his casually mentioning never having seen a Native American prior to working at this university—and did not have an assigned textbook or transparent reading list (Linklater, 2014).

As a result of faculty intellectual differences in approach, our course sequence was a source of confusion for students. Harris and González (2012), Jacob (2012), and Rockquemore and Laszloffy (2008) normalized the experience of faculty and student dissonance with differences in approach becoming a tension projected on the diverse faculty. I tried explaining how the issue was emerging in my classroom and what I was doing to address it; however, I could not help but sense the underlying message that I was doing something “different.” White student complaints at this university and others like it focus on and problematize the “different” pedagogical practices of “minority” faculty rather than the problem with normalizing whiteness (Jacobson, 2012). Harris and González (2012) note,

Hiring additional faculty of color is necessary, but does not solve the problem. Rather, what is required is transforming academic culture so that it welcomes and embraces those who are currently regarded as “other” and increases the opportunity for alternative points of view to challenge dominant ideologies and deep-rooted social hierarchies. (p. 8)

I knew my class curriculum and pedagogy aligned with the department values articulated in my position’s job posting, which stated commitments to social justice as well as a variety of research methods. I was transparent in my job talk about my decolonizing teaching pedagogy, which included situating Indigenous ways of knowing alongside Euro-western worldview and ideology (Ponterotto, 2005; Tinker, 2009). I included some decolonizing content each semester, as I taught undergraduate research and the graduate course in program evaluation and action research. However, instructors in our program—as I imagine is true in all programs—vary in their pedagogy and socialization practices with the social workers in their classrooms. As a result, students may naturally experience confusion as they navigate contradictory expectations from one course to another—just as they can also expect varying expectations from one supervisor to another or one agency to another. However, I could also sense an unrealistic expectation that I could somehow fix the current embodiment of DEI tensions and the associated emotional residue, which were common structural problems and power dynamics related to diverse identities and perspectives that are never a quick fix (Berg & Seeber, 2016; Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2008).

As a result, I had to make the critical frameworks even more explicit to help students successfully navigate between the two courses. I added social justice–focused readings, lectures,

and replies to questions asked by students in class about what knowledge is considered credible as appropriate references, which I saw as a form of epistemic justice as described by Fricker (2007). The prerequisite instructor told students with no uncertainty that they could not cite non-peer reviewed sources, including dissertations or theses in their course papers; however, dissertations, theses, program evaluations, community reports, Indigenous Research Methods (IRM), and other sources of grassroots and practice-informed research were considered valid sources in a program evaluation context. I had to help students understand the differences between good research, as defined in well-funded knowledge producing research contexts, versus the practical program evaluations in agencies with limited research budgets, time, and access to doctoral-level researchers (Royle et al., 2016).

BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ faculty and students often navigate experiences with marginalization and connection to their identity, culture, and community while “living simultaneously in two worlds” in academic settings (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000, p. 165). Marsh et al. (2016) described, “the blending of Indigenous and Western research methods, knowledge translation, and program development is a concept called Two-eyed Seeing” (p. 4). As a result, BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ students in predominantly white, heterosexual, and cisgender institutions often benefit from focused cohorts of students that help them navigate the two worlds and implement their social justice commitments with their communities (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000). Students who are not BIPOC and/or LGBTQIA+ may also benefit from critical and decolonizing pedagogical approaches. However, white, heterosexual, and cisgender students may be inexperienced in navigating classrooms, communities, and organizations that do not center, normalize, and privilege their own worldview and experiences (Jacobson, 2012).

### **Restructuring the Program Evaluation Course**

I decided to restructure the program evaluation course given the dynamics noted above. The course included program evaluation and action research when I arrived; however, I broadened the curriculum to include community-based research (Strand et al., 2003), critical participatory action research (CPAR; Sandwick et al., 2018; Torre et al., 2012), and both quantitative and qualitative IRM (Smith & Tuhiwai Smith, 2018; Walter & Anderson, 2013). I was committed to facilitating the program evaluation course in a manner that focused student learning with community engagement and impact. As a very recently tenured faculty member, I felt I had more freedom in how I responded to nudges to resolve student confusion. I was able to talk directly about landmines I previously avoided, as a means of explicitly teaching about our academic versions of controlling systems and structures (Harris & González, 2012; Jacob, 2012; Netting et al., 2004). Students have a foot in both agency contexts and their controlling systems, as well as academic controlling system dynamics (Harris & González, 2012; Netting et al., 2004). If I was asked to explain why students were confused from the prerequisite course to the program evaluation course, I had to role model taking risks in creating a culture change in our public institutional context by centering decolonization, feminism, and Indigenous ways of knowing and engaging that they can apply to their practice contexts.

My restructuring of the course included moving to a blended online and in-person model with required one-on-one instructor consultation at scheduled meeting times and engagement in class

in small groups. I began requiring a one-on-one meeting for all students in the class at the advice of national community-engaged research colleagues who were aware of the dynamics in my department and my commitments to critical community-engaged approaches. The meetings served a dual purpose that included consultation on their project and maintained my awareness of student affect throughout the semester related to course concepts and process (Berg & Seeber, 2016).

I learned from teaching online undergraduate research courses that some students benefited from the pre-recorded lectures available to re-watch until they understood less familiar key course concepts. Additionally, students enrolled in the program evaluation course in previous years often showed up late for 8:00 am lectures with coffee in a disposable cup, sent non-verbal cues indicating they found the content irrelevant with unengaged or dazed looks, and demonstrated that they had not completed the readings. I also struggled with the 8:00 am start time, so on the first day of class I proposed we structure the class in a hybrid format with one hour of lecture and discussion board activities followed by in-person work in small groups of students in similar practice contexts. Since this was my first course with the students and they had been a cohort together for a year, I asked how they liked to make decisions and proceeded to follow their lead. Students could engage as active, self-directed learners who began to apply the course content before the start of the in-person class, which built-in more student responsibility, accountability, and engagement with the later start time and hybrid format (Berg & Seeber, 2016; Brandt, 2020). Students could focus on the most relevant content and were not required to engage with lectures on less relevant topics. I followed best practices in the online format, which meant I kept my lectures brief and focused on the most essential points that ended before students tended to lose interest or capacity for new concepts (Berg & Seeber, 2016).

I had been utilizing the small group structure for the course for a few years, since learning how isolated students felt in developing their program evaluation proposals during story circles at the end of class. Students needed a regular space, with relationships they trusted, to name and normalize the tensions and struggles they felt applying the critical methods in practice. The small group structure gave students a sense of belonging with others navigating similar substantive areas and organizational climates, which resulted in increased engagement with the course materials as they gave and received peer-feedback (Brandt, 2020). I floated around from group to group to consult and then had whole-class discussions, which sometimes included additional spontaneous resource sharing from myself or students that emerged from the themes in one-on-one consultations that week, online posts due before class, or our small group in-class discussions. For example, students inquired about transformative mixed methods design as potential knowledge development processes that could result in shifts in processes and outcomes (Creswell et al., 2007; Martens, 2010; Sweetman et al., 2010). Another student shared a resource on focus group data analysis (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). I often posted resources on the online course platform during class breaks and collectively coached the class at their learning edge for the day, which was often associated with applying liberatory, decolonizing, and critical research methods and concepts. Our experience aligned with Jacobson's (2012) observation that "group work with a decided focus on social justice is implicated as a critical approach for addressing problems created by injustice," as group work "fosters social inclusion, mutual aid, and social action" (p. 278).

## **Critical Pedagogies in a Public University Context**

Public universities often tie their community-engagement mission to land-grant and agricultural college grant histories without acknowledging that public universities are all situated within Indigenous ancestral territories (Lee & Ahtone, 2020; Mitchell, 2017). Yet, collaborative work with diverse communities requires acknowledging history to address those communities' problems (Hill Collins, 2013; Strand et al., 2003). BIPOC and feminist scholars often enter the academy with the intention of liberatory or decolonizing pedagogies that include participatory learning, "teaching for a change" (Hill Collins, 2013, p. 127), an emphasis on wellness/healing, and giving back to and transforming communities (hooks, 1994; Linklater, 2014; Rendón, 2009; Smith & Tuhiwai Smith, 2018). The legacy of BIPOC scholars now inform the critical pedagogy of scholars who teach CPAR, IRM, and decolonizing research and practice to meet the demands of the next generations of diverse students (Rendón, 2009; Sandwick et al., 2018; Smith & Tuhiwai Smith, 2018).

Contemporary practices in many professional schools focus on evidence-based practices that incorporate professional wisdom, the best available empirical evidence, and client/participant values and preferences (Royse et al., 2016). However, the best available empirical evidence within a global colonial society is often rooted in existing power structures and information-machinery that privilege information, money, and people in a top-down manner that emphasizes production and consumption of knowledge (Berg & Seeber, 2016; hooks, 1994; Sohng, 1996). As a result, decisions that have an impact on people often do not include their input and consideration of their perspectives, worldview, or experiences (hooks, 1994; Sohng, 1996; Tinker, 2009). Participatory democracies, Participatory Action Research, and program evaluations situated within local community organizations are a means of knowledge production that is accessible to graduate students who can collaborate with community members experiencing the issue as co-leaders or co-researchers who pursue answers to local problems (Berg & Seeber, 2016; Hill Collins, 2013; Sohng, 1996).

Indigenous populations typically have worldviews different than settler colonial cultures (Linklater, 2014). All groups have a worldview which (a) includes "assumptions about the order of nature and the place of humanity within it"; (b) decides "how order relates to and is affected by the passage of time; (c) "determines what is virtue and what is deviance"; and (d) "asks ultimate questions of life, death, and meaning" (Tinker, 2009, p. 1). Research paradigms are rooted in a worldview where positivism presumes deviance can be described and prescribed with an intervention (Ponterotto, 2005). Positivism presumes objective and quantifiable observations with experimental control (Royse et al., 2016). Positivism that frames deviance from non-Indigenous perspectives may be viewed as a form of domination, labeling of deficits, and white supremacy (Mitchell, 2017). In contrast, Indigenous statistics focus on interconnected structural causes for disparities (Walter & Anderson, 2013).

Constructive-interpretivism creates a thick description, providing deeper insights into lived experiences, which aligns with views of humans as interdependent and in harmony with nature in a manner that is often consistent with Indigenous worldviews (Linklater, 2014; Ponterotto, 2005). For example, Indigenous worldviews often take community responsibility for

maintaining relationships focused on building knowledge and healing, rather than punishing or criminalizing misbehavior (Linklater, 2014).

Critical-ideological approaches focus on dialogue, unequal power, an unapologetic activist scholar agenda, freedom from oppression, and pressure to change the status quo in a manner consistent with decolonizing and CPAR approaches (Ponterotto, 2005). Decolonizing practices include taking responsibility for naming colonial contexts, unsettling settler normalcy and innocence, changing power structures, and critiquing and revising data collection and analyses processes (Linklater, 2014; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Land acknowledgements are a common practice in university settings, which may raise public consciousness of Indigenous connection to land, sovereignty, history, and cultural rights as a small step towards sustained and equitable relationship, reconciliation, and just outcomes (Smith & Tuhiwai Smith, 2018). However, Tuck and Yang (2012) assert that reconciliation is a goal that is a settler move to innocence. Decolonizing efforts should instead focus on including Indigenous content in the curriculum with culturally relevant pedagogies, Indigenous land ownership, as well as sovereignty over organizational structure, processes, and research (Smith & Tuhiwai Smith, 2018; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Hill Collins (2013) also writes about the idea of unsettling conversations and transformative work from a Black perspective. Smith and Tuhiwai Smith (2018) provide specific guidance on reflection questions from Indigenous perspectives focused on “whose interests are the focus ... who has responsibility ... and who they are accountable to” (pp. 10–11). Decolonizing methodologies offer a means to dismantle racism within institutions, which in professional schools like social work include the university and our organizational partners in the community. However, students need frameworks to understand community-engaged practices that include collaboration and partnership with those closest to the problems in order to create change, rather than use, tokenize, or merely consult (Kranias, 2018; LaFrance & Nichols, 2010; Marsh et al., 2016).

Graduate education often includes research and multicultural training, which may include community-based research concepts, particularly in higher education and professional schools (Mitchell, 2017; Strand et al., 2003). Student activism during the 1960s resulted in ethnic studies programs that included an emphasis on equitable dialogue, community engagement, centering BIPOC knowledge, community partnerships and leadership, critical consciousness, and analysis of power and causes of social problems, equity, racial, economic, and social justice, as well as activism (Mitchell, 2017). Mitchell (2017) describes that “community engagement strategies have been a part of the teaching and service missions of institutions of higher education since their inception” and that “the tenants of intersectionality can be employed to inform and create a community engagement practice that addresses the interconnected structures of inequality in order to affect meaningful change” (p. 35). Students have been agents of change on campus and in engaged communities for at least half a century (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). The writings of BIPOC community-engaged scholar graduates describe possibilities for graduate student socialization into community engagement (Evans et al., 2009). However, students attend class and practice social work in colonial contexts that we rarely explicitly name.

## **Transformative Pedagogy and Research Methodology in Colonial Settings**

The CPAR and IRM supplement the more positivistic framing of Royse et al. (2016), which was the textbook in my MSW program and the course I inherited at this institution. Royse et al. (2016) describe how students can develop an ability to critically evaluate empirical evaluations and research to practice settings, which is commonly described as research-informed practice. Practice-informed research and critical perspectives on practice contexts receive less attention in the chapters focused on assessing client needs and satisfaction with programs, as well as understanding organizational processes through logic models (Royse et al., 2016). The logic modeling process is a useful tool for students to understand their practice context and ask questions of agency leaders, and it is a means for students to articulate social problems, underlying theory, organizational processes, and measurable outcomes (Royse et al., 2016). However, the organizational and societal context is rarely explicitly situated within colonialism (Linklater, 2014). Colonial processes tend to develop consistent organizational cultures that can be analyzed and understood within the various educational, medical, legal, and organizational settings (public, non-profit, and private). Students can learn to understand and analyze their role within organizational and disciplinary contexts to assess what current realities are and what might be feasible to change within a year or two (Linklater, 2014).

Royse et al.'s (2016) ethics chapter provides an appropriate example of seeking approval for research in reservations from the appropriate tribal authority; however, the community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) content centers positivistic perspectives that presume research rigor is a mismatch with community collaboration. CBPAR is described as capacity-building and participant-driven with commendable goals, but also as an unrealistic and likely conflict-ridden process (Royse et al., 2016). Ethical frameworks provide guidance on what you ought to do given the givens; however, mainstream ethical frameworks often maintain the status quo and are “incongruent with the survival ethics required by the marginalized” (De La Torre, 2013, p. 8). In contrast, ethics from the margins can disrupt normalized and legitimized discourses with representation and voice that is a better match for populations experiencing marginalization and oppression (De La Torre, 2013). In contrast, CPAR provides an integration of ethics and science that enables a more relational, responsive, and active approach to fulfill community responsibilities in a less-fragmented manner (Rendón, 2009; Sandwick et al., 2018; Torre et al., 2012). CPAR can lead to policy change, research-informed practices, and practice-informed research (Sandwick et al., 2018).

### **Individual Academic Identities and Standpoints**

I continually work, sometimes mid-lecture, mid-dialogue, or even mid-sentence to reframe with critical perspectives in order to create more culturally safe spaces. My own commitments to decolonizing and Indigenizing my teaching is rooted in both my own complex intersectional identities that result in experiences with oppression, discrimination, and marginalization within settler colonial contexts (Crenshaw, 2011; Mitchell, 2017; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Palmer (1998) asserts that “good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (p. 10); “good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness” (p. 11); and “teaching is always done at the intersection of personal and public life” (p. 17). Mitchell and Coll (2017) describe similar

concepts including authenticity, positionality (identities within sociopolitical systems), power, and vulnerability. I intuitively recognize diverse students' experiences as a result of my own lived experiences with my intersectional identities, which results in connection and ease in helping navigate a genuine set of practices students believe are relevant to the communities they work with and for (Mitchell, 2017). Student areas of social work practice often overlap with their own identities and maintain sustained commitments to their own civic engagement (Mitchell, 2017). The process is a form of referencing and integrating their own experiences with outside perspectives as a way of validating their experience and strengthening their professional voice. In essence, the critical reflection in the context of one-on-one and group work is a form of multicultural sustained relationships and mutual aid that simultaneously centers and supports BIPOC students and raises the consciousness of non-BIPOC students who seek to spend their careers working with BIPOC communities (Jacobson, 2012). However, I seek to be consistently aware, as Palmer (1998) notes:

For years, African Americans were silent in the presence of whites—silent, that is, about their true thoughts and feelings. For years, women were similarly silent in the presence of men. Today, all of that is changing as Blacks and women move from the margins to the center and speak truths that people like me need to hear. (p. 45)

Community-engaged work that centers BIPOC voices in classrooms, and community-based research, has shifted from an emphasis on ethnic studies to many disciplines in the last two decades—to now include BIPOC asserting the need to center their voices in the social change movements to address their experiences with oppression, discrimination, and marginalization. Affirmative Action scholars state that generations of BIPOC people are now tenured professors, lawyers, judges, and business owners who write, engage with their communities, and influence the ways we go about our public/professional and personal lives (Crenshaw, 2011). My own commitments to critical approaches to community-engaged teaching are rooted in supporting emerging BIPOC leaders who can spend their careers seeking the societal and institutional changes needed in order to bring wellness/healing, transformation, and social justice to their own communities.

### **Examples of Transformative Program Evaluation Methods in Indigenous Contexts**

Public universities in regions where graduates of professional schools will likely work with a high percentage of Indigenous populations require curriculum development that prepares students to be emerging leaders with skills for effective engagement in diverse communities (Hill Collins, 2013; Smith & Tuhiwai Smith, 2018). CPAR, community-based research, and decolonizing research methods and practices provide a great starting place to help students think through approaches to program evaluation and research that are “transformative rather than ameliorative” (Mitchell, 2017, p. 38; Strand et al., 2003). Tuhiwai Smith (2008) provides guidance on twenty-five decolonizing practices and research methods such as celebrating survival, connecting, democratizing, and Indigenizing.

Students and scholars often seek to reframe engagement to be more culturally safe. Focus groups can be redesigned to incorporate more relational circles with a shared meal to build trust,

respect, humor, and support (Baskin, 2005; Kovach, 2009). Circle rituals can begin with a land acknowledgement led by a local leader, make local smudging materials available, and provide research participants with a small gift as a means of creating a healing and reciprocal process (Baskin, 2005; Kovach, 2009). Circles create research settings for sharing stories and experiences holistically, which allows research to emerge from the organic process of the group where participants can share and be heard (Baskin, 2005; Kovach, 2009; Lavallée, 2009). The researcher is relational, participates in the research, and develops a sense of support among the group and a reflexivity that allows the circle participants to struggle, name the origins of problems, create, respond to, and ask their own research questions (Baskin, 2005). Hearing others' stories may bring up memories or emotions, which can result in mutual sharing of experiences and can create a healing and/or transformative process (Kovach, 2009; Lavallée, 2009).

The relational focus of IRM includes (a) emphasis on giving back to community that may involve “addressing structural inequalities and social change” (Baskin, 2005, p. 177); (b) participants checking and approving transcripts and research findings for accuracy as participants engaged in the “interpretation and analysis” (Baskin, 2005, p. 180) of the data via their sharing and listening; (c) confirmation that data analysis results represent the story told and the needs of the community as a group that co-creates the group story and knowledge developed; and (d) open lines of communication for follow-up by participants as requested, as they may want to share additional stories or experiences after the initial data collection occurs (Baskin, 2005; Kovach, 2009).

### **Graduate Student as Knower and Equal**

Instructors are able to create community-engaged and socially just outcomes via institutional change and knowledge production efforts when Indigenous people and other groups that experience marginalization's perspectives are centered in higher education and curriculum (Mitchell, 2017). CPAR and decolonizing research and practice approaches inform pedagogy focused on critical dialogues between students, community partners, and instructor. Contemporary community engagement work requires frameworks that are strengths-based; center groups that are underrepresented and working toward social justice on their own terms; and include an analysis of power, positionality, systemic causes of disparities, needed institutional changes, and critique of inclusion assumptions (Mitchell, 2017; Smith & Tuhiwai Smith, 2018).

Indigenous pedagogy includes using stories as a means of student reflection on worldview and motivations that can be reevaluated in the safety of a classroom setting (Fire, 2006). I noticed students get the punchline of the case examples centering Indigenous ways of knowing, without my playing a direct role, given the more explicit focus on Indigenous and decolonizing perspectives. The use of story in teaching gives students a chance to see their own reaction to the story and what they would do to identify key issues to address or change (Brandt, 2020; Fire, 2006). Engaging in the case study discussion in small groups, then debriefing as a larger class gives students the chance to engage in the process of decolonizing practices where “more than the reflexivity of locating one's self in one's work one must locate and examine one's



motivation, one's agenda, one's worldview, and the larger social context, including the historical context, when working with Indigenous communities" (Fire, 2006, p. 5).

Students can apply CPAR skills in collaboration with Indigenous communities within organizations where they have practicums and sustained existing relationships (hooks, 1994; Rendón, 2009). Students can work in substantively focused small groups and discuss real-world engagement and problem-solving that enable fluid, dynamic, and critical development of their projects (hooks, 1994; Rendón, 2009). hooks (1994) notes that "when a classroom is truly engaged, it's dynamic. It's fluid. It's *always* changing" (p. 158). Students who commit to developing their program evaluations in collaboration with community partners—and with the critical feedback and accountability of peers in weekly small groups—focused on applying key CPAR concepts to their program evaluation work. Palmer (1998) describes critical classroom engagement with peers on a subject of interest to students, as "community can do much to rescue us from our ignorance, bias, and self-deception if we are willing to submit our assumptions, our observations, our theories—indeed ourselves—to scrutiny" (p. 104).

### **Creating Change in Graduate Higher Education and Community Organizations**

Critical and community-engaged research is an excellent means of developing students as leaders who can collaborate to develop best practices rooted in community needs/values, professional wisdom, and the best available empirical evidence (Royse et al., 2016). Students socialized with critical perspectives and experiences with civic engagement that address community-defined problems have the frameworks necessary to be change agents (Strand et al., 2003). Programs with commitments to social justice can be guided by "intersectional community engagement" to remedy social problems (Mitchell, 2017, p. 41; Strand et al., 2003). Community-engaged partnerships can help create intersectional coalitions focused on creating equitable and just communities (Mitchell, 2017).

The specific course modifications had several positive outcomes; however, the course could add more explicit reflection on insider-outsider identities for researchers working in Indigenous communities (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000). Non-Indigenous students reported feeling unsettled with a research project that was continually shifting and changing to include more critical reflection, inclusive methods, and social justice–focused outcomes normalizing genuine and dynamic engagement that disrupts ethnocentric worldviews (hooks, 1994; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Program evaluation in practicums is a means for ongoing collaborative community change work to create a more equitable and just world (Mitchell, 2017). Social work faculty can revise and restructure explicit and implicit curriculum to create institutional change starting with disrupting the colonial frameworks embedded in the curriculum and processes of our own classrooms, departments, universities, and practicum placements. Students and field instructors need to experience guided and supported challenge and cultural safety in order to create similarly transformative experiences for their clients and participants. Students engaged in a critical and community-engaged research process can then develop the capacity or elasticity to accept feedback and revise their research and practices accordingly, which are essential skills when working with BIPOC communities (Berg & Seeber, 2016; Jacobson, 2012; Tuhiwai Smith,

2008). Similarly, diverse students often need the social supports of mentors and peers to name their experiences, receive guidance in navigating institutional structures, and work towards developing culturally grounded interventions focused on wellness and healing (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000; hooks, 1994; Marsh et al., 2016). Instructors play various roles meeting students at their learning edges including coach, motivational guide, facilitator, consultant, and mentor (Brandt, 2020). Students who build support systems with a sense of belonging and responsibility are more likely to engage in ongoing efforts to co-create just, equitable, healthy, and whole communities wherever they work (Berg & Seeber, 2016; Hill Collins, 2013; Netting et al., 2004). My best mentoring relationships are reciprocal; students, faculty, and community partners in good elastic relationships can work together to create more socially just and healed communities.

### References

- Baskin, C. (2005). Storytelling Circles: Reflections of Aboriginal protocols in research. *Canadian Social Work Review*, 22(2), 171–187. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41669834>
- Berg, M., & Seeber, B. K. (2016). *The slow professor: Challenging the culture of speed in the academy*. University of Toronto Press.
- Brandt, W. C. (2020). *Measuring student success skills: A review of the literature on self-directed learning*. <https://www.nciea.org/sites/default/files/publications/CFA-SlfDirLearningLitReport-R2.pdf>
- Brayboy, B., & Deyhle, D. (2000). Insider-outsider: Researchers in American Indian communities. *Theory into Practice*, 39(3), 163–169. [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15430421tip3903\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15430421tip3903_7)
- Burciaga, R., & Cruz Navarro, N. (2015). Educational testimonio: Critical pedagogy as mentorship. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 171, 33–41. <https://doi.org/10.1002/he.20140>
- Crenshaw, K. (2011). Twenty years of critical race theory: Looking back to move forward. *Connecticut Law Review*, 43(5), 1253–1354. [https://opencommons.uconn.edu/law\\_review/117](https://opencommons.uconn.edu/law_review/117)
- Creswell, J., Clark, V., Gutmann, M., & Hanson, W. (2007). Advanced mixed methods research designs. In A. Tashakkori & C. Teddlie (Eds.), *Handbook of mixed methods in social and behavioral research* (pp. 209–240). Sage.
- De La Torre, M. (2013). Doing Latino/Latina ethics from the margins of empire: Liberating the colonized mind. *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 33(2), 3–20. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sce.2013.0042>
- Evans, S., Taylor, C., Dunlap, M., & Miller, D. (2009). *African Americans and community engagement in higher education: Community service, service learning, and community-based research*. State University of New York Press.

- Fire, A. (2006). Recommendations to enhance the educational experience of Aboriginal social work students. *Critical Social Work*, 7(2). <https://doi.org/10.22329/csw.v7i2.5732>
- Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic injustice: Power and ethics of knowing*. Oxford University Press.
- Harris, A. P., & González, C. G. (2012). Introduction. In G. Gabriella Guitérrez y Muhs, Y. F. Niemann, C. G. González, & A. P. Harris, *Presumed incompetent: The intersections of race and class for women in academia* (pp. 1–14). University Press of Colorado.
- Hill Collins, P. (2013). *On intellectual activism*. Temple University Press.
- Hoffman, G., & Mitchell, T. (2016). Making diversity “everyone’s business”: Discourse analysis of institutional responses to student activism for equity and inclusion. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 9(3), 277–289. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000037>
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.
- Jacob, M. M. (2012). Native women maintaining their culture in the white academy. In G. Gabriella Guitérrez y Muhs, Y. F. Niemann, C. G. González, & A. P. Harris *Presumed incompetent: The intersections of race and class for women in academia* (pp. 242–249). University Press of Colorado.
- Jacobson, M. (2012). Breaking the silence, building solutions: The role of social justice group work in the retention of faculty of color. *Social Work with Groups*, 35(3), 267–286. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01609513.2011.642265>
- Kovach, M. (2009). *Indigenous methodologies: Characteristics, conversations, and contexts*. University of Toronto Press.
- Kranias, G. (2018). *Participatory evaluation toolkit*. Health Nexus. [https://en.healthnexus.ca/sites/en.healthnexus.ca/files/u47/participatory\\_evaluation\\_toolkit.pdf](https://en.healthnexus.ca/sites/en.healthnexus.ca/files/u47/participatory_evaluation_toolkit.pdf)
- LaFrance, J., & Nichols, R. (2010). Reframing evaluation: Defining Indigenous evaluation framework. *The Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*, 23(2), 13–21. [https://eric.ed.gov/?redir=http%3a%2f%2fwww.cjpe.ca%2fsite.cgi%3fs%3d4%26ss%3d21%26\\_lang%3den%26article%3d23-2-013](https://eric.ed.gov/?redir=http%3a%2f%2fwww.cjpe.ca%2fsite.cgi%3fs%3d4%26ss%3d21%26_lang%3den%26article%3d23-2-013)
- Lavallée, L. (2009). Practical application of an Indigenous framework and two qualitative research methods: Sharing circles and Anishnaabe symbol-based reflection. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8(1), 21–36. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F160940690900800103>
- Lee, R., & Ahtone, T. (2020, March 30). Land-grab universities: Expropriated Indigenous land is the foundation of the land-grant university system. *High Country News*. <https://www.hcn.org/issues/52.4/indigenous-affairs-education-land-grab-universities>

Linklater, R. (2014). *Decolonizing trauma work*. Fernwood Publishing.

Marsh, T., Cote-Meek, S., Young, N. L., Najavits, L. M., & Toulouse, P. (2016). Indigenous healing and seeking safety: A blended implementation project for intergenerational trauma and substance use disorders. *The International Indigenous Policy Journal*, 7(2), 1–35.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.18584/iipj.2016.7.2.3>

Marsh, T., Marsh, D., Ozawagosh, J., & Ozawagosh, F. (2018). The sweat lodge ceremony. *Intergenerational Indigenous Policy Journal*, 9(2), 1–21.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.18584/iipj.2018.9.2.2>

Martens, D. N. (2010). Transformative mixed methods research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(6), 469–474. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1077800410364612>

Mitchell, T. D. (2017). Teaching community on and off campus: An intersectional approach to community engagement. *New Directions in Student Services*, 157, 34–44.  
<https://eric.ed.gov/?redir=http%3a%2f%2fdx.doi.org%2f10.1002%2fss.20207>

Mitchell, T. D., & Coll, K. M. (2017). Ethnic studies as a site for political education: Critical service learning and the California domestic worker bill of rights. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 50(1), 187–192.

Netting, F. E., Kettner, P. M., & McMurtry, S. L. (2004). *Social work macro practice* (3rd ed.). Pearson Education, Inc.

Onwuegbuzie, A., Dickinson, W., Leech, N., & Zoran, A. (2009). A qualitative framework for collecting and analyzing data in focus group research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8(3), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F160940690900800301>

Palmer, P. (1998). *The courage to teach*. Jossey-Bass Inc.

Ponterotto, J. (2005). Qualitative research in counseling psychology: A primer on research paradigms and philosophical science. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 52(2), 126–136. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.52.2.126>

Quinn, A. (2019). Reflections on intergenerational trauma. *First Peoples Child & Family Review*, 14(1), 196–210. <https://fpcfr.com/index.php/FPCFR/article/view/381>

Rendón, L. I. (2009). *Sentipensante (sensing/thinking) pedagogy: Educating for wholeness, social justice and liberation*. Stylus Publishing, Inc. [Electronic Edition].

Rockquemore, K. A., & Laszloffy, T. (2008). *The Black academic's guide to winning tenure – without losing your soul*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc.

Royse, D., Thyer, B., & Padgett, D. K. (2016). *Program evaluation: An introduction to an evidence-based approach* (6th ed.). Cengage Learning.

Sandwick, T., Fine, M., Greene, A., Stoudt, B., Torre, M., & Patel, L. (2018). Promise and provocation: Humble reflections on critical participatory action research for social policy. *Urban Education, 53*(4), 473–502. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0042085918763513>

Senge, P. (1994). *The fifth discipline: The art & practice of the learning organization*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.

Smith, G., & Tuhiwai Smith, L. (2018). Doing Indigenous work: Decolonizing and transforming the academy. In *Handbook of Indigenous education* (pp. 1–27). Springer Nature Singapore.

Sohng, S. (1996). Participatory research and community organizing. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare, 23*, 77–97.

<https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2378&context=jssw>

Strand, K., Cutforth, N., Stoecker, R., Marullo, S., & Donohue, P. (2003). *Community-based research and higher education*. Jossey-Bass.

Sweetman, D., Badiee, M., & Creswell, J. W. (2010). Use of the transformative framework in mixed methods studies. *Qualitative Inquiry, 16*(6), 441–454.

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1077800410364610>

Tinker, G. (2009). World view and ideology. [Race, Class, and Gender: Class notes].

Torre, M., Fine, M., Stoudt, B., & Fox, M. (2012). Critical participatory action research as public science. In H. Cooper, P. Camic, D. Long, A. Panter, D. Rindskopf, & K. Sher (Eds.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology, Volume 2. Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological* (pp. 171–184). American Psychological Association.

Tuck, E., & Yang, K. (2012). Decolonization is not a metaphor. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, & Society, 1*(1), 1–40.

<https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/18630/15554>

Tuhiwai Smith, L. (2008). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous people*. Zed Books.

Walter, M., & Anderson, C. (2013). *Indigenous statistics: A quantitative research methodology* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). Taylor & Francis.

**About the Author:** Laurie A. Walker, PhD is Assistant Teaching Professor, Department of Native American Studies, Montana State University, Bozeman, MT ([laurie.walker@montana.edu](mailto:laurie.walker@montana.edu)).

# **Tough Nuts to Crack: Initiating an Imperfect Racial Justice Accountability Process Within One School of Social Work from One Perspective**

Elsbeth Slayter

**Abstract:** This narrative reflects my journey as a White woman who is part of a team of leaders in a school of social work while developing and implementing an inwards-facing racial justice accountability initiative. This initiative was focused on developing an institutional strategy for confronting, addressing, and dismantling racism within our School of Social Work at Salem State University.

**Keywords:** accountability, anti-racist practice, data analysis, racial justice, reflection, reflexion

## **Introduction**

Dr. Ibram Kendi had just spoken at our university's Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebration as the spring semester of 2020 started, renewing in me my commitment to being active as an anti-racist practitioner. I had taken in his Dr. Angela Davis–inspired credo, “there is no neutrality in racism ... the opposite of ‘racist’ isn’t ‘not-racist’ but ‘anti-racist’” (Kendi, 2019, p. 33). As a new interim chair for my department, I wondered how I might infuse some aspects of this credo into my leadership work during my term. I felt excited and invigorated by his talk. Reflecting back on this, I wonder if there was a bit of a “white savior” bravado impetus in my motivation at the time, but at least it was part of what helped to get the ball rolling for the efforts I am about to describe.

A few days later, on a chilly January morning, I sat with the interim dean of the School of Social Work at the time (a woman of color) to talk about priorities for the semester. We reflected on the reality that a disproportionate number of MSW students of color had been dismissed the previous semester due to low or failing grades, although it is important to note that numbers were very small. We acknowledged and recognized that systems can disadvantage historically marginalized groups if they are not examined and addressed, and we sought to do just that. This topic had been raised within our School of Social Work community before, but pushback about the need for academic standards had obfuscated the conversation about equity each time. I also felt frustrated about the data my dean had shared with me, but these feelings of frustration were quickly overshadowed by my need to act, to do something in response to the data. Although I recognized this sense of urgency as a tenet of white supremacy, I still leaned into it. I turned to an area of comfort for me, data analysis, and the belief that data-driven arguments can move even the most stalwart of audiences to act. I might have even let this blind me to other options that may have been before me, but this is the direction I took.

I felt grateful that due to our history of working together on racial justice community organizing projects within our university, the dean and I shared some trust that had developed as a result. We decided to initiate a commitment to racial justice accountability work in our School by devoting a large segment of our faculty and staff meetings to racial justice work monthly.

Without this personal history, our plan would likely not have emerged. I remember reflecting that, as usual, so much of what racial justice work gets done depends on the personalities in leadership at any given time—and that we might as well take advantage of that reality to get the job done while we could, even if it was a top-down maneuver.

I felt enthused, emboldened, and on a mission to crack the tough nut which was getting our community to look at racial justice matters within our School. Little did I realize that the journey was also about cracking my own personal tough nut of racism open as well. The micro mirrors the macro. Regarding emergent systems, adrienne maree brown (2017) writes “small actions and connections create complex systems, patterns that become ecosystems and societies ... emergent strategy is how we intentionally change in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for” (p. 3). My school’s journey mirrored my journey, and vice versa. This essay is about my personal journey towards changing myself as one member of my School of Social Work while simultaneously co-leading the School on a similar journey.

As I looked at what was ahead, the goal for the School was twofold: to foster better reflective and reflexive practice as it relates to the dismantling of racism in our School and to build the capacity of our staff and faculty to do better for students of color. Reflective practice is about unearthing the actual truth embedded in what professionals do, versus just what they say they do (Schön, 1983, 1987). Reflexive practice, by contrast, is the ability to look inwards and outwards to recognize how society and culture impact practice as well as how we ourselves influence practice; as Slayter et al. (2023) note,

the reflective and reflexive social work practitioner will want to ask, “How do I create and influence the knowledge about my practice that I use to make decisions?” In embracing reflectivity and reflexivity, social workers move beyond “just knowing” how well practice is going, which is a form of implicit evaluation that is subjective by nature. (Pre-Engagement section, para. 2)

And as we crafted this new process for the School, I was re-starting a simultaneous, parallel journey of my own vis-a-vis my own racial justice awareness that at first was too centered on data and not centered enough on my connection to what was behind those very same data points.

### **Developing an Accountability Initiative**

We initially framed our ideas for the School’s accountability work in the context of our strategic plan, feeling lucky that we had it to lean back on. We focused specifically on strategic initiative three, which was to advance human and cultural diversity, social justice, and human rights. We decided to feed race and ethnicity data back to our faculty and staff as an accountability mechanism and, hopefully, we thought, as a motivator for action on racial justice equity. Coming from a research background, my instinct was to go to the data in order to present information to faculty and staff as a way to engage in evidence-based practice. I remember feeling almost mechanical and logical at this point, buying into the positivistic paradigm. I thought, “how could people not want to act on patterns of racial and ethnic disproportionality if they see the data?” It was my view that while we had worked hard on the diversity of our

curriculum over the years as a faculty, we had not yet turned the lens inward to look at our own institutional processes, to consider where structural racism and implicit bias had potentially made their marks on our School.

As I look back, I can remember myself saying things like “Sitting with the discomfort of these data as an entire School is so important,” but I’m not sure I let the real discomfort of those words sink into myself, even though I was an architect of the project. Was I sitting with discomfort myself as it related to my work as a teacher and as an administrator? In retrospect, no, not enough. Not enough at all. It was still an abstract idea that I knew to be right in practice, but which I could not fully implement on a personal level.

### **Drawing on Data as an Impetus**

One of our primary ideas was to report on racial and ethnic patterns in program dismissals and in academic probation letters. It was easy enough to report on program-level data because that was separate from myself by a few spheres. But another idea we had was for me as a White person to model good practice for faculty by standing up and showing my own grading data vis-a-vis whether there were racial or ethnic disproportionalities (or not) in my grading. I thought, if I can do this as a White person, and show that it is okay to, essentially, “throw myself under the bus” in confronting what is and is not happening in my classroom vis-a-vis racial and ethnic disproportionality, maybe other people would step up to do the same. Doing this work involves thinking about the implications of unearned advantage or disadvantage for the students in courses. One might ask how confronting a professor’s own patterns relates to the realities of how those patterns were experienced by students. Also, important to note is the fact that context matters, as well. Since this activity doesn’t tell us about causality, even if we find disproportionality, we don’t fully know all the influences but must be willing to reflect on potential sources of what we find.

I remember being ready to do all this but also being somewhat devoid of feeling about it at the same time. It takes a lot to “fall on your sword,” so to speak, in front of all of your colleagues, especially when you are about to admit that your grading patterns exhibit a potentially racist pattern. I felt oddly at ease about this idea, yet oddly disconnected from the emotion of it at the same time. I felt absolutely fine admitting that it was 100 percent likely that there would be racist patterns in my grading data, because we live in a racist society, and I have been raised up as a teacher in that racist context, so why wouldn’t I see those patterns in my work? But I didn’t feel the sad or embarrassed feelings that should have gone along with that. That is in some ways a strength, and in some ways a detriment. I couldn’t make sense of my emotional detachment, but I kept pressing forward.

### **Engaging the Group**

As we prepared to present the individual- and program-level racial and ethnic findings to our colleagues, we strategized about faculty and staff engagement tactics, a primary worry. We had the sense that this work might feel like additional work on top of our already large pile of things to do and to pay attention to during a busy semester. We noted the importance of integrating this



work into the normal course of business so it would feel less cumbersome to our staff and faculty. We knew that we had to make this work feel worthwhile. Although I recognized this as a fellow busy faculty member, I also privately somewhat resented that my co-workers needed to be cajoled to do this work. I did not have ready answers about how to proceed, but continued to hope that the data would be an important hook in the engagement process along with the notion of helping people shift from a diversity frame to an equity frame.

Borrowing from the Council on Social Work Education's (2020) commentary on the matter, we decided to talk about how this shift can be seen as moving from asking "Who is in the room?" to "Who is trying to get in the room but can't?" or "Whose presence in the room is under constant threat of erasure?" as well as "What conditions have we created that maintain certain groups as the perpetual majority?" This consideration led us to learning about Dr. Bensimon's (2006) equity-minded practice framework, which we merged with Dr. Kendi's (2019) credo about non-racist vs. anti-racist practice to inform our own conceptual framework for our data-driven processing activities.

We posited that equity-minded practice calls on social work educators to use data to inform their understanding of social identity inequities. This can inform the building of a network of equity-minded practitioners who want to learn what works and what we could do better to close equity gaps in their practice settings. We noted that equity-minded practice called for using official meeting time to do this work, building it into organizational cultural norms. In operationalizing what equity-minded practice would look like for us in our initial efforts with staff and faculty, we identified three actions.

First, on the individual level, we needed to view the classroom and advisement appointments as racialized spaces; second, we needed to reflect on the racial and ethnic consequences of both individual and institutional practices; and third, we needed to exercise agency to produce racial and ethnic equity through individual and collective action. Our consultation with our university's Office of Inclusive Excellence (focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion) suggested that we were on a good, but somewhat uncharted path. I felt proud of the framework we had crafted and was hopeful that our community would buy into it as we began the work. I remember thinking that I was pushing a rather top-down process, but felt it was the only way to actually get something like this to actually happen. Any other approach felt like capitulation.

### **Sitting with My Own Data**

Having set up the conceptual model for this work, the time had come for me to sit with my own data. I went ahead and developed a simple mechanism to assess for racial and ethnic disproportionality focused on students who had received low grades in my courses (operationalized as less than a B) in order to answer the following research question: Are students of color disproportionately represented in low-grade groups within one professor's courses? My analyses revealed that students of color were disproportionately represented in the low-grade group over the past two years, with variation from course to course across the semesters.

These data left me with much to reflect on (despite the fact that disproportionality analyses do not connote causation). I was surprised that I found myself disconnected and detached from the data, without a lot of emotion about the negative findings before me. I had a hard time being truly reflective and reflexive about what, exactly, my role was in those grade outcomes for students of color. How much of this was my implicit bias? Where, exactly, was my hand in these outcomes? It's really hard work, being reflective and reflexive about one's own racism. I had known that intellectually, but when faced with the task of actually doing the work, it was hard to do more than draw a blank. I found myself favoring the question "How much of this is related to structural racism beyond my control?" and allowing that to be the excuse that explained all the data away. "Nothing to see here, nothing I can do," I thought at my worst times. I also knew, however, that implicit bias had to be a part of the picture as well—all of my reading and studying on racism told me this had to be the case. But I put that aside at first, because it was easier, even though I knew better. It was only later that I came back to the work of chipping away at my implicit bias, when I was more ready to face myself.

When the time came for the presentation of the data to the larger group, I had a pretty easy time standing up and showing people the pretty significantly terrible pattern of disproportionality presenting my individual grading, but it was harder to talk about what it meant—so to be honest, I blithely skipped past that, and nobody really challenged me on that, as it was likely uncomfortable for them as well. At first, people in the audience were completely silent, and I worried that nobody would talk, but after posing some of our pre-planned questions to the group, things began to loosen up for some in the room. But the fact is, we were speaking in generalities. I suppose that is the best that could be expected for a starting place in our accountability process. The questions for reflection we had chosen to pair with our data were:

- How frequently do I differentiate instruction based on race and ethnicity?
- Do scoring rubrics give advantages for certain ways of knowing and expression?
- Do I allow culturally based differences in language, speech, reading, and writing to shape my perceptions about students' cognitive ability?
- Are there opportunities for different methods of assessment I am not considering?

Sharing my data did seem to achieve the purpose of jumpstarting a conversation about these questions, but the truth is as the discussion meandered along over the course of that semester and beyond, I've been stuck ever since with these individual-level questions since this initial sharing time. I'm not sure I'll ever be done figuring out the answers to these questions. I suppose, though, that I should never be done with them as an anti-racist reflective and reflexive practitioner. The work of a reflective and reflexive anti-racist practitioner is never done.

While our School continued along a (slow) path of exploring racial justice topics from this point onwards, suggesting that the nut had been cracked open some, my own personal path took a turn in its own direction as well. Our subsequent School-wide workshop on implicit bias showed me a beginning image of some truths about myself that made me need to look deeper into myself. I realized that I was going to need to look hard at where my own racism existed inside. I didn't exactly know how to go about this.

Later on that year, after the murder of George Floyd, I had an unexpected change to enter into this work much more intensively. I began to co-facilitate a weekly group for White students, staff, faculty, and alumni who were interested in developing their White racial identity, considering their White privilege, and addressing their White fragility. All of this was towards the goal of making whiteness more visible. Through this experience, I began to feel more free to critique myself with respect to how I had worked with my students and colleagues of color in the past. I faced some painful memories. But it wasn't until later that summer when I participated in the intensive six-week process run by Academics for Black Survival and Wellness (<https://www.academics4blacklives.com/>) that I had a really big turning point. This program helped me to break through the disconnection I was feeling between the intellectual connection to anti-racism work and the gut connection I deep down knew that I needed with this work.

Academics for Black Survival and Wellness (2023) helps “to foster accountability and growth for non-Black people and enhance healing and wellness for Black people” (About Us section) through the use of a step-by-step program designed by Black scholars from around the US and Canada. Working with a group of White allies, this bi-weekly program led by Black scholars allowed me to look at my own anti-Black racism, especially as it relates to my work in the university context. This gut-wrenching work caused me to face aspects of the Black experience I was not aware of previously, allowing me to sit with it, and to reflect on how I could act on the knowledge it brought me about myself as a White professor functioning in a racist society. I often felt raw and upset and at the same time powerful and proud for looking at the ugliest and most ignorant and racist parts of myself and my academic and personal world.

After completing this program, connecting with what was behind my individual grading data was a lot easier. I could recognize the stereotypes I placed on my students of color and my White students without being aware of them consciously. I noticed the categories I placed my students into in an automated sort of way. I identified the differential grading patterns I engaged in when looking at the work of students of color, for example. I began to see the ways in which my assessment mechanisms were likely biased. It was all much clearer to see if I pushed myself to adjust my lenses towards an equity framework. I realized that I absolutely engaged in implicit bias, and I had unearthed it: It had been hidden in plain sight. Now, my tough nut to crack had started to split open too. The question was, was I brave enough to share this experience openly with my social work colleagues in order to help them along in this process as well?

I see my primary work from this point as shepherding both myself and my School towards some sort of ongoing and renewable accountability process. On the individual front, I'm not exactly sure how to be accountable to my current or former students of color in my grading process, but I'm on a journey to figure that out every single day. I'm trying out oral exams to replace written exams for my statistics interpretation exam, for example, as I did not need to assess writing, I needed to assess the capacity to interpret data for social work practice. This was spurred on by a pattern of racial and ethnic disproportionality in last fall's final exam, which was written. And I knew that those students could do the work, because they could talk me through statistics, but writing about statistics proved a challenge. I had to re-assess what the most important thing to assess about this work was. Other aspects of the course had assessed their writing as it would

apply to report-writing, grant-writing, and the like, but in terms of data interpretation, an oral examination would be just fine. What I have come to in my personal journey is summed up well by the inimitable Grace Lee Boggs, who says “we have to change ourselves in order to change the world” (Democracy Now, 2015, para. 25). This process related to another series of conversations that our School had engaged in about our students’ writing, general preparation for practice, overall standards, and the use of a deficits vs. strengths lens, among other topics.

And that leaves me to report where we are on the program front. We are making a number of efforts that are guided by a few of us who are pushing the envelope. We are headed into a series of retreats for our own community. We hope to work together to craft a school-wide accountability process based on our data as well as an anti-racism statement that will guide our process in the future. And, of course, that will need to be scaffolded with systems for responding to and being accountable for acts of racism as well. I’m anxious about how well we will be able to do that work, and how long it will take to get there. At this point I can see that the sharing of our School’s racial and ethnic disproportionality data with our students and alumni in a thoughtful and productive way can also be done in a respectful and healing way. I’d like to support this action as a step towards the goal of making our community a responsive and better place for all who are part of it. Facing these data will likely be a painful process for me and for our community, and a process that we will all need help with engaging in. Yet this will be a process that we will all need to be brave about, and will need to lean into if we are truly to embrace the work of anti-racism and keep on cracking those tough nuts we all seem to be holding on to.

### **Afterword**

As schools of social work begin to grapple with how to embark on a data-driven process of racial justice accountability, I recommend that they follow the principles of Dr. Estela Bensimon’s equity-minded practice approach (Bensimon, 2006; Bensimon & Associates, 2021). First, the educator should develop a keen awareness of their racial and or ethnic identity as it relates to their work in and around the classroom. Second, drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data, the educator should develop a keen awareness of racialized patterns in and around the classroom, acknowledging that the classroom and the academy are racialized spaces. In choosing metrics to consider, it can be especially important to take a strengths-based approach, focusing on course success rates, honors program completions, and field placement rates, as well as topics such as rates of placement on academic probation and program dismissal, for example. Third, the educator should engage in regular reflection and reflexion about the racial consequences of their actions in and around the classroom. Fourth, the educator should engage in agency to produce racial equity (Schön, 1983, 1987). Specific techniques for tracking disaggregated racial and ethnic student data can be found in the presentations “Equity-Minded Teaching & Data Use” and “Instructions for Race-Conscious Grade and Attendance Mapping” from Bensimon and Associates (2021a, 2021b).

In terms of recommendations for future research on racial and ethnic outcomes in our student data, I have two primary recommendations. As our field moves forward with becoming accountable in the realm of racial justice, we must not lose attention to the importance of race and ethnicity as salient factors in higher education outcomes while simultaneously needing to

honor the role of intersectional analyses (looking at disability and nationality, for example). It is vital to consider experiences and outcomes within groups so that the differences within groups are clear. For example, the experience of one Black female student raised in the United States in a home led by college graduates may be completely different than that of a Black male student with a disability raised by African immigrant parents without college educations. While institutional research offices usually have easy access to the racial and ethnic identifications that students share in their applications data, gathering data on students' nationality of origin, disability identification, or socioeconomic status might not be as easy, leading this to be a more involved research effort.

### Acknowledgements

The author wishes to acknowledge and thank former Interim Dean Lisa Johnson for her editorial assistance, constant inspiration, and gracious encouragement in the preparation of this essay and in the conduct of this work.

### References

Academics for Black Survival and Wellness. (2023). *Home*.

<https://www.academics4blacklives.com/>

Bensimon & Associates. (September 13, 2021a). *Equity-minded teaching & data use* [PowerPoint presentation]. Racial Equity Data Discovery Workshop, Racial Equity and Justice Institute, Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, MA.

<https://bensimonandassociates.app.box.com/s/jtptpg2c3vopudga1q4prngjs3en6hkpgp>

Bensimon & Associates. (September 13, 2021b). *Instructions for race-conscious grade and attendance mapping* [PowerPoint presentation]. Racial Equity Data Discovery Workshop, Racial Equity and Justice Institute, Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, MA.

<https://bensimonandassociates.app.box.com/s/3qtubbsfzqpnt06itp55pi70ajzor3rb>

Bensimon, E. M. (2006). Learning equity-mindedness: Equality in educational outcomes. *The Academic Workplace*, 1(17), 2–21. [https://bpb-us-](https://bpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/sites.usc.edu/dist/6/735/files/2016/01/Bensimon_Learning-Equity-Mindedness-Equality-in-Educational-Outcomes.pdf)

[e1.wpmucdn.com/sites.usc.edu/dist/6/735/files/2016/01/Bensimon\\_Learning-Equity-Mindedness-Equality-in-Educational-Outcomes.pdf](https://bpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/sites.usc.edu/dist/6/735/files/2016/01/Bensimon_Learning-Equity-Mindedness-Equality-in-Educational-Outcomes.pdf)

brown, a. m. (2017). *Emergent strategy: Shaping change, changing worlds*. AK Press.

Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). (2020). *Equity-minded competence in higher education*. [https://www.cswe.org/Centers-Initiatives/Centers/Center-for-](https://www.cswe.org/Centers-Initiatives/Centers/Center-for-Diversity?zs=J4G4f1&zl=BP0U6)

[Diversity? zs=J4G4f1& zl=BP0U6](https://www.cswe.org/Centers-Initiatives/Centers/Center-for-Diversity?zs=J4G4f1&zl=BP0U6)

Democracy Now. (2015). *Remembering Grace Lee Boggs (1915-2015): “We Have to Change Ourselves in Order to Change the World”*

[https://www.democracynow.org/2015/10/6/remembering\\_grace\\_lee\\_boggs\\_1915\\_2015](https://www.democracynow.org/2015/10/6/remembering_grace_lee_boggs_1915_2015)

Kendi, I. X. (2019). *How to be an antiracist*. One World/Penguin Random House.

Schön, D. (1983). *The Reflective Practitioner*. Temple Smith.

Schön, D. (1987). *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. Jossey-Bass.

Slayter, E., Singh, R., & Johnson, L. (2023). A model for social work practice with disability communities: Connecting critical cultural competence, intersectionality and anti-oppressive practice. In E. Slayter and L. Johnson (Eds.), *Social work practice and the disability community: An intersectional anti-oppressive approach* (pp. 33–65). Pressbooks.

<https://rotel.pressbooks.pub/disabilitysocialwork/chapter/chapter-2/>

**About the Author:** Elspeth Slayter, PhD is Professor, School of Social Work, Salem State University, Salem, MA ([eslayter@salemstate.edu](mailto:eslayter@salemstate.edu)).

## Double Special Issue: The Epilogue

Jenny L. Jones and Anthony P. Natale

**Abstract:** This epilogue comments on the *Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping* double Special Issue: A Call for Social Work Educators to Confront and Dismantle Systemic Racism *Within* Social Work Programs. The articles highlight the lived experiences, observations, and treatment of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) in social work programs across the country and the impact on individual productivity, higher education institutions, social work curriculum and the social work profession. The issues create a lens for examination of behaviors and practices and suggest paths forward to address systemic racism within social work programs.

**Keywords:** institutional racism, systemic racism, anti-racism, social work, epilogue

The proliferation of deaths of African Americans over the past four years has called for an awakening to America's treatment of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). The current social and political climate has fueled the reawakening of the quietly present negativity against BIPOC populations to be bold and loud and challenged the social work profession to revisit how we prepare students to practice and conduct research and conceptualize who is worthy and who is not, based on race (Abrams et al., 2023). And, while the social work profession (e.g., the National Association of Social Workers and Council on Social Work Education) has adopted statements on issues of racial injustice, racial disparity, anti-racism, inclusion, equity, and diversity, there continues to be a gap in the practice of these areas, as well as a level of resistance by some to adhere to them or take them seriously. Thus, there is much work to be done in evaluating the production and circulation of racial discourses by communities and institutions, especially how national ideals, bodies, and borders are constituted and challenged within that discourse.

In this powerful collection, we heed a resounding call to action that echoes far beyond the pages and reverberates within the very fabric of social work education. This double issue stands as a collective voice, a unified plea urging social work educators to confront and dismantle the entrenched specter of systemic racism within the very programs designed to foster positive change. The narratives within unfold as poignant testimonials, illuminating the realities faced by educators of diverse backgrounds and experiences as they navigate the complexities of a profession that professes values of equity and inclusivity. As we delve into these narratives, we confront uncomfortable truths, challenge prevailing norms, and emerge with a shared commitment to catalyze real, substantive change. Together, these narratives beckon educators, administrators, and advocates alike to engage in candid dialogue, dismantle barriers, and embrace the imperative of fostering environments that embody the principles of justice, equity, and anti-oppression within social work education.

This double Special Issue—V29(2) and V30(1)—presents parallel narratives that facilitate critical reflection and dialog about the role of the social work profession in the development of anti-racist policies and practices in the social work profession. Additionally, the narratives provide an opportunity for the use of diverse voices, theories, and methods that challenge us to

conceptualize and enact an anti-racist future through reckoning with our past histories of oppression and resistance; de-centering whiteness; and forging new practices, policies, and pedagogies that can lead to an anti-racist future. Concerted and intensified efforts have to be made for change to occur. Throughout this double Special Issue, authors reveal key themes that form common threads across their diverse experiences.

V29(2) focuses on institutional racism, including experiences with misogynoir at predominately white institutions; dual stressors of classism and racism; the witnessing of anti-black racism; historical and contemporary experience of being racially restricted; white fragility; academic censoring due to the use of critical race theory; and contemporary experiences around dealing with the murder of George Floyd. Additionally, solutions for dealing with such experiences and stereotypes expressed over the past years specific to BIPOC people include trauma strategies used to address and survive the documented stressors that African American women often face in the academy.

V30(1) provides in-depth accounts of racism based on space and place, marginalization, and the need for decolonization of the social work curriculum to include critical race theory. Moreover, this issue illuminates racial bias in academic institutions; the profession's checkered history of complicity with racial subjugation; microaggressions endured by Black graduate students in social work programs; the intersectionality of race, gender, age, and citizenship; and the transformative potential of diversifying curricula and incorporating critical race theory.

The themes of both issues include the imperative to dismantle racial inequalities and the envisioning of a future grounded in equity, inclusion, and change. The commonalities among the authors' reflections collectively urge the members of the social work academy to confront, evolve, and actively engage in the ongoing journey toward equity and inclusivity in social work education.

### **Conclusion: Navigating the Unfinished Journey Toward Inclusivity in Social Work Education**

As we stand at the crossroads of these poignant narratives, woven together by the diverse voices of scholars, it is undeniably clear that the journey toward inclusivity in social work education is critical and incomplete. The raw honesty and courageous introspection shared by these academics serve as a testament to the progress made and an unwavering call to action.

Yet, as these narratives unfold, it becomes painfully apparent that the journey toward full inclusivity in social work education still needs to be completed. Despite its commitment to social justice, the academy grapples with persistent challenges—implicit biases, microaggressions, systemic injustices, and historical complicity—that cast shadows over its aspirational ideals.

This collection of narratives is a powerful reminder that true inclusivity requires more than rhetorical commitments; it demands an unflinching examination of institutional structures, curricula, and interpersonal dynamics. The impact of these stories lies not only in their



revelatory nature but in their potential to spark transformative change. The academy must heed this call to action, recognizing that the path to inclusivity is linear and has obstacles. It necessitates a sustained commitment to dismantling systemic barriers, confronting uncomfortable truths, and fostering an environment where every voice is heard and actively valued. The implications are profound, urging social work education to evolve beyond performative gestures toward an authentic commitment to justice, equity, and inclusion.

In the face of these narratives, social work education stands at a critical juncture. The journey toward total inclusivity is ongoing, and the academy must summon the collective will to traverse the remaining distance. The narratives shared here are beacons illuminating the path forward, urging us to confront the unfinished business of inclusivity and affirming that the pursuit of justice is an eternal and indispensable commitment for the profession of social work.

### References

Abrams, L. S., Crew, S. E., Dettlaff, A. J., and Williams, J. H. (2023). Introduction to social work, white supremacy, and racial justice: Reckoning with our history, interrogating our present, Reimagining Our Future. In *Social work, white supremacy, and racial justice* (pp. 1–12). Oxford University Press.

**About the Authors:** Jenny L. Jones, PhD, ACSW (she/her) is Dean and Professor, Whitney M Young, Jr School of Social Work, Clark Atlanta University, Atlanta, GA ([jjones@cau.edu](mailto:jjones@cau.edu)); Anthony P. Natale, PhD, MSW (he/him) is Associate Professor, Anne and Henry Zarrow School of Social Work, University of Oklahoma, and Director, Southwest Center for Human Relations Studies, Norman, OK ([anatale@ou.edu](mailto:anatale@ou.edu)).