

REFLECTIONS

NARRATIVES of PROFESSIONAL HELPING



“Shared Spaces” Photograph 707x884 Kenya C. Jones 2026

Artist’s Statement: This original photograph captures a shared space for reflection, connection, and renewal. The swings and surrounding trees symbolize the spaces helping professionals create for healing, listening, and collective care, while the open landscape beyond reminds us that even in uncertain times, hope and possibility remain. Rooted in the Journal’s appreciation for authentic stories and original creative expression, the image reflects the resilience, humanity, and community that sustain helping professionals as they navigate change together.

Navigating Change: Reflective Insights for Helping Professionals in Shifting Political Landscapes

GUEST EDITORS: Kenya C. Jones, Anthony T. Estreet, and James T. Freeman

Volume 32 (2026)

Number 2

REFLECTIONS

NARRATIVES of PROFESSIONAL HELPING

Editorial Leadership Team: Editor-in-Chief: Darlyne Bailey, PhD, LISW (Professor Emeritus and Dean Emeritus; Executive Director, Community Dialogues for Action, Bryn Mawr College Graduate School of Social Work and Social Research); Associate Editors: Monica Leisey, PhD (Professor, 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), Ahn Ngo, PhD (Wilfrid Laurier University); Practicum Education – Brie Radis, PhD (West Chester University); Research – Tiffany Baffour, PhD (East Carolina University), Kenya C. Jones, PhD, LMSW (Clark Atlanta University); Teaching & Learning – Cathy McElderry, PhD (Middle Tennessee State, retired)

Cover Artist: Kenya C. Jones, PhD, LMSW (Clark Atlanta University)

Copyediting and Production Team: Lead Copy Editor and Production Manager: Jack Pincelli, BS, SSA (Pillbug Editorial); Assistant Copy Editor: Kelcey Montimes, BS (Salem State 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); Sheara Jennings (Howard University); Nancy Myer-Adams (California State University Long Beach); Jeanne Koller (Monmouth University); Darlyne Bailey (Editor-in-Chief, Ex-Officio)

ISSN - 1080-0220. Published July 2026 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.

BECOME A FRIEND OR INSTITUTIONAL PARTNER OF *REFLECTIONS*

To continue to be an open access journal that does not require a subscription or pose a financial barrier to our over 1,000 readers in the U.S. and abroad, **we need your help.**

We operate on a very tight budget that we stretch to fund a part-time Assistant Editor, a Lead Copyeditor and Production Manager, and students who help with copyediting and production. *Reflections'* Publisher, Editors, Editorial Board, Reviewers, and Publishing Partners are all volunteers.

No tax-deductible contribution is too small or too big for you to become an **Individual Friend of *Reflections*** (\$\$ of any amount committed as a one-time gift or over whatever time you designate). Or, if you represent a program or a department at an agency, corporation, school, college, or university, please join the University of Georgia, Howard University, Monmouth University, and California State University Long Beach to become an **Institutional Publishing Partner of *Reflections*** (\$3,000 committed over a three-year period).

To contribute, please visit:

<https://reflections narratives of professional helping.org/index.php/Reflections/donate>

Thank You so very much for your support!!

REFLECTIONS

NARRATIVES of PROFESSIONAL HELPING

- 6-12 [Reflections from the Guest Editors: Navigating Change in a Time of Uncertainty](#)
Kenya C. Jones, Anthony T. Estreet, and James T. Freeman
- 13-25 [An Act of Love: Building a Collaborative for Reproductive Justice and Abolition Amidst Tumultuous Times](#)
Crystal M. Hayes and E. D. Goldblatt Hyatt
- 26-29 [Navigating Care: LGBTQIA+ Affirmation and Mental Health in a Challenging Political Landscape](#)
Elizabeth Francis
- 30-47 [Midnight Watch for Rogue Waves: Experiencing Faculty Intimidation in Florida](#)
Douglas Robertson
- 48-55 [Navigating Ethical Advocacy: Adaptive Leadership and Moral Courage in Politically Charged Contexts](#)
Darrin E. Wright
- 56-75 [Marcus Garvey: A Pioneer in the Empowerment of the Oppressed](#)
Llewellyn Cornelius
- 76-82 [Funding Needs in Public Schools: Social Workers Advocating for Ethical Decision-Making](#)
Jaelyn Childs and Christopher Robinson
- 83-89 [Delivering Accessible Reproductive Care in a Post-Dobbs Era: A Social Worker's Narrative on Policy, Ethics, and Practice](#)
Kaylisa Estes
- 90-96 [No Time to Rest: Purposeful Approaches to Systemic Racism and the Ongoing Struggle for Justice in Social Work Education](#)
Annette Grape and Peggy Lane
- 97-100 [Navigating Field Education in a Politically Evolved America](#)
Candace L. Riddley, Angela R. Savage, Ahfiya J. Howard, Vené C. Baggett, Brian E. Anderson, and Yarneecia D. Dyson
- 101-106 [Reclaiming Our Future from MAGA: Infrastructure and Self-Reliance in the Black Community](#)
Eyitayo Onifade

In Loving Memory of Dr. Shonda Lawrence (7/17/1963 – 7/19/2026)

As we bring this Special Issue to publication, we want to pause to honor the life and enduring legacy of Dr. Shonda Lawrence. Among other major responsibilities and positions Shonda held, she was also a Guest Editor of our *Reflections*.

Her contributions to *Reflections* will remain an enduring part of the Journal's legacy. As Guest Editor, alongside Dr. Tiffany D. Baffour, she led the powerful two-part Special Series "A Call for Social Work Educators to Confront and Dismantle Systemic Racism Within Social Work Programs" published in Volume 29, Number 2 (2023) and Volume 30, Number 1 (2024). Through that work, Shonda helped create an essential platform for courageous dialogue, critical reflection, and transformative scholarship that challenged social work educators to confront systemic racism within our own institutions and classrooms.

Shonda was a light in every space she entered. She inspired others to think more deeply, collaborate more broadly, and lead with both courage and compassion. Although her absence is and will always be profoundly felt, her legacy lives on through the students she mentored, the colleagues she encouraged, the scholarship she advanced, and the countless lives she changed.

The Guest Editors of this Special Issue dedicate their work to the memory of Dr. Shonda Lawrence with deep gratitude and love. As remembered by Kenya C. Jones:

Shonda was far more than a respected scholar and educator—she was my friend, colleague, and mentor. She had a remarkable ability to make you laugh while also encouraging you to think differently. Her wisdom challenged me to view opportunities through new lenses, and her words of encouragement often came at exactly the right moment. She inspired me to embrace interdisciplinary collaboration and introduced me to the world of data science, encouraging me to build meaningful partnerships with faculty beyond my department and school. Those experiences have profoundly shaped my scholarship, teaching, and professional growth.

What I admired most about Shonda was not only her brilliance, but her generosity. She had an extraordinary gift for connecting people, mentoring students, supporting colleagues, and creating spaces where others felt seen, valued, and empowered. Her influence reached far beyond the classroom or the academy, touching countless lives through her authenticity, compassion, and unwavering commitment to advancing our profession.

May we continue the work she so passionately championed—leading with integrity, fostering collaboration and connection, amplifying voices that must be heard, and remaining steadfast in our commitment to justice, equity, and the transformative power of teaching and learning through sharing our stories.

Reflections from the Guest Editors: Navigating Change in a Time of Uncertainty

Kenya C. Jones, Anthony T. Estreet, and James T. Freeman

Abstract: This first Issue in the Special Series affirms that helping professionals cannot remain neutral during periods of social and political upheaval. Instead, the reflections gathered here demonstrate the need for justice-centered, culturally responsive, ethically grounded, and action-oriented practice that responds directly to the realities shaping marginalized communities and the professionals who serve alongside them. Through narratives of advocacy, resistance, healing, leadership, education, and community engagement, readers are invited to reflect on the responsibilities of helping work during divisive times and to consider how advocacy, ethics, and collective care remain central to professional practice.

Keywords: collective care, resistance and resiliency, cultural responsiveness, ethical practice

In moments of political uncertainty, helping professionals are called to do more than provide services. We are asked to lead, advocate, teach, organize, heal, mentor, and remain ethically grounded while navigating systems shaped by inequity.

Across the United States and beyond, practitioners, educators, clinicians, and community advocates continue to confront shifting sociopolitical realities marked by threats to diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives; restrictions on reproductive rights; educational censorship; immigration instability; racialized violence; reductions in health and human services funding; and widening disparities affecting Black, Brown, immigrant, LGBTQIA+, and other historically excluded communities.

These conditions shape not only the communities we serve but also the emotional, ethical, educational, and professional experiences of those working within social work, healthcare, behavioral health, education, advocacy organizations, and community institutions. In keeping with the interdisciplinary mission of *Reflections*, this series welcomes narratives from social work, healthcare, nursing, behavioral health, public health, education, legal advocacy, community practice, and other helping professions whose work intersects with justice, healing, and human dignity.

This first Issue in this Special Series affirms that helping professionals cannot remain neutral during periods of social and political upheaval. Instead, the reflections gathered here demonstrate the need for justice-centered, culturally responsive, ethically grounded, and action-oriented practice that responds directly to the realities shaping marginalized communities and the professionals who serve alongside them. Through narratives of advocacy, resistance, healing, leadership, education, and community engagement, readers are invited to reflect on the responsibilities of helping work during divisive times and to consider how advocacy, ethics, and collective care remain central to professional practice.

The evolving national climate is not a distant backdrop to helping practice; it is a force that directly shapes the conditions under which professionals teach, lead, advocate, heal, and serve. This Special Issue begins a critical conversation as helping professionals continue navigating increasing demands for social change while also working to preserve spaces where advocacy, resistance, reflection, and dissenting voices remain valued, protected, and supported. Across disciplines, the contributors in this issue illuminate both the urgency of this moment and the innovative strategies professionals continue to develop in response.

The “Urgency of Now” emerges as a central thread throughout this issue, as shifting policies and institutional changes increasingly create barriers to social equity while simultaneously challenging helping professionals’ ability to provide services, foster learning environments, and perform professional responsibilities without fear of retaliation, funding loss, surveillance, or professional consequences. The narratives gathered here remind us that helping work does not occur outside of socio-political conditions. Rather, the helping profession is deeply interconnected with policy, institutional power, community resistance, and collective survival.

Reflections, Narratives, and the Importance of Space

As Guest Editors, we are honored to introduce this first Issue in the Special Series “Navigating Change: Reflective Insights for Helping Professionals in Shifting Political Landscapes.” What began as a single Special Issue call evolved into a multi-Issue series after overwhelming response—and exceptional quality in the submissions received from helping professionals across disciplines.

As *Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping* celebrates more than 30 years of creating space for storytelling, critical reflection, and interdisciplinary dialogue, this Special Series continues that tradition by providing a forum within which helping professionals can document, examine, and learn from experiences navigating complex social, political, and institutional realities.

The breadth and depth of these narratives underscore this need. We approached this Issue not only as scholars, but also as helping professionals, educators, advocates, and witnesses to the emotional and structural realities shaping our communities, classrooms, organizations, and institutions.

This Issue speaks directly to practitioners, educators, students, policy advocates, researchers, and interdisciplinary helping professionals committed to justice-centered practice. While the contributors represent diverse disciplines and lived experiences, their narratives collectively reinforce the importance of advocacy, ethical leadership, culturally grounded engagement, and critical reflection during periods of disruption and institutional change.

In upcoming Issues in this series, we especially welcome contributions from nursing, law, and other helping professions whose voices have historically enriched *Reflections* and remain vital to

this ongoing conversation. Your perspectives deepen interdisciplinary dialogue and strengthen the collective work of justice, healing, and human dignity.

Atop the Legacy of HBCU Advocacy and Justice

This Special Issue also builds upon the foundational essay “HBCUs Respond: Social Justice and Social Work Education in a Trump Era” (Estreet et al., 2018) previously published in *Reflections*. In that earlier work, we reflected on the responsibilities of HBCU social work educators during the first Trump administration, examining advocacy, curriculum transformation, student engagement, and the role Historically Black Colleges and Universities take in preparing students to respond to shifting political realities. As Guest Editors, we—Dr. Kenya C. Jones of Clark Atlanta University; Dr. Anthony T. Estreet, previously of Morgan State University and now Chief Executive Officer of the National Association of Social Workers; and Dr. James T. Freeman of Johnson C. Smith University—value how our professional experiences within HBCUs continue to shape our perspectives on justice-centered education, culturally responsive pedagogy, transformative learning, and collective empowerment.

Jointly, our experiences have reinforced the enduring importance of advocacy, community engagement, critical consciousness, and leadership development rooted in equity and liberation. Dr. Estreet’s national leadership through NASW also provides a broader policy and advocacy lens on the ethical, professional, and structural challenges confronting helping professionals and marginalized communities across the country.

This first Issue on “Navigating Change” reflects a collective response to these ongoing realities. The authors represented throughout this edition offer narratives rooted in advocacy, ethical leadership, trauma, resilience, racial justice, education, philanthropy, healthcare, and community empowerment. Together, these narratives illuminate how helping professionals continue to navigate uncertainty while sustaining commitments to collective care, justice, empowerment, and transformative practice.

Flowing between their varied themes, this Special Issue’s articles flow intentionally between their varied themes from policy and education to healing and community resilience. Some narratives directly confront structural inequities and sociopolitical realities, while others illuminate the emotional, relational, and spiritual consequences these shifts create within helping practice and professional identity.

Taken together, the contributions reinforce the interconnectedness of personal experience, professional ethics, community engagement, and systemic change. They also remind us that helping work is not separate from public life; it is shaped by it and helps to shape it.

Reflections from This First Issue of the Special Series “Navigating Change”

Collectively, the manuscripts presented in this first Issue invite readers to examine helping practice through multiple lenses, including advocacy, healthcare, education, leadership, ethics, historical memory, trauma, philanthropy, and community resilience.

Hayes and Goldblatt Hyatt examine the development of a reproductive justice collaborative grounded in advocacy, abolitionist frameworks, and collective accountability. The article reflects the emotional and ethical labor required to sustain justice-centered work during divisive times while emphasizing solidarity and collaboration in supporting vulnerable communities.

Francis offers a deeply reflective narrative centered on affirming LGBTQIA+ individuals within healthcare and mental health practice. Through the lens of nursing and helping relationships, the article highlights the importance of culturally responsive and affirming care amid rising hostility toward LGBTQIA+ communities.

Robertson provides a powerful reflection on academic freedom, censorship, identity, and faculty vulnerability within increasingly restrictive educational climates. The article captures the emotional and professional toll of educational surveillance and ideological policing while emphasizing the importance of resistance and truth-telling within higher education.

In the next article, Wright explores advocacy through ethical decision-making models and Afrocentric principles such as humanistic values, autonomy, and empowerment; this work reminds us that ethical leadership within helping professions requires adaptability, courage, and a willingness to confront systemic inequities directly.

Cornelius revisits the legacy of Marcus Garvey and the historical foundations of racial uplift, self-determination, and collective empowerment. By connecting Garvey’s work to contemporary helping professions, the article reinforces the enduring significance of Black leadership traditions and liberation-centered practice during periods of social instability.

Childs and Robinson center the voices of emerging social work leaders while examining educational inequities, policy implications, and the ethical responsibilities of helping professionals advocating within public school systems. The article highlights the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration, student advocacy, and critical race perspectives in responding to educational disparities.

Estes offers a timely reflection on the ethical, emotional, and professional realities of reproductive healthcare following the *Roe* and *Dobbs* decisions. The article highlights advocacy, accessibility, interdisciplinary partnerships, and the role of practitioners responding to shifting reproductive policies and barriers to care.

Grape and Lane reflect on systemic inequities intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, racial violence, and political unrest. Through their experiences as social work educators, the authors

challenge neutrality and call for purposeful action within classrooms, institutions, and helping professions committed to justice-oriented education.

Riddley, Savage, Howard, Baggett, Anderson, and Dyson examine how shifting political landscapes are reshaping social work field education, particularly within Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Reflecting on student safety, field supervision, advocacy, and innovative placement models, the authors demonstrate how social work educators are adapting field education to ensure meaningful, equitable, and ethically grounded learning experiences while preparing future practitioners to navigate increasingly complex practice environments.

Onifade concludes the first Issue by examining Black self-reliance, infrastructure development, Pan-African traditions, and collective economic empowerment as pathways toward resilience and liberation. The article reinforces the Issue's recurring emphasis on historical memory, community responsibility, and collective survival during unsurety.

Together, these narratives remind us that helping professionals are not passive observers of political change. We are active participants in advocacy, healing, resistance, mentorship, education, philanthropy, and community transformation. Across disciplines and perspectives, the contributors challenge the myth of professional neutrality while emphasizing the importance of ethical leadership, collective responsibility, culturally grounded practice, and community-centered care.

Creating Space for Collective Voice and Reflection

As was described in the Artist's Statement, the cover photograph for this Special Issue, "Shared Spaces," offers a visual invitation into the central themes woven throughout these narratives. Rather than a single profession or event, the image presents a quiet landscape that symbolizes the reflective spaces helping professionals intentionally cultivate within classrooms, counseling offices, hospitals, community organizations, neighborhoods, and places of healing.

The empty swings remind us that helping work begins by creating space—for listening, mentoring, teaching, grieving, healing, organizing, and imagining new possibilities. The mature trees represent resilience, rootedness, protection, and the collective wisdom that sustains communities across generations. Looking beyond the trees, the open field and distant horizon symbolize hope, renewal, and the belief that even amid uncertainty, opportunities for justice, transformation, and human flourishing remain.

Like the reflections contained throughout this Issue, the photograph does not prescribe a single interpretation. Instead, it invites readers to pause, reflect, and consider their own role in creating spaces where dignity, compassion, advocacy, and collective care continue to grow.

What became immediately clear throughout the review process was that this Special Section met a profound need within the helping professions. The overwhelming number of submissions represented one of the largest responses to a Special Section theme in *Reflections* history and

affirmed the urgency of creating spaces where professionals can critically reflect, document lived experiences, challenge oppression, process collective grief, and imagine possibilities for justice, healing, and liberation.

The expansion from a single Special Issue to a multi-issue Series reflects both the urgency of the topic and the desire among helping professionals to share and connect during periods of social and political change. It also reinforces the importance of interdisciplinary dialogue, as contributors represent a broad range of helping professions committed to justice, healing, education, healthcare, community engagement, and human well-being.

As guest editors, we are deeply grateful to each author who entrusted us with their reflections, scholarship, vulnerabilities, and experiences. We also recognize the helping professionals across communities who continue to labor within difficult systems while upholding commitments to dignity, justice, equity, and collective liberation.

We offer special appreciation to Rosa James for her contributions as an additional reviewer. Her thoughtful feedback, generosity of time, and commitment to the integrity of the review process strengthened this edition and supported the development of the “Navigating Change” Special Series.

The reflections gathered throughout this Issue underscore that helping professional practice cannot be separated from the political, social, and institutional realities shaping the lives of individuals and communities. In a sociopolitical climate characterized by intensified attacks on equity and inclusion efforts, helping professionals are called to move beyond technical competence toward practice that is critically reflexive, culturally responsive, anti-oppressive, trauma-informed, and grounded in advocacy for human rights and social justice.

Consistent with the Council on Social Work Education (2022) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards and the National Association of Social Workers (2021) Code of Ethics, the narratives in this Issue reinforce that helping practice is inherently ethical, relational, political, and justice-oriented. The implications for practice are both immediate and substantial: Helping professionals must be prepared to confront structural inequities, engage policy realities at the macro level, collaborate across disciplines, protect the dignity and worth of marginalized communities, and sustain reflective and accountable practice even amidst uncertainty and resistance.

Educators must continue preparing students for justice-oriented leadership and ethical advocacy, while organizations and community leaders must remain committed to culturally responsive and equity-centered approaches despite shifting political pressures and funding realities. Far from peripheral, the concerns of advocacy, collective care, inclusion, and social justice remain central to the ethical mandate and contemporary relevance of the helping professions.

Taken together, the narratives in “Navigating Change” affirm that helping professionals are not merely responding to political upheaval but are actively shaping more just and inclusive futures

through practice, reflection, resistance, solidarity, and transformative action. In a time when silence is often rewarded and truth is increasingly contested, these narratives remind us that helping professionals remain essential voices in advancing justice, healing, and human dignity. The urgency of this moment demands not only reflection, but courageous action rooted in humanity, ethics, advocacy, and collective care.

Reference

Council on Social Work Education. (2022). *Educational policy and accreditation standards*. [https://www.cswe.org/getmedia/bb5d8afe-7680-42dc-a332-a6e6103f4998/2022-Educational-Policy-and-Accreditation-Standards-\(EPAS\).pdf](https://www.cswe.org/getmedia/bb5d8afe-7680-42dc-a332-a6e6103f4998/2022-Educational-Policy-and-Accreditation-Standards-(EPAS).pdf)

Estreet, A. T., Jones, K., & Freeman, J. T. (2018). HBCUs respond: Social justice and social work education in a Trump era. *Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping*, 23(2), 35–45. <https://reflectionsnnarrativesofprofessionalhelping.org/index.php/Reflections/article/view/1546>

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

About the Authors: Kenya C. Jones, PhD, LMSW (she/her) is Associate Professor, MSW Department, Clark Atlanta University, Atlanta, GA (404-880-8093, kjones1@cau.edu, [linkedin.com/in/drkenyacijoneslmsw](https://www.linkedin.com/in/drkenyacijoneslmsw)); Anthony T. Estreet, PhD, MBA, LCSW-C (he/him) is Chief Executive Officer, National Association of Social Workers (NASW), Washington, DC (naswceo@socialworkers.org, [linkedin.com/in/anthonyestreetphd](https://www.linkedin.com/in/anthonyestreetphd)); James T. Freeman, PhD, MBA, LCSW (he/him) is Associate Professor, MSW Department, Johnson C. Smith University, Charlotte, NC (jtfreeman@jcsu.edu, [linkedin.com/in/dr-james-freeman-0126412](https://www.linkedin.com/in/dr-james-freeman-0126412)).

An Act of Love: Building a Collaborative for Reproductive Justice and Abolition Amidst Tumultuous Times

Crystal M. Hayes and E. D. Goldblatt Hyatt

Abstract: Within the impending threat of a second Trump presidency, two social work academics and activists—one Black, one white—deeply committed to reproductive justice and abolitionist frameworks, created a collaborative dedicated to these values prior to the 2024 election. This collaborative, born out of shared histories of marginalization, is grounded in the belief that reproductive justice and abolition are acts of love. Through this collaborative, the authors empower social workers—particularly students—to engage in grassroots advocacy, education, and policy work that challenges systemic harm and centers Black and marginalized communities. This paper explores the authors’ personal and professional journeys, the development of the collaborative, and their ongoing efforts to foster accountability and action among social workers during politically turbulent times. In doing so, it highlights the critical importance of embedding reproductive justice and abolition within social work practice, education, and advocacy as a necessary response to this political climate.

Keywords: social work, reproductive justice, reproductive rights, prison abolition

Introduction

Social work is not only a profession; it is a calling for those of us who are engaged in the work. Our Code of Ethics, while sharing similar common commitments with many helping professions, uniquely emphasizes the profession’s responsibility to challenge social injustice and promote social change (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2021). It is this explicit commitment to social justice that drew us to social work and continues to shape our teaching, scholarship, practice, and advocacy. For us, social work’s capacity to promote resistance, resilience, collective action, and systematic change remains one of its greatest strengths.

For us, reproductive justice, abolition, and collaborative organizing are acts of love. Reproductive justice affirms the dignity, autonomy, and humanity of all people, while abolition seeks to transform systems that produce harm and create conditions in which individuals, families, and communities can thrive. Collaborative organizing reflects these same commitments by bringing people together to build relationships, share knowledge, and collectively work toward justice, healing, and liberation.

While the NASW Code of Ethics (2021) delineates that social workers should challenge social injustice, the recent post-2024 election climate in social work has been profoundly quiet. Executive Orders (EO) from the Office of the President have threatened organizations that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), removing funding (Akin Insights, n.d.) and sparking fears that individuals working from this perspective may be at risk as well. As a result, some organizations have capitulated in advance, removing DEI information from their websites and shuttering programs that promote these values (Cutler et al., 2025). Social work

organizations—specifically NASW and the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE)—have issued some statements responding to the Executive Orders (NASW, 2025a; Vakalahi, 2025). While NASW provided some action plans and multiple responses, including a powerful statement condemning the attacks on diversity (Wilson, n.d.), CSWE was vaguer, perhaps to not call too much attention to the profession and its ongoing work to dismantle white supremacy, oppression, and systematic discrimination.

The goals of the profession are highlighted in the call for reproductive justice (or “RJ” to condense), a theoretical orientation and praxis founded by 12 Black women activists in 1994 called Women of African Descent for Reproductive Justice (Ross & Solinger, 2017). Recognizing that the mostly white middle-class led pro-choice movement was incapable of defending the rights of Black and other Women of Color from marginalized backgrounds, RJ focuses on the lived experiences of people living on the margins and elevating them to ensure that they have 1) the right to have a child; 2) the right to *not* have a child; 3) the right to parent in safe and sustainable communities; and 4) the right to bodily, sexual, and gender autonomy free from coercion and violence (Ross & Solinger, 2017). The foundation of RJ activism is resistance to white supremacy in all its forms, and it aligns beautifully with all tenets of the NASW Code of Ethics (Goldblatt Hyatt & Haggerty, 2025). Advocating for reproductive justice includes supporting communities to receive healthy, nutritious food; the dismantling of community violence; abolition of family policing and all carceral systems; access to free abortion provision; and advocacy to end disparities in Black maternal morbidity and mortality and across other People of Color. These values and actions must be embraced by social work as a whole, especially during the turbulent times of a Trump presidency. However, CSWE does not include RJ in its core competencies and has remained largely silent on these issues, especially in recent days.

In response to the lack of clarity and direction from the profession’s leading organizations, Dr. Hayes founded the National Collaborative for Reproductive Justice and Innovation in Social Work (NCRJI-SW) and invited Dr. E to become a co-director and lead collaborator. In other words, the Collaborative emerged from concerns that social work lacked an organized reproductive justice and abolitionist response to the political moment. Instead of waiting for our professional organizations to create formal pathways to resistance over the next four years, we, reflecting on our lived experiences and calling to dismantle social injustice, collaborated to support research, education, and advocacy related to reproductive justice and abolition across the field. Our narrative chronicles our efforts to teach, research, and advocate during a tumultuous time in our nation’s history as we stand on the precipice of revolution and the second Black Nadir (Connolly, 2018).

Joining Up: How It Started

Dr. E: Two years ago, I was writing a proposal for the profession’s first textbook aligning social work and reproductive justice and needed someone to write about the prison industrial complex. I had spent many languishing hours stewing in imposter syndrome, feeling ill-equipped to tackle the enormity of this project despite dedicating my career to RJ tenets. The book and contributors

were all set, save for a chapter on the carceral system, which I knew would be important to include. Mass incarceration is a threat to RJ in its separation of families (Hayes et al., 2020; James, 2020; Roberts, 2022). I reached out to the Society for Social Work Research (SSWR) RJ Special Interest Group (SIG) listserv, asking for contributors to this chapter, and Dr. Hayes responded.

Dr. Hayes: When I saw the call for contributors, I knew I had to answer. I'm a Black feminist, a social worker, a reproductive justice scholar, and an abolitionist. But more than that, I've lived the realities of the carceral system my entire life. My father, a former Black Panther Party member, was a political prisoner and incarcerated for 45 years (AUTODIDACT 17, 2018). I grew up navigating foster care, the child of incarcerated parents, witnessing firsthand how the prison industrial complex is designed to break families apart. My work is deeply personal—whether it's supporting incarcerated pregnant people as a prison-based doula, fighting against state violence, or advocating for reproductive justice, I am always aware that my existence, my survival, is resistance. When I saw that the textbook needed a chapter on the carceral state, I didn't hesitate. Too often, conversations about reproductive justice are narrowly centered on abortion access, failing to interrogate the broader landscape of systemic oppression—particularly the ways the carceral system obstructs reproductive freedom and bodily autonomy (Hayes et al., 2020).

For Black women, femmes, gender nonbinary individuals, and incarcerated people—those trapped in cycles of state violence—reproductive justice extends far beyond the right to choose (Ritchie, 2017). It is fundamentally about the right to parent with dignity, the right to exist without oppression, and the right to live free from state control, violence, and coercion (Roberts, 2022; Ross & Solinger, 2017). This framework acknowledges that true reproductive freedom cannot exist without addressing systemic barriers like mass incarceration, racialized healthcare disparities, and economic injustice (Hayes et al., 2020; Roberts, 1997). It's about the right to raise our children without fear that the state will rip them from our arms (Roberts, 1997, 2022). It's about the right to bodily autonomy, not just in the context of abortion, but in every aspect of our lives—whether that means the right to give birth without chains, the right to access quality comprehensive compassionate culturally relevant healthcare without discrimination, or the right to say no without facing violence and retaliation. It's about dismantling the systems that have always deemed Black life disposable and building a future where we are not just surviving but thriving. I wanted to bring that lens to the book because too often, even in progressive spaces, these conversations are sidelined. Reproductive justice cannot be fully realized without abolition, without an interrogation of the carceral state, without a reckoning with how white supremacy shapes policy, practice, and culture. My contribution wasn't just about scholarship—it was about making sure these voices, our voices, were centered and could not be ignored.

Dr. E: Just a decade earlier, before the book, I had experienced an abortion after 20 weeks' gestation with my first child, who was diagnosed with a rare and deadly fetal anomaly. Our son, Darby, never developed an airway, and as a result, halfway through our pregnancy, fluid that should have been expelled from the trachea into the womb was building up inside his tiny body, ballooning his lungs, crushing his fragile heart, and flipping his diaphragm upside down. My

spouse and I were given three options: wait for him to die of heart failure in the womb, without certainty of when that would be; try to carry to term and give birth to a child who would be born brain-dead; end the pregnancy. After a second opinion at the nation's foremost center for fetal diagnostics, we made the heartbreaking choice to have an abortion. While I received excellent care and support, in the aftermath of our experience I came to appreciate how unique and stigmatizing later abortion is in the United States, which launched me, true to the values of social work, into advocacy mode. I told Darby's story everywhere I could, created clinical models for therapists supporting clients who terminated pregnancies due to medical reasons and delved into an RJ framework, recognizing that not everyone—especially those without my privilege—experienced the supportive abortion environment that I did. Later abortion has been targeted in political venues, and parents who make this decision, for whatever reason, have been stigmatized. Thus, I made RJ the focus of my career, and when I was approached by a leading publisher to write a book uniting it with social work values, I could not turn the opportunity down.

Dr. Hayes is, in many ways, larger than life. Originally from New York and the daughter of a Black Panther who was incarcerated for 45 years, she truly walks the walk of social justice. In addition to her faculty appointment at a small liberal arts institution, she has spent years working as a prison doula, supporting and advocating for women in the carceral system whose rights have been so severely violated. She supports abolition and has a distinguished research path that makes her values clear. In person, she is a force of nature. Her voice is strong, she makes her opinions clear, and, unlike myself, is not a people-pleaser. She wears oversized black plastic glasses and sports a bold red lip. She tells it to you straight, regardless of how you might feel about the truths she espouses. She aligns herself with Black feminists like Audre Lorde and bell hooks, centering the experiences of women of color and non-binary people, believing they have a unique and important story to tell. I was thrilled when she volunteered to write an auto-ethnographic chapter about her experiences with the carceral state within an RJ framework. Her chapter simply blew me away. We kept in touch after the book was submitted to the publishers, and I came to respect Dr. Hayes as someone I could truly learn from.

Dr. Hayes: After submitting my chapter, I figured that was it—another project, another contribution to the fight. But something about this collaboration felt different. Dr. E and I kept in touch, exchanging ideas and building a mutual respect. When 2024 rolled around and the stakes of the upcoming 2024 election became painfully clear, I knew we needed to do more. I sent out a call for collaborators, hoping to build something that could merge social work abolition and reproductive justice into direct action; I wanted to bridge the world between research and praxis. A lot of people showed up initially, but Dr. E was the only one who consistently kept coming back. It didn't surprise me, though. From the beginning, I could tell that Dr. E was thoughtful, intentional, and deeply committed to using their power for good. They are incredibly smart and generous, and I've always appreciated how they navigate the world—not as someone who takes up space just because they can, but as someone who carefully considers how to use their privilege in ways that disrupts white supremacy and create real change.

But we also knew that doing this work together required honesty. Dr. E is white and nonbinary. I am a Black cis straight woman. And we are navigating a field—academia—that is deeply entrenched in misogyny and white supremacy culture. We talked about that openly, about the dynamics at play, about the risks of collaboration in a space that often rewards surface-level diversity while punishing real, radical change. We weren't afraid to lean into those conversations, but we were also mindful that we had to be careful. White supremacy culture thrives on misrepresentation, on sowing division, on punishing Black women for speaking too boldly and white people for standing too close to us when we do. However, we chose to move forward, believing that the risk was worth it. We decided that freedom is worth fighting for. As we built this collaboration, I was reminded of a popular paraphrasing of Toni Cade Bambara: The role of the artist is to make the revolution irresistible (Bambara & Lewis, 2012). In many ways, our work is about doing just that—bringing research and advocacy together in a way that makes justice not only necessary but undeniable and irresistible.

Pre-Election Work

There's no single answer that will solve all our future problems. There's no magic bullet. Instead, there are thousands of answers—at least. You can be one of them if you choose to be.
—Octavia Butler, “A Few Rules for Predicting the Future: An Essay”

Dr. Hayes: I was in full organizing mode. I was scheduling weekly meetings with students and early career professionals; the first goal of the NCRJI-SW was to support Kamala Harris' candidacy for the presidency. Dr. E. was always fully onboard with this decision. It was clear that a Trump administration was antithetical to social work values and principles but beyond that, we could see that human rights were at stake as his unfounded narratives about immigrants eating cats and dogs (Thomas & Wendlig, 2024) and dictatorial threats to prosecute opposition (Dreisbach, 2024) circulated in the press, which gobbled it all up. We had already lived through a devastating pandemic under Trump's haphazard first presidency and were familiar with the multiple stories of ICE disappearing entire communities overnight amongst our colleagues. We had seen the dismantling of *Roe v. Wade* (Planned Parenthood Action Fund, n.d.), returning the decision of abortion to the states, with tragic results that included increased maternal mortality in anti-choice states (Pressner et al., 2025). Though there was much controversy surrounding the Biden administration's involvement in the Israel-Gaza crisis, I framed our support of Harris as *harm reduction* (D. R. Davis, 2013): supporting an administration that would, at least, be open to principles of reproductive justice and personal liberties versus shutting it entirely down. Though not an ideal candidate, Harris was the only pathway toward a more stable future during a time when the entire country was at war with itself.

Our work consisted of phone banking, leading meetings to encourage students to vote and to support clients in voting, and connecting with greater social work organizations that were also doing pro-Harris work. The work itself was exhausting in the face of the ever-growing voice of Trump and his supporters, which was the opposite of hopeful and uniting. We both felt the weight of this election in our bodies and bones: It was a whole-body fatigue, like swimming with clothes underwater or trying to climb a hill made of wet sand. We regularly talked about

pushing through to stay focused on the task at hand. Our social work students were enthusiastic about the birth of the reproductive justice and abolition collaborative and were increasingly engaged in the work.

Motivated for change, we penned a petition on behalf of the collaborative to CSWE, advocating for the inclusion of reproductive justice and abolition principles in the core competencies of MSW programs, and at the time of this writing have obtained over 600 signatures. I met with CSWE's director of accreditation to follow up on this request, and we are in ongoing communication.

By the end of the summer 2024, I had conceptualized a plan to design a webinar series, and we hosted an introductory webinar on reproductive justice that was attended by nearly 200 social work students, practitioners, allied professionals, and academics alike. During the webinar we reflected on our own unique positionality in doing this work and introduced the tenets of RJ and how they could guide us during tumultuous times. I spoke about my father's legacy, including a picture of him after being released from prison on medical parole, leaning on a cane, face turned toward the sun, in a garden. Dr. E discussed their upbringing as the child of a labor lawyer in Toronto, born into a life of social justice advocacy, and shared their abortion story. We could tell that our attendees were fully engaged with us as there were many meaningful questions asked about the intersection of social work and RJ. By embracing positionality and vulnerability during our webinar, I hoped to model what Black feminist scholars and activists before me have taught—that our truths, when spoken with intention and care, have the power to challenge power and cultivate radical change (Collins, 2022; Cooper, 2018; hooks, 1994; Lorde, 1984).

The high of the webinar and the enthusiasm it generated was so uplifting. But when Harris lost, the mood crashed. We, too, felt defeated and demoralized. We needed some time to pick ourselves up. We spoke on the phone about our despair and loss of hope in the face of the initial defeat. We were both experiencing trepidation over what was to come from the Trump administration, though we knew it would be antithetical to social work values (NASW, 2021). An anti-immigrant, anti-trans rhetoric that harkened back to 2016–2020 was growing stronger, and we sat in the limbo period before inauguration deflated and exhausted. Even as I reassured myself, I knew that Dr. E felt very pessimistic and overwhelmed. However, I leaned further into the tradition of Black feminist teachings and felt determined. I remember thinking how I had inherited a world where my political and civil rights were secured at birth—paid for by my ancestors. I had not fought for voting rights, civil rights, or Roe, but this was my chance to fight to protect them for all of us. I told Dr. E that we can't stop what we're doing. They agreed. Our commitment to reproductive justice and its tenets was stronger than fear, and while we acknowledged being down, we weren't *out*. The work of the Collaborative had only just begun.

Post-Inauguration

Dr. E: A litany of executive orders (EOs) swept through the nation within hours of Trump's inauguration. They included a push to end DEI programs; withdrawing from the World Health Organization (WHO); and the recognition of sex, instead of gender, in federal policies and

documents, to name a few (Akin Insights, n.d.). For those of us who were already deflated by Trump's victory, these EOs provided another difficult blow. As a non-binary person, I felt personally hurt and excluded, but not surprised, by the attack on transgender and gender diverse (TGD) people. I had only been "out" as non-binary for a few years, affirming the reality of who I truly am after a lifetime of crippling dysphoria and not fitting in. Post-top surgery and publicly declaring my non-binaryness, I was finally *myself*. But now, my identity was somehow considered a non-reality at worst, at best a threat to American values as delineated by the President. I grieved especially for TGD youth who had bravely stepped forward into their own realities, only to experience such very public and excising disaffirmation. I am also an immigrant from Canada and began to consider how my positionality as a non-binary immigrant working to advocate for social justice might mark me as a threat to the Trump administration. I became acutely aware of who in my neighborhood voted for Trump and I harbored anxiety about a future where I might be "turned in" to some unknown watch agency for my values and beliefs. This was my reaction on a micro level.

At a macro level, there was also chaos ensuing across the country, as a federal funding freeze and stop work orders were initiated from the Office of Management and Budget (Vallorano et al., 2025). As the Co-Directors of the collaborative, Dr. Hayes and I doubled down on our work, realizing that now, more than ever, it was important to provide education and advocacy in the face of a restrictive, increasingly authoritarian government. As the days passed, we were genuinely surprised by the silence coming from social work executive organizations, whom we expected to release clear and pointed arguments against attempts to create a climate of hostility toward diversity: the very heart of the social work profession. Instead, we were disappointed that CSWE did not even use the word "diversity" in its one-paragraph response (Vakalahi, 2025), while NASW (2025b), slightly more emboldened, chose to focus on the beloved community of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s (1956) advocacy, calling the current administration "complex or difficult" (0:37) and advocating for collective action. They also released a video on Facebook clarifying that not supporting gender-affirming care is a violation of our code of ethics (NASW, 2025c). Dr. Hayes and I felt that more could still be done in order to enact a full mobilizing call for resistance and decided to use the collaborative to further educate, mobilize, and strategize.

Dr. Hayes: In response, we created the Spring 2025 Webinar Series with guest speakers on topics ranging from dismantling white supremacy and environmental justice to abolition and reproductive justice during captivity. We met with our collaborators and sometimes heated discussions ensued about our perspectives on the content we were providing. For example, during the planning of the abolitionist webinar, it was clear that positionality played a key role in our speakers' experiences and perspectives on the topic. In other words, we wanted to challenge our collaborators—and ourselves—to avoid discussing abolition from a purist perspective. We emphasized the importance of being open to multiple entry points, especially when considering the unique experiences of Black women within the abolitionist movement. For Black women, the relationship with abolition is complex, as we are disproportionately vulnerable to violence in a society that often fails to protect us. While abolition aims to create a safer world, we must acknowledge that, in the present, it does not yet offer the security we

deserve. This acknowledgment is crucial, as it recognizes the tensions inherent in striving for a safer future while living in an unsafe present (Collins, 2022; A. Davis, 2003).

In acknowledging these tensions, we can engage in a more nuanced conversation about abolition that includes the realities of Black women's experiences. By recognizing the vulnerabilities that Black women face in the present while working toward a more just and liberated future, we ensure that our approach to abolition is grounded in both the urgency of the moment and the long-term vision for safety and justice for all. This critical perspective helps guide our collaborative work, shaping a framework that is both inclusive and responsive to the needs of marginalized communities.

We are a fully engaged collaborative. We have launched a research project exploring institutional resilience in the face of the executive orders. We run weekly "Reproductive Justice Resistance Briefings," formerly known as "RJ Power Hour," Zoom calls with our community where we engage in more phone banking, debriefs, calls to advocacy, and supportive check-ins. The Briefings host members from all around the country, with the shared goal of advancing RJ during these challenging times.

Future Directions and Implications for Our Collaboration

As we continue to build the National Collaborative for Reproductive Justice and Innovation in Social Work, our future direction is rooted in the ongoing work of fostering a transformative, intersectional approach to social work that incorporates reproductive justice and abolitionist frameworks. Our mission to advance these principles is more than a statement; it is a call to action for all of us—educators, clinicians, policy advocates, students, and allied professionals—to work together toward the goal of dismantling systemic harm and building community-centered models of care (Collins, 2022; Davis, 1981).

The urgency of this work has only intensified with the prospect of a second Trump presidency, which represents a dangerous trajectory for social justice, reproductive rights, and racial equity (Amnesty International, 2025; Brennan Center for Justice, 2017; Dakwar, 2025; Monteil, n.d.). The threat of deepening anti-immigrant, anti-Black, anti-woman, and anti-trans policies looms large. Under such leadership, the rights we have fought for, especially reproductive rights, are at risk of being completely stripped away. In this context, our work is not just necessary—it is an act of love. Reproductive justice and abolition are fundamentally rooted in care for our communities, particularly Black and marginalized poor working class communities. It is through love for our people, social work, our values, and our collective liberation that we do this work, knowing that love is both a revolutionary force and a life-sustaining practice (Roberts, 1997).

Looking ahead, we are committed to expanding our efforts in several key areas:

1. **Dismantling White Supremacy Culture:** We will continue to center Black women's leadership, scholarship, and voices in every aspect of our work. As we elevate their

contributions, we aim to ensure that Black feminist and abolitionist frameworks not only guide our training and advocacy but also transform the social work field (Collins, 2022).

2. **Bridging Research with Praxis:** We are dedicated to translating our research into concrete actions that shape policy, education, and practice. This involves developing community-informed, evidence-based tools that address the realities of systemic injustice, giving social work professionals and allied communities the practical strategies to confront and challenge these systems (Chavez, 2020).
3. **Integrating Reproductive Justice and Abolition into Social Work Core Competencies:** We will work to embed reproductive justice and abolitionist principles into the very fabric of social work education and practice. Through developing and disseminating educational resources, we aim to equip all social workers with the skills to address not only immediate client needs but also the larger systemic factors that perpetuate harm (Goldblatt Hyatt, 2024; Goldblatt Hyatt et al., 2024; NASW, n.d.; Poehling et al., 2023; Younes et al., 2021).
4. **Building a Transformative Network for Collective Action:** Collaboration will remain at the heart of our work as we cultivate a network of professionals committed to reproductive justice and abolition. This network will serve as a platform for sharing knowledge, building solidarity, and supporting initiatives that reimagine care work as a tool for justice, healing, and liberation for all marginalized communities (Davis, 1981).

Our vision for the future is one where reproductive justice and abolition are integral to the core values of social work and other helping professions. We will continue to push boundaries, challenge established norms, and ensure that these frameworks are not only taught but practiced. Through collective action, we will move closer to a future where liberation, equity, and healing are foundational, and where Black and marginalized communities are at the center of transformative justice. The work we do is an act of love—not just for our communities, but for a better, freer world where justice reigns, and all people are truly free (Collins, 2022; Davis, 1981).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the work we've done and continue to build through the National Collaborative for Reproductive Justice and Innovation in Social Work is not just an academic or professional endeavor—it is a deeply personal and political act of love. Our commitment to reproductive justice and abolitionist frameworks is rooted in the belief that transforming systems of oppression is essential for the liberation, healing, and equity of Black and marginalized communities. As we face the impending threats posed by political forces that seek to dismantle our rights and undermine our safety, we are reminded of the urgency of this work. This collaboration is a powerful testament to what can be achieved when we center Black women's leadership, engage in community-informed research, and remain steadfast in our vision for a future where justice and care are not just ideals, but practices embedded in the core of social

work and beyond. Our journey is far from over, and through collective action, we will continue to push toward a world that honors and protects us all.

References

- Akin Insights. (n.d.). *Trump executive order overview*. Retrieved March 19, 2025, from <https://www.akingump.com/en/insights/trump-executive-order-overview>
- Amnesty International. (2025, January 20). *USA: President Trump must respect human rights in his second term*. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/01/usa-president-trump-must-respect-human-rights-second-term/>
- AUTODIDACT 17. (2018, January 2). Former political prisoner—P.O.W. Robert Seth Hayes passes. *The New York Amsterdam News*.
- Bambara, T. C., & Lewis, T. (2012). An interview with Toni Cade Bambara: Kay Bonetti. In T. Lewis (Ed.), *Conversations with Toni Cade Bambara* (pp. 35–47). University Press of Mississippi.
- Brennan Center for Justice. (2017, January 19). *5 ways to fight for social justice during a Trump presidency*. <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/5-ways-fight-social-justice-during-trump-presidency>
- Chavez, K. (2020). *Community-informed research: From practice to policy*. Oxford University Press.
- Collins, P. H. (2022). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (30th anniversary ed.). Routledge.
- Connolly, N. D. B. (2018, February 21). This, our second nadir. https://www.bostonreview.net/forum_response/n-d-b-connolly-our-second-nadir/
- Cooper, B. (2018). *Eloquent rage: A Black feminist discovers her superpower*. St. Martin's Press.
- Dakwar, J. (2025, February 13). *The targeted chaos of Trump's attacks against international human rights law and justice*. American Civil Liberties Union. <https://www.aclu.org/news/human-rights/the-targeted-chaos-of-trumps-attacks-against-international-human-rights-law-and-justice>
- Davis, A. (1981). *Women, Race and Class*. Random House.
- Davis, A. (2003). *Are prisons obsolete?* Seven Stories Press.

Davis, D. R. (2013). Harm reduction. In C. Franklin (Ed.), *The encyclopedia of social work*. NASW Press and Oxford University Press.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199975839.013.171>

Dreisbach, T. (2024, October 22). *Trump has made more than 100 threats to prosecute or punish perceived enemies*. National Public Radio. <https://www.npr.org/2024/10/21/nx-s1-5134924/trump-election-2024-kamala-harris-elizabeth-cheney-threat-civil-liberties>

Goldblatt Hyatt, E. D. (2024). Radical informed consent: Considering a new approach for reproductive justice in social work practice. *Critical and Radical Social Work*, 12(1), 118–126. <https://doi.org/10.1332/204986021X16772547451432>

Goldblatt Hyatt, E. D., & Haggerty, Z. (2025). Social work and reproductive justice: A necessary fit. In E. D. Goldblatt Hyatt (Ed.), *Social work and reproductive justice: A necessary fit* (pp. 25–42). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/9780197755389.003.0004>

Goldblatt Hyatt, E. D., Younes, M., & Witt, H. (2024). The moral conundrum of reproductive justice in social work. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 44(4), 347–361. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08841233.2024.2374251>

Cutler, S., Baiocchi, A., Gretzinger, E., Hicks, M., Dutton, C., & Smith, J. (2025, February 28). *Tracking higher ed's dismantling of DEI*. The Chronicle of Higher Education. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/tracking-higher-eds-dismantling-of-dei>

Hayes, C. M., Sufrin, C., & Perritt, J. B. (2020). Reproductive justice disrupted: Mass incarceration as a driver of reproductive oppression. *American Journal of Public Health*, 110(S1), S21–S24. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2019.305407>

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.

James, K. J. (2020). Black lives, mass incarceration, and the perpetuity of trauma in the era of COVID-19: The road to abolition social work. In C. Tosone (Ed.), *Shared trauma, shared resilience during a pandemic* (pp. 281–290). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-61442-3_29

King, M. L., Jr. (1956, August 11). *The birth of a new age* [Speech transcript]. Stanford University, The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/birth-new-age-address-delivered-11-august-1956-fiftieth-anniversary-alpha-phi>

Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches*. Crossing Press.

National Association of Social Workers. (n.d.). Reproductive rights are human rights. www.socialworkers.org/Advocacy/Policy-Issues/Reproductive-Rights-Are-Human-Rights

National Association of Social Workers. (2021). Code of ethics.

<https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English>

National Association of Social Workers. (2025a). *NASW responds to Trump's executive orders*.

<https://www.socialworkers.org/News/News-Releases/ID/3145/NASW-responds-to-Trump-Administration-Executive-Orders>

National Association of Social Workers. (2025b). *NASW CEO Anthony Estreet responds to Trump administration executive orders*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NoCqgyH2A3Q>

National Association of Social Workers. (2025c). *NASW Committee on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer + Issues responds to executive order restricting gender-affirming care*.

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1630442510921627&ref=sharing>

Monteil, C. (n.d.). *Trump poised to launch unprecedented attack on racial justice; National Urban League ready to fight back*. National Urban League. Retrieved March 19, 2025, from

<https://nul.org/news/trump-poised-launch-unprecedented-attack-racial-justice-national-urban-league-ready-fight-back>

Planned Parenthood Action Fund. (n.d.). *Roe v. Wade overturned: How the Supreme Court let politicians outlaw abortion*. Retrieved March 19, 2025, from

<https://www.plannedparenthoodaction.org/issues/abortion/roe-v-wade>

Poehling, C., Downey, M. M., Singh, M. I., & Beasley, C. C. (2023). From gaslighting to enlightening: Reproductive justice as an interdisciplinary solution to close the health gap.

Journal of Social Work Education, 59(sup1), S36–S47.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2023.2203205>

Pressner, L., Suozzo, A., Chou, S., & Surana, K. (2025, February 20). *Texas banned abortions. Then sepsis rates soared*. ProPublica.

<https://www.propublica.org/article/texas-abortion-ban-sepsis-maternal-mortality-analysis>

Roberts, D. (1997). *Killing the Black body: Race, reproduction, and the meaning of liberty*.

Pantheon Books.

Roberts, D. (2022). *Torn Apart: How the child welfare system destroys Black families—and how abolition can build a safer world*. Basic Books.

Ross, L. J., & Solinger, R. (2017). *Reproductive justice: An introduction*. University of California Press.

Thomas, M., & Wendlig, M. (2024, September 15). *Trump repeats baseless claim about immigrants eating pets*. BBC.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c77128myezko>

Wilson, M. (n.d.). *Trump's DEI executive order: Only the beginning of attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion*. National Association of Social Workers.

<https://www.socialworkers.org/Advocacy/Social-Justice/Social-Justice-Briefs/Trumps-DEI-Executive-Order-Only-the-Beginning-of-Attacks-on-Diversity-Equity-and-Inclusion>

Vakalahi, H. F. O. (2025, February 3). *Resilient and united: Navigating social work education through unpredictable times*. Council on Social Work Education.

<https://www.cswe.org/news/newsroom/resilient-and-united-navigating-social-work-education-through-unpredictable-times/>

Vallorano, N. R., Weiner, H. A., Chavez Berrientos, G. V., Payne, W. S., & Seliga, J. (2025, February 4). *Updates and summary of the evolving executive federal funding freeze*. Mayer Brown. <https://www.mayerbrown.com/en/insights/publications/2025/02/updates-and-summary-of-the-evolving-executive-federal-funding-freeze>

Younes, M., Goldblatt Hyatt, E. D., Witt, H., & Franklin, C. (2021). A call to action: Addressing ambivalence and promoting advocacy for reproductive rights in social work education. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 57(4), 625–635. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2021.1895930>

About the Authors: Crystal M. Hayes, PhD (she/her) is Assistant Clinical Professor, School of Social Work, Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT (hayesc5@sacredheart.edu); E. D. Goldblatt Hyatt, DSW, LCSW (they/them) is Director and Associate Professor of Professional Practice for Reproductive Justice, School of Social Work, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick, NJ (eg548@ssw.rutgers.edu).

Navigating Care: LGBTQIA+ Affirmation and Mental Health in a Challenging Political Landscape

Elizabeth Francis

Abstract: This article explores the challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals in accessing affirming mental health care within an increasingly restrictive political climate. As a psychiatric nurse practitioner in Kansas, I discuss the ethical dilemmas of navigating care under state and federal laws that conflict with best clinical practices. The paper examines the profound psychological impact of policies restricting such care, including heightened anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation, and emphasizes the importance of trauma-informed, evidence-based care. It highlights the role of mental health professionals in advocating for equitable, inclusive care, utilizing frameworks such as minority stress theory to understand the mental health risks faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals. Furthermore, it explores strategies for fostering resilience, self-care, and community support, underscoring the need for collaboration within interdisciplinary teams to address healthcare inequities. Ultimately, this work calls for advocacy, education, and policy change to ensure a refuge within healthcare for this marginalized community.

Keywords: gender affirming care, psychiatry, advocacy, mental health, LGBTQ

As a psychiatric nurse practitioner in outpatient private practice, I have the privilege of providing mental health care to many LGBTQ+ individuals, including transgender and nonbinary patients who face immense challenges in today's political climate. The rising restrictions on gender-affirming care, particularly laws prohibiting providers from discussing or offering treatments to transgender youth, have fostered an environment of fear, distress, and isolation for many of my patients. In Kansas, these policies now prevent me from having open and honest conversations with trans youth about their medical options, forcing me to navigate care within legal constraints that conflict with best clinical practices and my ethical commitment to patient well-being. Every day, I am torn between following state and federal law and providing evidence-based healthcare—a choice no practitioner should ever have to make.

The complexity of patient care, combined with the emotional burden of witnessing suffering firsthand, makes it difficult to feel certain about every decision. I find myself increasingly consulting with colleagues, seeking legal advice, and weighing my responsibility to my patients against potential legal consequences. My work has become a balancing act between personal ethics, clinical best practices, and restrictive laws that limit my ability to provide comprehensive care. Despite these challenges, I remain committed to advocating for my patients in every way possible. I provide trauma-informed care that acknowledges the unique stressors facing LGBTQ+ individuals and empowers them to seek affirming resources and community support. For many transgender patients, particularly young people, the current socio-political climate has amplified their distress, making access to mental health care more crucial than ever.

Being an LGBTQ+ healthcare provider in this deeply polarized political climate adds an extra layer of emotional and ethical strain. Providing compassionate care while navigating a system where policies, laws, and societal attitudes increasingly threaten LGBTQ+ rights is exhausting.

The tension between professional duty and personal identity becomes overwhelming when patients, colleagues, or institutional policies reflect biases that feel dehumanizing. It's disheartening to advocate for patients while knowing that my own rights and dignity are being debated or undermined. The distress of existing in a hostile political landscape, coupled with the emotional labor of patient care, can lead to burnout. Finding safe spaces and support helps, but it does not erase the constant weight of discrimination and systemic injustice.

The Challenges Faced by LGBTQ+ Individuals in the Healthcare System

The challenges facing LGBTQ+ individuals in healthcare are vast, ranging from limited access to affirming mental health services to the psychological toll of discrimination and systemic bias (Lampe et al., 2024). LGBTQ+ individuals experience higher rates of anxiety, depression, substance use disorders, and suicidal ideation compared to their cisgender and heterosexual counterparts (Lampe et al., 2024). These disparities are compounded by stigma within healthcare settings, where patients may encounter providers who lack cultural competency or who dismiss their identities altogether. For transgender and nonbinary individuals, additional hurdles include difficulty accessing gender-affirming care, legal and financial obstacles, and fear of discrimination, all of which deter them from seeking necessary treatment (Lampe et al., 2024). Research consistently shows that access to gender-affirming care significantly reduces depression, anxiety, and suicidality among transgender and nonbinary youth (Austin et al., 2020). Yet, despite strong evidence of its benefits, laws restricting access to such care for minors continue to increase.

The impact of these policies on my patients is profound. Many transgender individuals I see experience heightened anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation as they grapple with the loss of access to affirming care and the broader message of rejection these laws send. Parents of trans youth express fear for their children's future, while young adults worry about their long-term stability in a state that actively legislates against their existence. One transgender patient confided that they are postponing their transition until they no longer fear for their safety, citing concerns over the current administration's rhetoric and policy. Some patients avoid healthcare settings altogether due to fear of discrimination, harassment, or even legal repercussions—leading to worsened mental health outcomes and untreated conditions that could have been managed with timely, affirming intervention (Tordoff et al., 2022).

Importance of Advocacy

As psychiatric nurse practitioners, we have a responsibility to advocate for equitable, affirming care. This includes educating ourselves and our colleagues on LGBTQ+ mental health needs and gender-affirming care, implementing trauma-informed care to acknowledge and mitigate past healthcare-related trauma, and creating inclusive spaces by using correct names and pronouns to foster an environment of trust and respect. It also means advocating for policy changes that protect LGBTQ+ individuals from healthcare discrimination. Minority stress theory provides a foundational understanding of the heightened mental health risks LGBTQ+ individuals face due to systemic discrimination, stigma, and legal barriers to care (Hatzenbuehler & Pachankis,

2016). Trauma-informed care principles further guide my practice by prioritizing safety, trust, and empowerment, ensuring that my patients feel validated and supported despite external stressors.

In my practice, I emphasize that during difficult times, regular therapy, a healthy diet, exercise, and social interaction are essential for maintaining mental and emotional well-being. Therapy offers a safe space to work through challenges and develop coping strategies, while a balanced diet supports mood regulation and cognitive function (Dabravolskaj et al., 2024; Firth et al., 2020). Regular exercise boosts endorphins, which can elevate mood and reduce stress, while also improving energy and sleep (Singh et al., 2023). Staying connected with others provides emotional support, combats feelings of isolation, and offers a sense of belonging. Each of these elements plays a vital role in navigating tough times, and even small efforts in these areas can make a significant difference—often more so than medication alone.

Recommendations for Other Providers

In Kansas, I have participated in interdisciplinary meetings with healthcare professionals, including therapists, social workers, and nurse practitioners, to prioritize self-care, address healthcare inequities, and navigate social justice issues. These discussions have fostered collaboration, deepened our understanding of the challenges faced by marginalized communities, and reinforced the importance of advocacy and inclusive, patient-centered care. By engaging in these conversations, I continue to refine my approach to patient advocacy and support, working toward a more inclusive and equitable healthcare system.

It is exhausting to operate within a system that often prioritizes ideology over medical evidence, forcing providers into a moral and professional dilemma. It is mentally and emotionally draining to provide care in an environment where fundamental rights are being questioned and where the act of offering affirming, evidence-based treatment can feel like an act of resistance. The emotional burden of this extends beyond the clinical setting; it seeps into daily life, creating a persistent sense of anxiety and uncertainty about the future of both my patients and my own role as a provider. Despite these challenges, I remain committed to standing by my patients, offering them a safe space where they feel heard, validated, and supported. But the cost of doing so is high. Bearing witness to suffering while simultaneously feeling constrained in my ability to alleviate it takes a toll—one that accumulates over time. The burnout that comes from constant advocacy, emotional labor, and ethical distress is real. Yet, I remind myself why I chose this path: to help, to heal, and to fight for a healthcare system that serves all individuals with dignity and compassion. Even as the system presents barriers, I continue to navigate it with one goal in mind—ensuring that my patients receive the care they deserve, no matter the obstacles in the way. The burden is heavy, but it is one I carry because I know the impact of this work. I see it in the relief on a patient's face when they realize they are in a safe space. I hear it in their voice when they express fear about the future but also gratitude for having someone who understands. I feel it in my own moments of doubt, exhaustion, and frustration—reminders that this fight is not just about policy, but about real lives. Despite the hardships, I remain committed to this

work, to my patients. By addressing these inequities with knowledge, empathy, and advocacy, we can work toward a system that truly serves all individuals with dignity and care.

References

- Austin, A., Craig, S. L., D'Souza, S., & McInroy, L. B. (2022). Suicidality among transgender youth: Elucidating the role of interpersonal risk factors. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 37(5–6), NP2696–NP2718. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260520915554>
- Dabravolskaj, J., Patte, K. A., Yamamoto, S., Leatherdale, S. T., Veugelers, P. J., & Maximova, K. (2024). Association between diet and mental health outcomes in a sample of 13,887 adolescents in Canada. *Preventing Chronic Disease*, 21. <https://doi.org/10.5888/pcd21.240187>
- Firth, J., Gangwisch, J. E., Borsini, A., Wootton, R. E., & Mayer, E. A. (2020). Food and mood: How do diet and nutrition affect mental wellbeing? *BMJ*, 369, Article m2382. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m2382>
- Hatzenbuehler, M. L., & Pachankis, J. E. (2016). Stigma and minority stress as social determinants of health among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth: Research evidence and clinical implications. *Pediatric Clinics of North America*, 63(6), 985–997. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pcl.2016.07.003>
- Lampe, N. M., Barbee, H., Tran, N. M., Bastow, S., & McKay, T. (2024). Health disparities among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer older adults: A structural competency approach. *International Journal of Aging & Human Development*, 98(1), 39–55. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00914150231171838>
- Singh, B., Olds, T., Curtis, R., Dumuid, D., Virgara, R., Watson, A., Szeto, K., O'Connor, E., Ferguson, T., Eglitis, E., Miatke, A., Simpson, C. E., & Maher, C. (2023). Effectiveness of physical activity interventions for improving depression, anxiety and distress: An overview of systematic reviews. *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 57(18), 1203–1209. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bjsports-2022-106195>
- Tordoff, D. M., Wanta, J. W., Collin, A., Stepney, C., Inwards-Breland, D. J., & Ahrens, K. (2022). Mental health outcomes in transgender and nonbinary youths receiving gender-affirming care. *JAMA Network Open*, 5(2), Article e220978. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2022.0978>
- About the Author:** Elizabeth Francis, DNP, MSN, APRN, PMHNP-BC (she/her) is Practicing Psychiatric Nurse Practitioner and Adjunct Professor, School of Nursing, Duke University, Durham, NC (elizabeth.francis426@duke.edu).

Midnight Watch for Rogue Waves: Experiencing Faculty Intimidation in Florida

Douglas Robertson

Abstract: In a 2023 emergency investigation, the American Association of University Professors reported: “What is unfolding in Florida is horrifying. It should serve as a cautionary tale to all in higher education.” Highlights of cascading events in Florida public higher education include elimination of tenure, keyword searches upon faculty syllabi, course removals from Common Core, elimination of references to Diversity-Equity-Inclusion, union-busting legislation, and mandated accreditation shopping. In this context, my general question is this: How does intimidation affect faculty experience in Florida’s public universities? My specific question is this: How is intimidation lived by me? I have written extensively about college teaching as an educational helping relationship and see this conceptual essay as central to the work of professional helping. Joining other first responders’ scholarly writings on the Florida emergency, this essay puts a personal face on the currently raging ideological war in American higher education and the encompassing American culture.

Keywords: higher education, Florida, political interference, identity and stereotype threat, intimidation

I am a sailor. At sea, we keep solo watch—two hours on, two hours off—all night. Gigantic waves, called rogue waves or killer waves, can appear without warning. One such wave in the North Sea, the Draupner Wave, was recorded at 84 feet in 1995. Most of the buildings in Paris are not that high. Surviving a mountain of water, cresting into a wall, collapsing on top of you, is unlikely. In addition, we watch for metal icebergs called containers. We have radar, but wave action blocks low profile objects such as these enormous steel boxes, 10 thousand of which fall overboard from mammoth freighters every year and float the currents. If we hit one, we sink, most likely. On night watch, you fight fatigue and try to stay vigilant for what could appear suddenly from the dark— something abrupt, unpredictable, fatal.

Recently, I have meditated on Erving Goffman’s (1963) classic, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. I do so because I am suddenly managing a stigmatized identity: I am a scholar in Florida. Nearly overnight, with a changing political context, my scholarly behavior, which has not changed, has transformed from exemplary to law-breaking. Simply doing my job seems dangerous. I feel as if I am at sea, at night, on watch.

This conceptual essay explores intimidation personally. The context comprises faculty conditions in Florida’s public universities amidst extreme political interference. In an emergency investigation, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP, 2023) reported: “What is unfolding in Florida is horrifying. It should serve as a cautionary tale to all in higher education” (p. 31). This discussion is grounded in experience, research, and theory. I write in the spirit of autoethnography and participant observation. I utilize abductive reasoning when I generalize—that is, I connect my experience and larger patterns. The general question is this: How does intimidation affect faculty experience in Florida’s public universities? The

intimate question is this: How is intimidation lived by me? I exercise what C. Wright Mills (1959) called the *sociological imagination*, connecting person and society, biography and history, agency and structure. I try to connect the dots, while adding new dots. Experience roots my discussion. When my discussion connects to the scholarly literature, it is fundamentally interdisciplinary. This essay covers ground in probing intimidation autoethnographically. Concepts discussed include academic freedom, scholarly identity, the “woke professor” stereotype, authenticity, identity and stereotype threat, imagined and real contingencies, concealing and disclosing stigmatized identities, and pathogenic policy.

This conceptual exploration joins other first responders’ scholarly work on the Florida emergency (e.g., Adams, 2024; Barsky et al., 2025; Batker & Turpin, 2023; Carr & Yousfi, 2024; Goodman, 2024; Green, 2023; Groton et al., 2023; Gupton & O’Sullivan, 2024; Guy & Moore, 2023; Hampson, 2023; Hutchens & Miller, 2023; Johnson et al., 2024; Kamola, 2024; Majewska & Feeder, 2022; Moody, 2024; PEN America, 2024; Rainwater, 2024; Robertson, 2025; Russell-Brown, 2023, 2024; Schoorman, 2024; Schoorman & Gatens, 2023, 2025; Taylor & Somers, 2021; Thornhill, 2023; Topalidis & Austin, 2023; Turner Roberts, 2024; Watson, 2023; Zelnick et al., 2023). What this essay adds to this emergency scholarly response is a conceptual and experiential discussion of the personal impact on faculty of intimidation by the State through the lens of one of those faculty—me.

Positionality

I am a white, cisgender, heterosexual male of Scottish heritage who made the developmental transition from childhood to adulthood in the 1960s and early 1970s in a small mill town in Oregon. I grew up working class, and I am a first-generation college graduate. I am a tenured full professor of higher education at Florida International University (2008–present). I served in senior university leadership as University Undergraduate Dean from 2008 to 2016. In 1968, when I was 18, I could not vote (the 26th Amendment, setting the voting age at 18, was ratified July 1, 1971). In 1968, a military draft existed. Although considered too young to vote, I could be required to kill people in Vietnam. As popularly repeated in the years following, 1968’s American deaths in Vietnam averaged 46 a day. Body counts were reported each night on the evening news. Post-traumatic stress syndrome was an unnamed, undiagnosed epidemic. On April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated. On June 6, 1968, Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated. In 1968, my uncle had a decal next to his front door: “America, love it or leave it.” He had a bumper sticker, too. In 1968, riots erupted in over 100 American cities. In 1968, American society shook violently with disequilibrium. In 1968, in this socio-historical-geographical context, I graduated from high school as valedictorian and began my uninterrupted 56-year career in higher education as a student, professor, and administrator, a career that continues now in Florida.

Florida Public Higher Education

The point I want to make clearly is that Florida’s public higher education environment, as I experience it, is saturated with threat cues regarding my scholarly identity. As I construe my

colleagues' perceptions, I believe that my experience, although uniquely mine, represents in important ways the experience of many faculty colleagues in Florida's public colleges and universities. Nonetheless, I anchor my observations in my own experience so as to avoid the appearance of projection.

Florida's threat environment is significantly expressed in the laws and policies emanating from DeSantis' Stop WOKE agenda, beginning in 2021, and continuing as I write this essay. For example, recently, my university's faculty were notified that a second university-wide keyword search of faculty syllabi was being conducted on a separate issue from the first. Flagged syllabi and professors would undergo examination by an ad hoc review committee. Let me pause a moment to let that sink in... keyword searches of syllabi... interrogations of flagged syllabi and professors by ad hoc committees. The practice was outrageous the first time, and now it is being normalized. Chief United States District Judge Mark E. Walker, Northern District of Florida, called the State's approach "positively dystopian" in his formal ruling against the State (*Pernell v. Florida Board of Governors of the State University System; Novoa v. Diaz*, 2022). Justice Walker began his preliminary injunction by quoting George Orwell's (1949) *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

"It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen," [p. 1] and the powers in charge of Florida's public university system have declared the State has unfettered authority to muzzle its professors in the name of "freedom." (*Pernell v. Florida Board of Governors of the State University System*, 2022, p. 1)

I have co-authored a chapter with Black feminist and cultural critic bell hooks (hooks & Robertson, 2007), whose work has been singled out with animus by the State. I am alert to this keyword search surveillance. I abhor giving energy to this vigilance. Survival instincts divert my attention to my work.

The content and implementation of the Stop WOKE laws and policies are noteworthy, but also vitally important is the process by which they are produced. The threat is always in my face. The pattern goes as follows: A shockingly repressive bill is introduced in the Florida legislature. The governor has national political ambitions and gives repeated speeches and press conferences touting the legislation and his Stop WOKE agenda. Faculty talk about the legislation. Media cover it. Revisions occur over months back and forth in committees. Politicians talk about it. Media cover it. The bill finally passes; the governor signs it; and it becomes a statute. Media cover it. Faculty talk about it. State universities are administered by the Florida State University System (SUS) Board of Governors (BOG), each governor and the BOG chancellor being appointed by the governor, as are essentially the presidents and trustees of each of the 12 SUS universities. The BOG issues directives that implement the statute. University boards of trustees and administrators interpret and issue the directives at each university. Deans and chairs follow suit. At each step in this process, terror rekindles. Then a new year comes, and a new legislative session begins. Legislation is implemented as new legislation goes through the process of becoming law, which will in turn be implemented. Cycles upon cycles of anxiety and intimidation build, year by year.

As a tenured full professor in a Florida public metropolitan Research I university, the nation's largest Hispanic Serving Institution, I must emphasize that the four examples below of political interference in my work environment are merely illustrative, not exhaustive (not even close):

- Tenure has essentially been eliminated, as has faculty peer review, progressive discipline, due process, appeal, and arbitration in annual faculty evaluations. Every five years, administrators decide tenured faculty's fate without appeal. Immediate termination of tenured faculty is now real. Without tenure, academic freedom functionally ends.
- By law, students can secretly record classes without permission of the faculty or other students as evidence for civil and criminal charges against faculty regarding students' ability to say whatever they want with or without factual support; possible financial penalties for faculty are \$200,000, plus court costs (CS/CS/HB 233: Postsecondary Education, 2021).
- All expenditures are prohibited for any offices, administrators, faculty, curriculum, co-curricular programs, initiatives, and so forth that support diversity, equity, and inclusion or critical race theory. An audit has been conducted by the State.
- The State formally declared in a 2022 legal argument that faculty are "government employees" whose instruction is "pure government speech, not the speech of the educators themselves" and that "curriculum is set by the university in accordance with the strictures and guidance of the State's elected officials" (*Pernell v. Florida Board of Governors of the State University System*, 2022, pp. 10–11).

An entire paper could be devoted to describing the dramatic changes in the Florida public higher education environment since 2021. However, my point is that Florida's public higher education environment, as I experience it, is saturated with threat cues regarding my identity as a scholar.

Identity

Identity may be a simple idea: the answer to the question "Who am I?" However, identity is a dizzying reality. The answer to the question "Who am I?" is utterly contextual, it seems to me. I inhabit many contexts, each with the potential to highlight a different identity or aspect of my identity. The question is perhaps more properly asked, "Who am I in this situation?"

Having said all that, an important exception exists. I have a special set of self-awarenesses called in the literature my *true self*, a self that I view as foundational and enduring across contexts (Strohming et al., 2017; Zhang & Alicke, 2021). Authenticity comes into play (Bailey & Iyengar, 2023; Guenther et al., 2024; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Schmader & Sedikides, 2018; Sedikides & Schlegel, 2024). Being able to be my true self, my authentic self, has high value (Slepian & Jacoby-Senhor, 2021). I just want to be me.

If my identity in a specific context is vulnerable to stigma, I may choose to conceal it. The same goes for my true self. If my context involves fundamental survival, such as my workplace, the

stakes are high. My choice of presented identity becomes even more difficult. I read the environment for threat cues. My *imagined* identity contingencies are as powerful as any *real* contingencies (e.g., Carroll, 1978; Gregory et al., 1982; Sherman et al., 1985).

The costs of concealing stigmatized identities can be extreme. The cost of disclosing can be equally severe. My dilemma of whether to disclose or conceal takes a toll from deliberating and fretting even before I pay my decision's cost. Simply being, merely existing, amidst these dynamics, is tortuous not effortless. I find myself reading Erving Goffman (1959) again, this time his first seminal work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. I will develop further these issues of identity within the context of being faculty in Florida amidst extreme political interference.

Scholarly Identity

A person's unique developmental path unfolds within evolving socio-historical contexts—change within change in vertically and horizontally organized, interconnected, dynamical systems (Erikson, 1978; Robertson, 1988, 2017, 2023a). Generational differences, in addition to individual differences, surely exist with regard to scholarly identity. The higher education context, in which my scholarly identity has evolved, itself has changed over my 56 years as a student, professor, and administrator.

I chose to become a professional scholar in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when public university missions focused on serving the common good *and* economic development simultaneously (Geiger, 2023; St. John et al., 2018).

Now universities exist within a paradigm of neoliberalism and academic capitalism (Hall, 2016; Hamilton & Nielsen, 2021; Harvey, 2005; Kezar et al., 2019; Rhoades, 2023; Schleck, 2022; Schrecker, 2010; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Steger & Roy, 2010; St. John et al., 2018). American universities focus on economic development primarily, with lip service for social welfare (Geiger, 2023; St. John et al., 2018).

In my lifespan, it matters with regard to the developmental period in which I formed my initial scholarly identity (in my case, in young adulthood transitioning from adolescence, as opposed to, for instance, in middle adulthood as a second career). Also significant is the socio-historical period in which I initially constructed my scholarly identity (in my case, in the 1960s amidst Civil Rights and Anti-Vietnam War Movements in contrast to, for example, in the Great Recession following the 2008 economic collapse).

Scholarly identity (in the literature, also called academic identity) has been approached from a variety of theoretical perspectives (e.g., Acker & Armenti, 2004; Barrow et al., 2022; Bauman, 1996; Beck & Young, 2005; Burrows, 2012; Clegg, 2008; Davies, 2005; Gill, 2010; Harris, 2005; Henkel, 2005; Lee & Boud, 2003; Sparkes, 2007; Winter, 2009). In particular, important research has addressed how the evolution of the neoliberal university and academic capitalism has recontextualized our scholarly identities and has changed some scholarly identities from

being favored to being disfavored, from being relevant to being irrelevant, and from being rewarded to being unrewarded (Beck & Young, 2005; Billot, 2010; Burrows, 2012; byrd & Siddiqui, 2025; Covarrubias, 2024; Filippakou, 2023; McDonald et al., 2021; Pick et al., 2017).

Certain values and purposes have anchored my scholarly identity from the beginning. These specific core values and purposes are what are under attack now. To me, being a scholar is a vocation, or calling, rather than merely a job. Simply put, my *raison d'être* as a scholar is to create knowledge for the benefit of the common good and to facilitate the development of critical thinking in students. The State's political interference makes it dangerous for me to follow my calling—a foundational purpose of my life. I experience the State's political interference as an existential threat—with possible consequences being termination of employment and meaning.

An important aspect of my experience is the speed of the attack on my scholarly identity—a *blitzkrieg*, it seems. At my university, tenure was being removed slowly, quietly, dying by multitudinous little cuts over years, perhaps decades, not months. A primary cutting instrument was FIU's Resource Reallocation Policy that was instituted in 2015 (Robertson, 2019, 2020, 2022, 2023b; Robertson & Pelaez, 2016, 2018; Robertson et al., 2025). According to this policy, when a permanent faculty position is vacated, the funding for that line goes to the Provost's Office to be reallocated. A maximum of 50% of the funding can be returned to the department. This simple mechanism has reduced tenured lines dramatically in less than 10 years. In terms of appointment type, the ratio of full-time Permanent (tenured and tenure-earning) to full-time Contingent (nontenure track) has fallen from 2:1 to 1:1, with Contingent now being the slim majority (Robertson, 2022, 2023b; Robertson et al., 2025).

At research universities, such as my university, policy often requires tenure for faculty who chair doctoral committees, chair departments, evaluate faculty annually, and chair or serve on promotion and tenure committees. Without sufficient Permanent (tenured, tenure-earning) faculty, universities have changed policy to eliminate the tenure requirement and pass the work to Contingent faculty, or at least, FIU has done so. I have documented that these kinds of policies with these kinds of results have cumulative, unintended, negative consequences (Robertson, 2020).

Gary Rhoades, who with Sheila Slaughter, helped to establish the concept of *academic capitalism* (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), observes, "at the core of academic capitalism are managerial practices that involve enhanced managerial capacity [and] growing contingent employment of academic workers" (Rhoades, 2023, p. 525). Professors are academic workers in academic capitalism. In this perspective, which is dominant in American higher education, tenured professors are academic workers who are relatively expensive and difficult to control. In academic capitalism, restructuring of management, labor, and their relations is required. Brimming with impatience, the Florida legislature precipitously eliminated tenure (as we know it) by statute. The brazen speed of functionally terminating tenure shocked me. I was prepared for the slow death of my conception of the scholar but not for its assassination right before my eyes.

Central to my construction of my scholarly identity is the concept of academic freedom for which tenure is the functional bodyguard (AAUP, 2015, 2023; Ceglie & Thompson, 2021; Davies, 2005; Johnson et al., 2024; Kiwan, 2024; Reichman, 2021; Schleck, 2022; Schrecker, 2010; Scott, 2019; Whittington, 2024). Academic freedom is not free speech, although the two constructs are related. To me, academic freedom describes a necessary working condition for being a professional scholar. As a scholar, I select problems to study that I perceive to have significance to society. Then I try my best to solve those problems without fear or favor. I am held accountable to suitable standards of scholarship by various communities of my peers. What I have just described is not radical. It is a position that is at the core of over 100 years of struggle, advocacy, and litigation in the United States (AAUP, 2015; Finkelstein et al., 2016; Sun, 2023; Thelin, 2011). However, this way of seeing my work as a scholar contrasts radically with neoliberal logic where the public university is a market-regulated corporation and faculty are academic labor who engage in government speech overseen by elected officials. I realize that this sentence sounds exaggerated, but I am using the language I see at use by the government itself (Florida statutes and State attorneys' legal motions).

Why it matters how I see academic freedom is because the intimidation that this conceptual essay addresses relies on the threat of punishing the exercise of my academic freedom. Next semester at the time of writing, I am teaching a graduate capstone course, *Contemporary Issues in Higher Education*. I just sent the title of the textbook to the Provost's Office, as mandated by the State. Keywords searches of syllabi have become normalized. Survival thoughts interfere with my scholarly thoughts. This threat climate itself is a contemporary issue in higher education. I struggle with how to address the topic of a chilly climate while in that same chilly climate. I see my PhD students in higher education, many of whom are already administrators at FIU, change their dissertation topics because of possible negative impacts on their careers. The same challenge occurs in my research. I write about selected contemporary issues in higher education—take this essay, for example. To me, this scholarship contributes, when amplified, to the continuing development of the promising but highly imperfect American democracy. As in my teaching, I research intimidation while being intimidated. The dynamic is twisted and debilitating. Similarly, with my service, speaking out in meetings about the concerns that I raise in this essay brings possible costs. I self-police. I see my colleagues self-police. In *On Tyranny*, Timothy Snyder (2017) calls it “anticipatory obedience” (p. 18).

Tenure protections have been eliminated. These facts of my experience show why academic freedom is crucial for me to live my scholarly identity openly and for fulfilling a fundamental purpose in my life. The political interference in Florida strikes me at that existential depth.

Identity and Stereotype Threat

I am particularly interested in understanding the individual's experience. Helping to improve the quality of the individual's experience has fundamental importance to me. I cannot do that without understanding the individual's context and the interconnection of person and environment. I recommend engaging the thinking of Gregory Bateson on this topic—the *ecology of mind* as he has called it (Bateson, 1972, 1979). Bateson's philosophical perspective is

sweeping in its pan-disciplinary applications (in Bateson's case, anthropology, biology, psychiatry, cybernetics, urban planning, mammalian communication, systems theory, epistemology, linguistics). This conception of individual experience extends my mind beyond the mere envelope of my skin to include my relations with my environments. In these terms, what is happening in my Florida university is a part of my mind.

Connecting individual experience and social context is not a radical nor novel perspective. Social psychologist Claude Steele (2010) has made this connection in developing his theory of identity threat, which I find useful with regard to understanding faculty intimidation. Steele's theory is often also known as *stereotype threat* (Steele & Aronson, 1995), which addresses conditions in which I perceive that my identity is vulnerable to being assigned to a stereotype operant in my environment. In my case, I believe that my scholarly identity is vulnerable to being stereotyped as a "woke professor," which in my immediate work environments is a dangerous identification. Steele's theory has resonated broadly, which I think comments on its validity and utility. In a systematic literature review of twenty years of stereotype threat research (1995–2015), Pennington et al. (2016) describe the theory's impact as follows:

Over the past two decades, stereotype threat has become one of the most widely researched topics in social psychology. ... Steele and Aronson's original article has gathered approximately 5,000 citations and has been referred to as a "modern classic." (p. 1)

This theory argues that I have characteristics in mind with which to view myself. In a context, if one of those characteristics is threatened, that characteristic rises to the surface and dominates my identity and attention. For example, prior to Stop WOKE legislation and policy, being a scholar is not something that I thought about much. I just did my scholarship—focusing on solving my scholarly problems and on helping students to think critically. However, now that I perceive that being a scholar has dangerous implications, I navigate my work contexts with my scholarly identity top of mind. On a daily basis, I struggle with enacting my scholarly identity without committing professional suicide. My environment is saturated with threats to the "woke professor" stereotype. I find myself particularly sensitive to being stereotyped in that way. I routinely begin my courses, presentations, and writing with a positional introduction of myself, as I did in this essay. My experience and behavior—as a person and as a professional scholar—is shaped importantly by my perspective. I have a position—a vantage—from which I view something that may be different from the vantage from which another person views that same thing. I believe that a principle of good scholarly practice is to be as aware as possible of my perspective and its influence on my scholarship. I encourage students to do the same. Now, in the current circumstances in Florida, I am aware that my principle of good practice—my positional introduction—is a trigger for the negative stereotype of the "woke professor."

Costs of Concealing and Disclosing Identity

In the classic book-length conceptual essay *Stigma*, Erving Goffman (1963) succinctly focuses the issue of deciding to disclose or to conceal stigmatized identity:

The issue is not that of managing tension generated during social contacts, but rather that of managing information about his failing [his stigmatized identity]. To display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when, and where. ... It is... the management of undisclosed discrediting information about self, that I am focusing on in these notes, in brief, “passing.” (p. 43)

Exposing or hiding a concealable stigmatized identity (such as being a scholar in Florida who believes in and practices academic freedom)—both have potential costs. The literature documents costs of disclosing or concealing my stigmatized scholarly identity in the workplace that are predictable: emotional, physical, social, professional, and so forth.

Importantly, no safe play exists. When I have a stigmatized identity, I lose both ways—concealing or disclosing. That point needs underscoring. The situation—where I lose both ways—is a double-bind. I recognize the double-bind and suffer from that recognition. Then carrying that suffering, I choose (often situation by situation) to disclose or conceal and suffer from that choice. This kind of stress from both the framing of the decision and from the decision itself is pathogenic (Bateson et al., 1956; Watzlawick et al., 1967). What seems particularly devious is that observers, such as federal judges, AAUP officials, and Florida faculty, believe that in the political interference in Florida’s higher education the pathogenic double-bind is intentional and meant to debilitate, tame, and control faculty, or push them to leave.

Intimidation through scholarly identity threat that creates what appears to be intentional double-binding choices of disclosure or concealment—both with negative consequences—makes for exhausting midnight watches—two hours on, two hours off—looking for huge rogue waves that can kill ... and for snakes on the boat.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I can imagine a colleague saying, “This essay is a White male cisgender heterosexual tenured full professor—and a former dean, to boot—describing the loss of something that I never had and articulating the personal impact of identity threats that I experience every day.” To which I say, I agree. The question is, what are we, individually and collectively, going to do about it? We still have choices, I believe.

Being oppressed means the absence of choices.

—bell hooks (1952 – 2021)

References

Acker, S., & Armenti, C. (2004). Sleepless in academia. *Gender and Education*, 16(1), 3–24.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0954025032000170309>

Adams, K. (2024). Tightrope walking: Balancing theatre teachers’ academic freedom of expression with the implementation of Florida’s Stop Woke Act and Don’t Say Gay Bill. *Barry*

Law Review, 29(1), Article 4. <https://lawpublications.barry.edu/barrylrev/vol29/iss1/4>

American Association of University Professors. (2015). *AAUP policies and reports*.
<https://www.aaup.org/reports-publications/aaup-policies-reports>

American Association of University Professors. (2023). *Report of a special committee: Political interference and academic freedom in Florida's public higher education system*.
<https://www.aaup.org/report/report-special-committee-political-interference-and-academic-freedom-florida's-public-higher>

Bailey, E. R., & Iyengar, S. S. (2023). Positive—More than unbiased—Self-perceptions increase subjective authenticity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 125(6), 1351–1372.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/pspa0000359>

Barrow, M., Grant, B., & Xu, L. (2022). Academic identities research: Mapping the field's theoretical frameworks. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 41(2), 240–253. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1849036>

Barsky, A., Groton, D., & Spadola, C. (2025). Impacts of viewpoint diversity law on teaching and learning in Florida's state universities. *Educational Policy*, 39(1), 207–234.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/08959048231215485>

Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an ecology of mind*. University of Chicago Press.

Bateson, G. (1979). *Mind and nature: A necessary unity*. Bantam Books.

Bateson, G., Jackson, D. D., Haley, J., & Weakland, J. (1956). Toward a theory of schizophrenia. *Behavioral Science*, 1(4), 251–264. <https://doi.org/10.1002/bs.3830010402>

Batker, C. J., & Turpin, J. E. (2023). Who has the final say? Academic freedom, censorship, and governance in higher education. *Journal of Academic Freedom*, 14, 1–12.
<https://www.aaup.org/JAF14/who-has-final-say>

Bauman, Z. (1996). From pilgrim to tourist—or a short history of identity. In S. Hall & P. Gay (Eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity* (pp. 18–36). SAGE.
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446221907.n2>

Beck, J., & Young, M. F. D. (2005). The assault on the professions and the restructuring of academic and professional identities: A Bernsteinian analysis. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 26(2), 183–197. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142569042000294165>

Billot, J. (2010). The imagined and the real: Identifying the tensions for academic identity. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 29(6), 709–721.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2010.487201>

- Burrows, R. (2012). Living with the h-index? Metric assemblages in the contemporary academy. *The Sociological Review*, 60(2), 355–372. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2012.02077.x>
- byrd, d., & Siddiqui, N. (2025). A critical examination of first-generation faculty scholarship: Demonstrating the need for intersectional, empirical analysis. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 18(Suppl 1), S241–S258. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000560>
- Carr, E. M., & Yousfi, N. (2024). “Anti-wokeism” & authoritarianism: A renewed call for constitutional protections for education. *Syracuse Law Review*, Article 4911250. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4911250>
- Carroll, J. S. (1978). The effect of imagining an event on expectations for the event: An interpretation in terms of the availability heuristic. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 14(1), 88–96. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-1031\(78\)90062-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-1031(78)90062-8)
- Ceglie, R., & Thompson, S. (Eds.). (2021). *Academic freedom: Autonomy, challenges and conformation*. Emerald. <https://doi.org/10.1108/9781839098826>
- Clegg, S. (2008). Academic identities under threat? *British Educational Research Journal*, 34(3), 329–345. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920701532269>
- Covarrubias, R. (2024). What does it mean to belong? An interdisciplinary integration of theory and research on belonging. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 18(1), Article e12858. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12858>
- Davies, B. (2005). The (im)possibility of intellectual work in neoliberal regimes. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 26(1), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596300500039310>
- Erikson, E. H. (Ed.). (1978). *Adulthood*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Filippakou, O. (2023). Higher education and the myth of neutrality: Rethinking the cultural politics of research in the age of instrumental rationality. *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 45(1), 77–89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714413.2022.2091396>
- Finkelstein, M. J., Conley, V. M., & Schuster, K. H. (2016). *The faculty factor: Reassessing the American academy in a turbulent era*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Fla. CS for CS for HB 233 (2021) (Postsecondary Education). <https://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2021/233>
- Geiger, R. L. (2023). The ten generations of American higher education. In M. N. Bastedo, P. G. Altbach, & P. J. Gumport (Eds.), *American higher education in the twenty-first century: Social, political, and economic challenges* (5th ed., pp. 3–36). Johns Hopkins University Press.

- Gill, R. (2010). Breaking the silence: The hidden injuries of the neo-liberal academia. In R. Ryan-Flood & R. Gill (Eds.), *Secrecy and silence in the research process: Feminist reflections* (pp. 228–244). Routledge.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Random House/Anchor Books.
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Touchstone/Simon & Schuster.
- Goodman, R. T. (2024). Higher education as the frontline of democracy: The case against Florida House Bill 233, the anti-shielding/intellectual viewpoint diversity/student recording legislative act. *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 46(1), 64–84. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714413.2023.2245311>
- Green, M. Z. (2023). (A)woke workplaces. *Wisconsin Law Review*, 2023(3), 811–872. <https://doi.org/10.59015/wlr.KSVJ1288>
- Gregory, W. L., Cialdini, R. B., & Carpenter, K. M. (1982). Self-relevant scenarios as mediators of likelihood estimates and compliance: Does imagining make it so? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 43(1), 89–99. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.43.1.89>
- Groton, D., Barsky, A. E., & Spadola, C. (2023). Perceived impacts of a viewpoint diversity law in Florida's State Universities. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 45(5), 529–544. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080x.2023.2191071>
- Guenther, C. L., Zhang, Y., & Sedikides, C. (2024). The authentic self is the self-enhancing self: A self-enhancement framework of authenticity. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 50(8), 1182–1196. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672231160653>
- Gupton, J. T., & O'Sullivan, A. (2024). Critically framing Florida's anti-Woke education reform movement. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 56(4), 419–423. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2024.2376717>
- Guy, M., & Moore, K. (2023). Chilling speech in the name of “woke”: A critique of the Stop WOKE Act. *The Reporter: Social Justice Law Center Magazine*, 2023(1), 4. <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/sjlc/vol2023/iss1/4>
- Hall, G. (2016). *The uberfication of the university*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Hamilton, L. T., & Nielsen, K. (2021). *Broke: The racial consequences of underfunding public universities*. University of Chicago Press.
- Hampson, C. D. (2023). Critical theory & commercial law in the sunshine. *Florida Law Review Forum*, 75, 1–34. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4705810>

- Harris, S. (2005). Rethinking academic identities in neo-liberal times. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 10(4), 421–433. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562510500238986>
- Harvey, D. (2005). *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press.
- Henkel, M. (2005). Academic identity and autonomy in a changing policy environment. *Higher Education*, 49, 155–176. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-004-2919-1>
- hooks, b., & Robertson, D. (2007). Living engagement. *To Improve the Academy*, 25, Article 2. <https://doi.org/10.3998/tia.17063888.0025.006>
- Hutchens, N., & Miller, V. (2023). Florida’s Stop WOKE Act: A wake-up call for faculty academic freedom. *Journal of College and University Law*, 48(1), 35–69. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4353927>
- Johnson, V. C., Ruth, J., & Schrecker, E. (Eds.). (2024). *The right to learn: Resisting the right-wing attack on academic freedom*. Beacon Press.
- Kamola, I. (2024). *Manufacturing backlash: Right-wing think tanks and legislative attacks on higher education, 2021-2023*. American Association of University Professors. <https://www.aaup.org/article/manufacturing-backlash>
- Kernis, M. H., & Goldman, B. M. (2006). A multicomponent conceptualization of authenticity: Theory and research. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 38, 283–357. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601\(06\)38006-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(06)38006-9)
- Kezar, A., DePaola, T., & Scott, D. T. (2019). *The gig academy: Mapping labor in the neoliberal university*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Kiwan, D. (2024). *Academic freedom and the transnational production of knowledge*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108780629>
- Lee, A., & Boud, D. (2003). Writing groups, change and academic identity: Research development as local practice. *Studies in Higher Education*, 28(2), 187–200. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0307507032000058109>
- Majewska, I., & Feeder, S. (2022). The persuasive impact of teachers as position experts on education policy: Florida and “stop WOKE.” *Florida Journal of Educational Research*, 59(4), Article 131308. <https://doi.org/10.62798/ggwm6402>
- McDonald, D., Baker, S., & Shulsky, D. (2021). Against the professorial odds: Barriers as building blocks for educational advancement. *Journal of Advanced Academics*, 32(1), 92–131. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1932202X20966569>

Mills, C. W. (1959). *The sociological imagination*. Oxford University Press.

Moody, J. (2024, October 3). A battle over Florida's general education courses. *Inside Higher Education*.
<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/governance/state-oversight/2024/10/03/florida-institutions-slash-general-education-offerings#>

Orwell, G. (1949). *Nineteen eighty-four: A novel*. Secker & Warburg.

PEN America. (2024, October 7). *Course cancellations at Florida International University signal escalating censorship* [Press release]. <https://pen.org/press-release/course-cancellations-at-florida-international-university-signal-escalating-censorship/>

Pennington, C. R., Heim, D., Levy, A. R., & Larkin, D. T. (2016). Twenty years of stereotype threat research: A review of psychological mediators. *PLOS ONE*, 11(1), Article e0146487.
<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0146487>

Pernell v. Florida Board of Governors of the State University System, 641 F. Supp. 3d 1218 (N.D. Fla. 2022). https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/USCOURTS-flnd-4_22-cv-00304/USCOURTS-flnd-4_22-cv-00304-0

Pick, D., Symons, C., & Teo, S. T. T. (2017). Chronotopes and timespace contexts: Academic identity work revealed in narrative fiction. *Studies in Higher Education*, 42(7), 1174–1193. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2015.1085008>

Rainwater, K. (2024). Florida faculty unions and the struggle for public education. In V. C. Johnson, J. Ruth, & E. Schrecker (Eds.), *The right to learn: Resisting the right-wing attack on academic freedom* (pp. 162–175). Beacon Press.

Reichman, H. (2021). *Understanding academic freedom*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Rhoades, G. (2023). Markets, state, and higher education: Trends in academic capitalism. In M. N. Bastedo, P. G. Altbach, & P. J. Gumport (Eds.), *American higher education in the twenty-first century: Social, political, and economic challenges* (5th ed., pp. 506–532). Johns Hopkins University Press.

Robertson, D. (1988). *Self-directed growth*. Brunner-Routledge.

Robertson, D. (2017). *Making change, lessons learned: A primer for change-agents*. New Forums Press.

Robertson, D. (2019). Performance perspectives on undergraduate student success at public metropolitan research universities. *Innovative Higher Education*, 44(2), 87–101.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-018-9451-1>

- Robertson, D. (2020). Student success, research preeminence, and unintended consequences at public metropolitan research universities. *Innovative Higher Education*, 45(1), 35–49. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-019-09481-x>
- Robertson, D. (2022). Equifinality, equity, and intersectionality: Faculty issues in pursuit of performance metrics. *Innovative Higher Education*, 47(4), 683–709. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-022-09594-w>
- Robertson, D. (2023a). *Making learning, lessons learned: An intellectual memoir on developing as a college teacher*. New Forums Press.
- Robertson, D. (2023b). Underrepresentation of Hispanic faculty at Hispanic serving metropolitan research universities. *Metropolitan Universities*, 34(4), 9–25. <https://doi.org/10.18060/26222>
- Robertson, D. (2025). Inclusion overcomes intimidation: Toward identity safety. *Behavior and Social Issues*, 34(2), 309–317. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42822-025-00211-x>
- Robertson, D., & Pelaez, M. (2016). Behavior analytic concepts and change in a large metropolitan research university: The graduation success initiative. *Journal of Organizational Behavior Management*, 36(2-3), 123–153. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01608061.2016.1200513>
- Robertson, D., & Pelaez, M. (2018). Rules, rule-governed behavior, and organizational change in a large metropolitan research university. *Behavioral Development*, 23(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1037/bdb0000066>
- Robertson, D., Pelaez, M., & Santiago Perez, T. (2025). Metric-centric policy, practice, and faculty equity issues. *Sage Open*, 15(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440251384780>
- Russell-Brown, K. (2023). “The Stop WOKE Act”: HB 7, race, and Florida’s 21st century anti-literacy campaign. *N.Y.U. Review of Law and Social Change*, 47, Article 4219891. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4219891>
- Russell-Brown, K. (2024). The multitudinous racial harms caused by Florida’s anti-DEI and “Stop WOKE” laws. *Fordham Urban Law Journal*, 51(3), Article 4. <https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/ulj/vol51/iss3/4>
- Schleck, J. (2022). *Dirty knowledge: Academic freedom in the age of neoliberalism*. University of Nebraska Press.
- Schmader, T., & Sedikides, C. (2018). State authenticity as fit to environment: The implications of social identity for fit, authenticity, and self-segregation. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 22(3), 228–259. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868317734080>

- Schoorman, D. (2024). Waking up to the 'Anti-Woke' agenda. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 56(4), 404–410. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2024.2364632>
- Schoorman, D., & Gatens, R. (2023). A threat to democracy: Florida's agenda to dismantle public higher education. *Journal of Academic Freedom*, 14. <https://www.aaup.org/JAF14/threat-to-democracy>
- Schoorman, D., & Gatens, R. (2025). Understanding Florida's HB7: A policy of intimidation by confusion. *Educational Policy*, 39(2), 464–493. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08959048241235405>
- Schrecker, E. (2010). *The lost soul of higher education: Corporatization, the assault on academic freedom, and the end of the American university*. The New Press.
- Scott, J. W. (2019). *Knowledge, power, and academic freedom*. Columbia University Press.
- Sedikides, C., & Schlegel, R. J. (2024). Distilling the concept of authenticity. *Nature Reviews Psychology*, 3, 509–523. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44159-024-00323-y>
- Sherman, S. J., Cialdini, R. B., Schwartzman, D. F., & Reynolds, K. D. (1985). Imagining can heighten or lower the perceived likelihood of contracting a disease: The mediating effect of ease of imagery. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 11(1), 118–127. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167285111011>
- Slaughter, S., & Rhoades, G. (2004). *Academic capitalism and the new economy: Markets, state, and higher education*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Slepian, M. L., & Jacoby-Senghor, D. S. (2021). Identity threats in everyday life: Distinguishing belonging from inclusion. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 12(3), 392–406. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550619895008>
- Snyder, T. (2017). *On tyranny: Twenty lessons from the twentieth century*. Tim Duggan Books/Penguin Random House.
- Sparkes, A. C. (2007). Embodiment, academics, and the audit culture: A story seeking consideration. *Qualitative Research*, 7(4), 521–550. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794107082306>
- Steele, C. M. (2010). *Whistling Vivaldi*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Steele, C. M., & Aronson, J. (1995). Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African Americans. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69(5), 797–811. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.69.5.797>
- Steger, M. B., & Roy, R. K. (2010). *Neoliberalism: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.

- St. John, E. P., Daun-Barnett, N., & Moronski-Chapman, K. M. (2018). *Public policy and higher education: Reframing strategies for preparation, access, and college success* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315622453>
- Strohminger, N., Knobe, J., & Newman, G. (2017). The true self: A psychological concept distinct from the self. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 12(4), 551–560. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691616689495>
- Sun, J. C. (2023). Academic freedom: Its historical development, current state, and future challenges. In M. N. Bastedo, P. G. Altbach, & P. J. Gumpert (Eds.), *American higher education in the twenty-first century: Social, political, and economic challenges* (5th ed., pp. 37–67). Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Taylor, Z. W., & Somers, P. (2021). Controversial and contradictory: Historical and contemporary apologies for (a lack of) faculty academic freedom. *Journal of Research on the College President*, 5(1), 109–126. <https://doi.org/10.54119/jrcp.2021.508>
- Thelin, J. R. (2011). *A history of American higher education* (2nd ed.). Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Thornhill, T. (2023). Goodbye Florida, I’m out! For good. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 9(4), 440–443. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23326492231201500>
- Topalidis, Y., & Austin, S. (2023). Documenting Black faculty experiences in the “Stop Woke” era. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 9(4), 550–555. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23326492231201501>
- Turner Roberts, K. (2024). Indoctrination at its apex: “Stop Woke Act” and its ramifications on law schools and professors of color. *Widener Law Review*, 30(25), 25–45. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4818649>
- Watson, L. M. (2023). The anti-“critical race theory” campaign—Classroom censorship and racial backlash by another name. *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review*, 58(2), 487–549. <https://journals.law.harvard.edu/crcl/vol-58-no-2-summer-2023/>
- Watzlawick, P., Beavin, J., & Jackson, D. (1967). *Pragmatics of human communication: A study of interactional patterns, pathologies & paradoxes*. W. W. Norton.
- Whittington, K. E. (2024). *You can’t teach that: The battle over university classrooms*. Polity Press.
- Winter, R. (2009). Academic manager or managed academic? Academic identity schisms in higher education. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 31(2), 121–131. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600800902825835>

Zelnick, J. R., Kim, M. E., & Goodkind, S. (2023). First they came for critical race theory... *Affilia*, 38(2), 169–174. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08861099231163651>

Zhang, Y., & Alicke, M. (2021). My true self is better than yours: Comparative bias in true self judgments. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 47(2), 216–231. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167220919213>

About the Author: Douglas L. Robertson, PhD is Professor of Higher Education, Educational Policy Studies, College of Arts, Sciences, and Education, Florida International University, Miami, FL (drobert@fiu.edu, <https://www.douglasrobertson.miami>).

Navigating Ethical Advocacy: Adaptive Leadership and Moral Courage in Politically Charged Contexts

Darrin E. Wright

Abstract: Helping professionals constantly struggle to navigate the complexities of ethical dilemmas while promoting just and equitable policies in the current unstable political environment. With emphasis on how social workers and other helping professionals can evaluate and resolve conflicting policies to advance social justice, this essay examines how moral courage and adaptive leadership are essential to this work. Drawing on an ethical decision-making model and incorporating Afrocentric principles such as humanistic values and autonomy, the essay provides a framework for understanding the empowerment and self-determination necessary for effective advocacy. Reflecting on these concepts can help professionals sharpen their approach to ethical leadership and drive meaningful change. The essay concludes with three thought-provoking questions to strengthen ethical advocacy and decision-making in today's politically volatile world.

Keywords: Afrocentric Perspective, autonomy, belonging, ethical decision-making, humanistic values, social justice, well-being

Introduction

In a world where political polarization grows daily, helping professionals are increasingly called upon to navigate complex ethical dilemmas (McIntosh et al., 2021). These professionals often work within systems that challenge their core values while advocating for fair and equitable policies (Reamer, 2018b). Tools such as adaptive leadership and moral courage are essential for making complex judgments under systemic barriers that threaten clients' well-being and sense of belonging. This essay explores the critical role of advocacy in politically charged environments, discussing how social workers and other helping professionals can apply ethical decision-making frameworks to make difficult decisions and stand up for what is right. Drawing from the Afrocentric Perspective, this paper examines humanistic values and autonomy as guiding principles for understanding empowerment and ethical advocacy in social work practice (Foster, 2011, 2014; White, 2021; Wright, 2013, 2025).

Adaptive Leadership in Times of Uncertainty

One framework that stands out in navigating these challenges is adaptive leadership, a concept first introduced by Heifetz and Linsky (2002). This approach is about tackling challenges that do not have easy answers. It is not about solving technical problems with straightforward solutions but about confronting adaptive challenges that require flexibility, resilience, and creativity. In social work, adaptive leadership is critical when political shifts deeply impact marginalized communities. Addressing these challenges involves difficult conversations, challenging unjust policies, and pushing for systemic change (Wright, 2022, 2025).

Take, for instance, social workers who work with undocumented populations. These professionals may face tough ethical decisions when immigration policies contradict their profession's values (National Association of Social Workers, 2021, Sections 1.01, 1.02, and 1.16). An adaptive leadership approach would call for carefully examining the political climate, identifying allies, and maintaining an unwavering commitment to advocacy for policies that honor human dignity. Even when the path is unclear, social workers can take action, knowing their work is rooted in social justice principles (Martinez & Fleck-Henderson, 2014).

Moral Courage and Ethical Decision-Making

In politically volatile times, moral courage becomes indispensable for professionals, particularly social workers and nurses. Kidder (2005) defines *moral courage* as the strength to act in accordance with one's ethical beliefs, even when such actions may involve personal risk. Reamer (2018b) further emphasizes that true leadership in social work requires moral courage, the willingness to challenge authority and take on unpopular causes in the name of justice, even when facing risk of opposition and failure. This concept is particularly salient in environments where institutional policies may perpetuate harm, compelling practitioners to confront ethical dilemmas head-on. For instance, Numminen et al. (2019) highlight that nurses often face challenging ethical issues within hierarchical hospital structures, requiring them to advocate for patient welfare despite potential repercussions from their superiors.

Moral courage aligns with the findings of Taraz et al. (2019), who emphasized that an ethical climate within healthcare settings fosters moral courage among nursing staff, ultimately benefiting patients and promoting a culture of empathy and cooperation. Moreover, ethical decision-making frameworks, such as Reamer's (2018a) model, serve as critical tools for navigating these complex situations. Reamer's framework offers a systematic way to navigate ethical dilemmas. The key steps in the process are as follows:

1. **Identifying the Ethical Issue:** This step involves recognizing the dilemma and understanding how conflicting values are at play.
2. **Identifying Affected Parties:** Who will be impacted by the decision? This step ensures that professionals are aware of the consequences for various groups.
3. **Exploring Possible Actions:** What are the potential responses? This step helps brainstorm alternatives and consider their pros and cons.
4. **Considering Ethical and Legal Implications:** Professionals should weigh their options against ethical codes, legal guidelines, and professional standards.
5. **Consulting with Others:** Consulting with colleagues or ethics committees can shed light on perspectives that may not have been previously considered.

6. Making the Decision and Documenting the Process: After thoughtful consideration, professionals must take action and record their reasoning.
7. Monitoring and Evaluating the Impact: Ethical decision-making does not stop at the action; it requires ongoing reflection and adjustment to ensure continued alignment with ethical principles.
(Reamer, 2018a)

For example, imagine a social worker in a public school who encounters a policy requiring the reporting of undocumented students to immigration authorities. This situation creates an ethical conflict between following institutional policy and protecting vulnerable children. By applying Reamer's framework, the social worker can consider their choices' legal, ethical, and human rights implications and advocate for policies prioritizing student safety.

The Afrocentric Perspective: Humanistic Values and Autonomy in Advocacy

In my article "Black Males' Plight to Breathe in America—Black Racial Injustice" (Wright, 2022), I introduce important Afrocentric principles to the discourse, specifically humanistic values and autonomy, which offer a robust framework for understanding how advocacy can drive social change.

The Afrocentric Perspective: A Foundation for Advocacy

Before discussing the principles of humanistic values and autonomy, it is important to provide context for the Afrocentric Perspective (ACP) and its relevance to advocacy. As articulated by Molefi Kete Asante (1980), Afrocentricity advocates for the centrality of people of African ancestry within the context of their own personal and historical experiences, emphasizing human agency, location, centeredness, and subject position rather than victimhood. Building upon this foundation, the ACP emerged as a culturally grounded social work practice model that acknowledges, codifies, and integrates shared cultural experiences, values, and interpretations among individuals of African origin (Wright et al., 2018). This perspective also considers the interaction of race with other sociocultural characteristics, including gender, ethnicity, social class, ability status, and sexual orientation. While rooted in African-centered thought and cultural traditions, the ACP offers broader insights into resilience, collective responsibility, empowerment, and social justice that are relevant to advocacy across diverse communities. It highlights traditions such as family, spirituality, community solidarity, empowerment, cooperation, creativity, and mutual aid, which serve as foundational social and cultural strengths within social work practice.

Humanistic Values

Humanistic values prioritize eliminating human oppression and enhancing human potential through principles that advance equity, fairness, and social and economic justice (Wright, 2026). This principle is fundamentally concerned with fostering well-being and belonging. *Well-being*

reflects a holistic state of physical, mental, and emotional health associated with happiness, life satisfaction, and stability. *Belonging* refers to a sense of acceptance, connection, and value within one's community. Both are essential to human flourishing, and a strong sense of belonging significantly influences overall well-being (Gautam et al., 2024).

These humanistic values help social workers challenge ideologies, policies, and systemic practices that limit human potential and obstruct positive social change across communities (Gregoire et al., 2025; Martin & Martin, 2002; Mbiti, 1970; Wright et al., 2018).

Within the social work profession, this principle calls practitioners to oppose policies and systems that disproportionately harm marginalized populations and undermine their well-being and sense of belonging. Whether confronting restrictive voting laws or the systemic neglect of communities of color, advocacy grounded in human dignity, justice, and fairness remains central to social work practice. Humanistic values should therefore guide efforts to advance justice, equity, and inclusion for all (Foster, 2011, 2014; White, 2021; Wright, 2013, 2026).

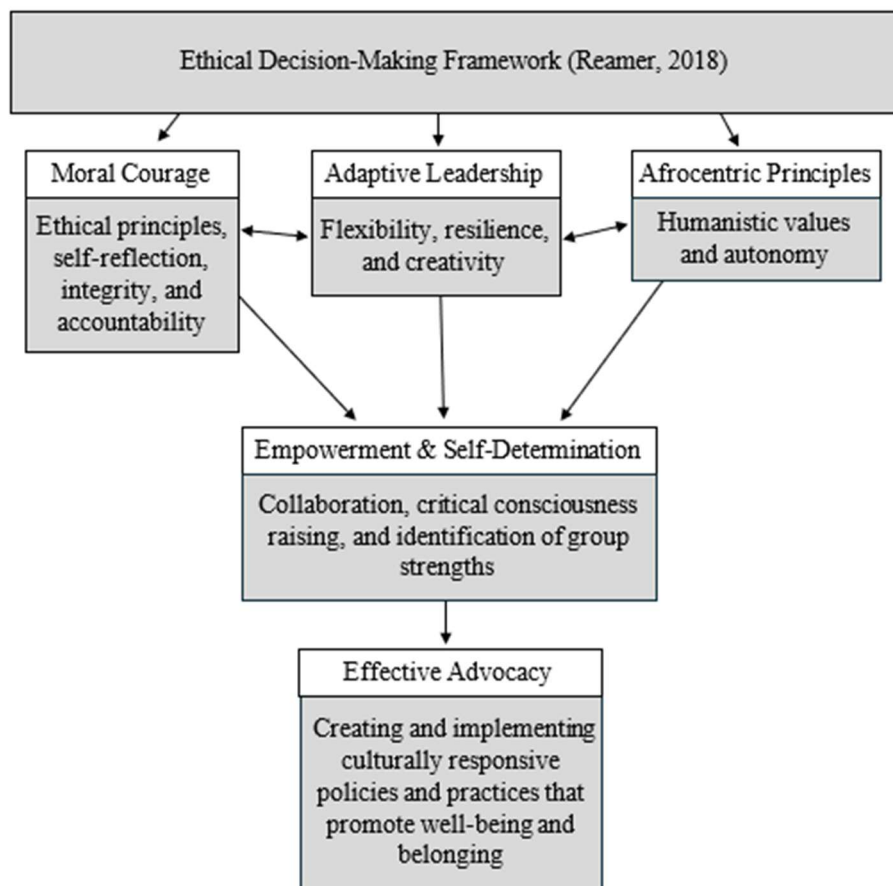
Autonomy

As understood in the Afrocentric context, *autonomy* involves resisting oppression and actively working to dismantle it. This principle emphasizes the importance of self-determination in advocacy (Foster, 2011, 2014; White, 2021; Wright, 2013, 2025). Social workers and other professionals must challenge oppressive systems and empower individuals and communities to take control of their futures. Advocacy efforts must, therefore, focus not just on changing policies but on strengthening the ability of marginalized communities to shape the decisions that affect their lives (Wright, 2022).

See Figure 1 for a conceptual framework visualizing the key principles of effective, ethical advocacy discussed in this essay.

Figure 1

Key Principles of Effective, Ethical Advocacy



Reflective Questions for Advocacy and Ethical Decision-Making

In my advocacy work, I have found the following three reflective questions helpful in guiding ethical decision-making:

1. How can I apply adaptive leadership to my advocacy efforts, especially when navigating political uncertainty?
2. In what ways do my personal and professional values align or conflict with existing policies, and how can ethical decision-making models help me address these challenges?
3. How can the principles of humanistic values and autonomy help me advocate more effectively for marginalized communities?

Conclusion

In sum, advocating for ethical change in politically charged environments presents significant challenges, but helping professionals remain essential catalysts for change. Social workers and other professionals can navigate these complex situations effectively by utilizing adaptive leadership, demonstrating moral courage, and applying ethical decision-making frameworks (Reamer, 2018a, 2018b). Additionally, Afrocentric principles such as humanistic values and autonomy provide a much-needed framework for understanding that empowerment is essential to effective advocacy (Martin & Martin, 2002; Ramirez et al., 2024; Wright, 2022, 2025). By reflecting on these approaches, professionals can strengthen their ability to create meaningful change in today's unpredictable sociopolitical climate. As the late Congressman and civil rights icon Rep. John Lewis urged, "We must engage in good trouble, necessary trouble" (as cited in Hayden, 2020, para. 3) to confront injustice and push for transformative change. Using this reflection on ethical advocacy, social workers and related professionals can better address systemic inequalities and create culturally responsive policies and practices that benefit their client systems' overall well-being and belonging within their ecosystems (Watson, 2023).

References

- Asante, M. K. (1980). *Afrocentricity: A theory of social change*. African American Images.
- Foster, S. (2011, March 11). African retention patterns in social work. (Wright, D., Interviewer).
- Foster, S. (2014). Integrating the Afrocentric Perspective into the social work curriculum. [Unpublished manuscript]. Clark Atlanta University.
- Gregoire, T., Thomas, S., & Vakalahi, H. F. O. (2025, February 27). *CSWE releases statement on federal executive orders*. Council on Social Work Education.
<https://www.cswe.org/news/newsroom/cswe-statement-on-federal-executive-orders/>
- Gautam, S., Jain, A., Chaudhary, J., Gautam, M., Gaur, M., & Grover, S. (2024). Concept of mental health and mental well-being, it's determinants and coping strategies. *Indian Journal of Psychiatry*, 66(Suppl 2), S231–S244.
https://doi.org/10.4103/indianjpsychiatry.indianjpsychiatry_707_23
- Hayden, C. D. (2020, July 19). *Remembering John Lewis: The power of 'good trouble.'* Timeless: Stories from the Library of Congress. <https://blogs.loc.gov/loc/2020/07/remembering-john-lewis-the-power-of-good-trouble/>
- Heifetz, R. A., & Linsky, M. (2002). *Leadership on the line: Staying alive through the dangers of leading*. Harvard Business School Press.
- Kidder, R. M. (2005). *Moral courage*. HarperCollins.

- McIntosh, T., Antes, A. L., & DuBois, J. M. (2021). Navigating complex, ethical problems in professional life: A guide to teaching SMART strategies for decision-making. *Journal of Academic Ethics*, 19(2), 139–156. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10805-020-09369-y>
- Martin, E. P., & Martin, J. M. (2002). *Spirituality and the black helping tradition in social work*. NASW Press.
- Martinez, D. B., & Fleck-Henderson, A. (Eds.). (2014). *Social justice in clinical practice: A liberation health framework for social work*. Routledge.
- Mbiti, J. S. (1970). *African religions and philosophy* (Rev. ed.). Praeger.
- National Association of Social Workers. (2021). Code of ethics. <https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English>
- Numminen, O., Katajisto, J., & Leino-Kilpi, H. (2019). Development and validation of the Nurses' Moral Courage Scale. *Nursing Ethics*, 26(7–8), 2438–2455. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0969733018791325>
- Ramirez, S., Beaudin, N., Rayner, J., Price, N., & Townsend, D. (2024). Black-focused social prescribing: The importance of an Afrocentric approach. *Health Promotion and Chronic Disease Prevention in Canada*, 44(6), 292–295. <https://doi.org/10.24095/hpcdp.44.6.07>
- Reamer, F. G. (2018a). Ethical decision making in social work. In A. R. Roberts & K. R. Yeager (Eds.), *Social workers' desk reference* (3rd ed., pp. 1113–1120). Oxford University Press.
- Reamer, F. G. (2018b, March). Social work leadership and advocacy—The moral imperative. *Social Work Today*, 18(2), 14. <https://www.socialworktoday.com/archive/MA18p14.shtml>
- Taraz, Z., Loghmani, L., Abbaszadeh, A., Ahmadi, F., Safavibiat, Z., & Borhani, F. (2019). The relationship between the ethical climate of hospitals and moral courage of nursing staff. *Electronic Journal of General Medicine*, 16(2), Article em109. <https://doi.org/10.29333/ejgm/93472>
- Watson, E. R., & Collins, C. R. (2023). Putting the system in systemic racism: A systems thinking approach to advancing equity. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 71(3–4), 274–286. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12628>
- White, G. L. [Dr. GL White]. (2021, June 21). *The Afrocentric Perspective lecture by Drs White and Wright CAUWMYJSSW* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/J4Zp2eIVR8Y>
- Wright, D. E. (2013). *Afrocentric Perspective in social work: An integrative lens*. Paper presented at the 11th Biennial Conference of Caribbean & International Social Work Educators, Curaçao, Netherlands Antilles.

Wright, D. E. (2018). From good to great: An innovative bridge program developing professionalism and self-reflection in social work students entering the field. *Field Educator*, 8(2). <https://alswe.simmons.edu/article/from-good-to-great-an-innovative-bridge-program-developing-professionalism-and-self-reflection-in-social-work-students-entering-the-field/>

Wright, E. D., Jones, K., White, G., Harper, R., & Alhassan, M. (2018). School of Social Work handbook. Clark Atlanta University.

Wright, D. E. (2022). Black males' plight to breathe in America—Black racial injustice. *Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping*, 28(2), 82–86. <https://reflectionsnnarrativesofprofessionalhelping.org/index.php/Reflections/article/view/1912>

Wright, D. E. (2025). Health equity: Addressing a social justice imperative for Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) through a population health framework. In J. C. Wadley (Ed.), *Contemporary issues in human services: Special topics for clinical practice, public health, and social justice* (1st ed.). Routledge.

Wright, D. E. (2026). Combined use of servant leadership principles and Afrocentric Perspective principles as framework to decolonize social institutions commitment to wellbeing and inclusion. In N. L. Currie (Ed.), *Decolonized clinical supervision and leadership: A social work perspective* (pp. 239–250). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009440585.014>

About the Author: Darrin E. Wright, PhD, LMSW is Adjunct Faculty, School of Social Work, Walden University, Atlanta, GA (dwinnovative12@gmail.com).

Marcus Garvey: A Pioneer in the Empowerment of the Oppressed

Llewellyn Cornelius

Abstract: “Empowerment” has recently become a buzzword in the social sciences and has come to be connected with the notion of helping the disenfranchised find the resources to improve their circumstances. However, contemporary discussions of empowerment understate the early empowerment pioneer Marcus Garvey and his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). At a time when African Americans were defined as second-class citizens, the UNIA succeeded in fostering positive self-esteem and self-determination among over 2,000,000 individuals through the world. This reflection essay documents these achievements both during the height of the UNIA movements as well as in the decades that followed.

Keywords: African Americans, community organization, self-empowerment, community empowerment

Introduction: Author Reflection

I have long known about Marcus Garvey from growing up a child of the 1960s in Harlem, New York City, as Harlem was one of the centers for his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) decades before I was born. Even these decades after the height of the UNIA movement, its spirit was alive in the community I grew up in, thus I understood the issue of empowerment on a personal level—even before the publication of Dr. Barbara Solomon’s seminal 1976 book *Black Empowerment: Social Work in Oppressed Communities* which opened up the door for inclusion of empowerment theory in social work practice. Thus, while this has centered my practice work for decades, I am very aware that even today, some voices find Marcus Garvey unsettling. This is in spite of President Biden pardoning Marcus Garvey on January 20, 2025, following more than 100 years of community advocacy to restore his reputation (Reed, 2025). In the spirit of fostering empowerment, though, this essay is presented to inspire the reader to become more curious about this issue. It is hoped through this discovery process one can see the connection between Garvey’s principles of collective community engagement and what is taken for granted today under either empowerment therapeutic practice, collective social empowerment activities, or community engagement, respective of one’s background.

Contextualizing Empowerment

“Empowerment” is one of the latest buzzwords in the social sciences. It is typically used to represent the idea that we can help people change their circumstances, or at least how they see their circumstances. Like most buzzwords its current use is without an acknowledgement of the contributions of pioneers who predate the use of this term. This essay focuses on one of these pioneers—Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) whose contributions, especially those which focused on developing self-respect and fostering self-determination, represented examples of black empowerment long before the notion of “empowerment” became popular.

In 1976 Barbara Bryant Solomon, in her classic work *Black Empowerment: Social Work in Oppressed Communities*, defined *empowerment* as follows:

A process whereby the social worker engages in a set of activities with the client or client system that aim to reduce the powerlessness that has been created by negative valuations based on membership in a stigmatized group. It involves identification of the power blocks that contribute to the problem as well as the development and implementation of specific strategies aimed at either the reduction of the effects from indirect power blocks or the reductions of the operations of direct power blocks. (p. 19)

Gutierrez (1990) has defined empowerment as “a process of increasing personal, interpersonal or political power so that individuals can take action to improve their life situations” (p. 149). In short, empowerment focuses on finding the barriers to social change within individuals and within communities, then providing strategies to overcome them (Gutierrez, 1990; Simon, 1990; Solomon, 1976). These concepts will be used to examine how Marcus Garvey and the UNIA empowered African Americans long before “empowerment” became popular.

Precursors to Garvey

Marcus Garvey was not the first leader of African descent who attempted to instill ideas and concepts which we popularize today under “empowerment” in African Americans (See depiction of Marcus Garvey in Figure 1). Any tribute to Garvey would also have to reflect the efforts of others such as Sojourner Truth, Richard Allen, Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Dubois, David Walker, Martin Delany, Ida B. Wells, Casely Hayford, Duse Mohammed Ali, Robert Love, and Alexander Bedward.

Figure 1

Marcus Garvey, Eminent Scholar



Note. From *Marcus Garvey, eminent scholar* [Photograph], by Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, The New York Public Library, 1941 (<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/8e0981a2-4adf-a10a-e040-e00a18063089>), New York Public Library Digital Collections.

As implied, there were a multitude of historical factors which set the stage for the Garvey Movement. One of these factors was the proliferation of written material which sought to correct the contemporary worldview of Africa and Africans. It is believed that Garvey was indebted to Duse Mohammed Ali, a Sudanese-Egyptian author who was credited with reporting the first history of Egypt written by an Egyptian, for his understanding of the importance of ancient

Egyptian civilization and historical achievement (Clarke & Garey, 1974). Ali was also sensitive to the commercial potential of Pan-African collaboration in face of Europe's exploitive control over the African continent and its resources (Clarke & Garey, 1974).

A second influence on the Garvey Movement was the work called *Ethiopia Unbound* by Casely Hayford, which called for the need to build up the black race through the development of Ethiopian leagues (Clarke & Garvey, 1974). In fact, the source for the Garvey motto "One God, One Aim, One Destiny" was Hayford's discussion of W. E. B. DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk* (Clarke & Garvey, 1974).

A third influence on the Garvey Movement came from the activities of Dr. Robert Love, who is best known for his militant journalistic activities in the *Jamaican Advocate* during the period of 1894–1905 (Lewis, 1988). In fact, Garvey stated once,

Much of my early education in race consciousness is from Dr. Love. One cannot read his *Jamaican Advocate* without getting race consciousness ... if Dr. Love was alive and in robust health, you would not be attacking me, you would be attacking him.
(as cited in Lewis, 1988, p. 25)

Dr. Love was committed to increasing the number of black representatives in the Jamaican colonial legislature (Lewis, 1988). For both Love and Garvey, race consciousness was a cry of a people and of a class. Among other activities, Dr. Love proposed land reform to redistribute property to the landless peasants, decried police brutality and the injustices levied out to migrant workers in central America, stressed the need to elevate the role of women in society; and called for attention on the significance of the Haitian revolution. Finally, he was interested in promoting Pan-Africanism—which included securing the political rights of Africans and their descendants; ameliorating the condition of the oppressed; encouraging educational, industrial, and commercial enterprises; fostering friendly relations with whites; and raising money for these causes (Lewis, 1988).

A fourth influence on the Garvey Movement was the religious/community organization efforts of members of the Bedward movement in Jamaica, founded by Reverend Alexander Bedward, whose height was from the 1890s through the 1920s (Chevannes, 1991). The focus of Bedwardism was the need of the downtrodden masses to look to God for their salvation; Bedward used parables from the Bible to challenge the colonial state. Bedwardism attracted the most oppressed section of the poor peasantry and the semi-proletarian masses—out of which Rastafarianism later came (Addisa & Daba, 2022; Chevannes, 1991).

The Garvey Legacy

What made Garvey different from both his African and Anglo contemporaries was his ability to succeed in galvanizing a large number of individuals of African descent to formulate and implement plans to take control of their own destinies. At the time of the first convention for the UNIA, neither African Americans nor the United States itself had ever witnessed a gathering of

25,000 members who met for a month to establish a racial agenda for the world community of African peoples (Hill, 1983). At the height of the UNIA, there were 2,000,000 members in 1,200 branches in 43 countries, with 700 of these in the United States (Marin, 1991; Watson, 2014; See depictions of the UNIA in Harlem, 1920, in Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 2

Negro World Newspaper, 1920

The Indispensable Weekly
The Voice of the Anointed Negro—The Pathless Paper

Guaranteed Circulation 50,000
Reaching the Masses of Negroes Throughout the World

Negro World

A Newspaper Devoted Solely to the Interests of the Negro Race

VOL. VIII. No. 24
NEW YORK, SATURDAY, JULY 27, 1920
PRICE: THREE CENTS IN ADVANCE NEW YORK
FIVE CENTS ELSEWHERE IN THE U. S. A.
TEN CENTS IN FOREIGN COUNTRIES

GREAT WORLD CONVENTION OF NEGROES

Members of the Race From All Parts of the World to Assemble at Liberty Hall, New York, Sunday, August 1, at 10 A. M.—Biggest and Most Representative Assemblage in History of the Race

CONSTITUTION OF NEGRO LIBERTY IS TO BE WRITTEN

FELLOW MEN OF THE NEGRO RACE, GREETINGS:—

This is to inform you that on Sunday, August 1, the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities' League of the World will call its great convention to order at 10 A. M. in Liberty Hall.

Millions of people have been looking towards this

... of the four hundred million members of our race. The black man refuses to be dictated to by foreign Parliaments and alien statesmen. This is the time when all races feel it incumbent upon them to protect their own interests, and if sixty million Anglo-Saxons can be dominant in Europe, and a few million French and Italians and Germans, we do not see why we should allow ourselves to be dominated and abused by alien power. The Convention of the Universal Negro Improvement Association shall give new life and new spirit to the Negro peoples of the world; hence, I ask that every Negro lend his moral and financial aid to this great cause. The first meeting of the Convention will be at 10 o'clock on Sunday morning, August 1; the second meeting at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, and the third at 8 o'clock in the night. On the morning of the 2nd the Convention will assemble at 10 o'clock, to adjourn for a parade at 2 o'clock and to assemble at 8 o'clock sharp in Madison Square Garden in a great public demonstration. Twenty-five thousand delegates will be in line to march in the great procession of the Convention. All members of the Association in New York and surrounding States are asked to report in New York not later than 8 A. M. on Sunday, August 1. Everybody should report in time to be properly seated in the Convention and to take part in the parade. Madison Square Garden on Monday night will be the Mecca of the Negro peoples of New York. It can be said without fear that there will not be a seat vacant in Madison Square Garden at 8:30 Monday night. All roads will lead to this world-famed building. Churches, lodges, fraternal organizations, clubs and educational institutions that are sending

delegates to the Convention are requested to have their delegates report to the Registrar's office at 56 West 135th Street, New York City, before they attend at Liberty Hall, so that proper credentials can be given by the Registrar for admission to the Convention. Let your thoughts for the entire month of August be centered around the great Convention being held at Liberty Hall. Year for the success of this

... will create a new people, a new purpose, and a new nation realized.

Immediately after the convention the Black Star Line contemplates opening up direct routes between America and Africa and South America. More ships must be bought, and bigger ships. The Directors, therefore, ask that every Negro make now a desperate effort to buy more shares in the Corporation. The more ships the Black Star Line has the better accommodations we will be able to give to the race. Liberia must be built. Men must be transported. Skilled mechanics and craftsmen are wanted. We cannot transport them in balloons, in air ships; we can only transport them in the ships of the Black Star Line. First of all, we must buy ships to make transportation possible. Hundreds of miles of railroads must be laid down in Liberia. Docks must be built; educational institutions must be built; industrial enterprises must be constructed, and all will mean the transportation of skilled men from this Western Hemisphere, so we ask that every Negro who can afford it to buy more shares in the Black Star Line. You may buy from one to two hundred at Five Dollars each. My advice to you is that you buy now, so that by the close of the Convention the Directors will be able to give a statement to the world of the acquisition of more ships for the Black Star Line, which will make it possible for us to transport at our will. Write the office of the Black Star Line, 56 West 135th Street, New York City, N. Y., U. S. A., for your shares.

And let me say to you adieu for a while until we meet at the Convention on Sunday morning at 10 o'clock in Liberty Hall.

Yours fraternally,
MARCUS GARVEY.

NEW YORK, JULY 27, 1920.

HON. MARCUS GARVEY, WORLD FAMED ORATOR
WILL SPEAK FOR THE "BLACK STAR LINE" AT HUGE CONVENTION AT
LIBERTY HALL
120 WEST 138th STREET
Bet. 7th and Lenox Aves., New York

SUBJECT: "OUR CONVENTION"

SUNDAY, AUGUST 1; 3:30 AND 7:30 P. M.

Note. From *Negro World*, vol. 8 no. 24, front page [Photograph], by Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and Reference Division, The New York Public Library, 1920 (<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/a4fcc980-c60d-012f-b16c-58d385a7bc34>), New York Public Library Digital Collections.

Figure 3

UNIA Parade in Harlem



Note. From *UNIA parade in Harlem* [Photograph], by Liberty Hall: UNIA Cleveland, n.d. (<https://clevelandhistorical.org/files/show/10004>), Cleveland Historical.

Given that by the early 1920s the UNIA had established branches throughout the world, it is not a surprise that Garvey and the UNIA were seen as threat to colonialism. Direct connections to Garveyism continued to be found outside of the U.S.—Davis (2021) notes that there were more than 50 branches of the UNIA in Cuba during the 1920s. Adjete (2021) notes that the elements of self-determination and Pan-Africanism that are attributed to the UNIA were not just present in the U.S. between 1919 and 1931, but were also vibrant in Canada via the Coloured Literary Association of Toronto. The sphere of Garvey was also felt in Garvey to bring social justice to South Africa and southwest Africa (Namibia) in 1922 and in 1928 via his petitions to the League of Nations (Jones, 2022) as well as the independence efforts in Malawi between 1914 and 1920 (Page, 2022). Page (2022) asserts that it was the publication of “Africa for Africans” in the *Negro World* that planted to the nurturance of activists across the African continent over the course of the 20th century.

One example of Garvey’s threat to colonialism was the attempt of the Bermuda’s colonial government both to prevent Garvey from entering Bermuda and to undermine Garveys’ newsprint publication *The Negro World* (Swan, 2010). In spite of this attempted obstruction, the presence of the UNIA in Bermuda led to a Black Renaissance there (Swan, 2010). In another case, Watson (2014) noted that young intellectuals in Ibadan Nigeria saw Garveyism more as a means to reflect on their own state of colonial oppression as opposed to a call to action. In the same vein, in Brazil, there was an equal split between the black press who was praiseworthy of Garvey and the mainstream press which presented negative views of Garvey (Domingues,

2017). These actions are examples of the divide and rule tactic presented in Frieres' (1972) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* when talking about strategies oppressors use to subjugate people. They are also examples of the self-denigrating tactics that neocolonists practiced throughout the diaspora in their efforts to identify with their colonial benefactors as noted by Fanon (1963) in the *Wretched of the Earth*.

When reviewing the long-term legacy of the Garvey Movement as it relates to self-determination, empowerment, and autonomy, one must not only examine the structural presence of the UNIA, but also consider its impact on the thinking of leaders in Africa and throughout the African diaspora¹. Christian (2008) noted,

The Garvey movement played a massive role in giving future African leaders a much-needed psychological boost toward gaining the fight for independence. Among those Africans who benefited from the ideas of Marcus Garvey are Nnamdi Azikiwe (Nigeria, governor-general 1960), Jomo Kenyatta (Kenya, prime minister 1960, president 1964), Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana, president 1957), Kenneth Kuanda (Zambia, president 1964), and others. (p. 325)

Moran (2021) has pointed out the parallels between the UNIA movement and the work of Cesar Chavez and the United Fruit Workers, in this case via their focus on collective economic empowerment and self-determination. The influence of Marcus Garvey can also be seen in the growth of Rastafarianism, which in the early 1930s in both Jamaica and Ethiopia identified Garvey as its prophet (Addisa & Daba, 2022).

More contemporary discussions of Nationalism and Pan-Africanism are reflected both in the United Nation marking 2011 as the year of African Descendants, focusing on the anti-colonial and civil rights struggles through the diaspora as well and the modeling of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission by others around the world (Black Women's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2016; Dong-choon, 2010; Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2006; Lewis, 2011; Ministry of Foreign Affairs Sri Lanka, 2011; National Truth Commission Brazil, 2014; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, n.d.; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2016; United States Institute of Peace, 2001, 2002, 2004, 2009). Even though the impact of Garveyism has been felt around the world, there was a missed opportunity in the U.S. to reinforce the legacy of Marcus Garvey, as "President Barack Obama issued 212 presidential pardons and 1715 commutations during his tenure, but he refused to sign a presidential pardon for the Right Honorable Marcus Mosiah Garvey" (Philp, 2017, para. 1).

While some of Garvey's legacy can be quantified, some can only be measured in conceptual terms. The Garvey Movement represented a mobilization of both the middle class and poor oppressed Africans who worked as house servants, migrant laborers, during a time when "unionized farmer organizations, trade unions, independent churches, and student organizations

¹ An interesting side note regarding the indirect ripple effect of Garveyism can be found in a notation from Carew (1994) who indicated that Malcolm X's Grenadian grandmother and grandfather met at a Montreal UNIA meeting in 1918.

were banned or kept under strict state control” (Campbell, 1991). Garveyism captured the imagination of African in the U.S. and the Caribbean and Africa as well as Latin Americans. In crossing the alleged “barriers” implied by language, metropolitan affiliation, and constitutional status, the appeal of the movement demonstrated the structural similarity of the conditions of African people all over the Americas over two generations after the abolition of negro slavery (Girvan, 1991).

Fostering Positive Self-Esteem and Self-Respect

Marcus Garvey founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in Jamaica and extended it to other Caribbean nations and Africa, but it was strongest in the United States from 1919 through 1923. The very essence of the Garvey Movement was Garvey’s plea to help African people everywhere to develop the “courage of manhood” (which we would now term “personhood”) and to work and build for themselves. His speeches are replete with attempts to help Africans foster positive self-esteem and develop self-respect. For example, Garvey states that “we come now to the turning point of the Negro, where we have changed from the old cringing weakling, and transformed into full-grown men, demanding our portion as MEN” (Garvey, 1969, p. 8). In defining the word “man” (today we would say “person”), Garvey said:

So few of us can understand what it takes to make a man—the man who will never say die; the man who will never give up, the man who will never depend upon others to do for him what he ought to do for himself; the man who will not blame God, who will not blame nature, who will not blame fate for his condition, but the man who will go out and make conditions to suit himself (Garvey, 1969, p. 26).

The central purpose of the Garvey platform was to help Africans change the way in which they view themselves and the world around them. He challenged African people to accept their own beauty and worth and competence to go along their own way in the world (Cronon, 1973).

The goal of the UNIA movement was not to “succeed” or to “fail” as we are too apt to evaluate; rather, the purpose of the movement was to open the minds of African people and to counter the messages used to make Africans feel inferior. Garvey understood that in order for African people to help themselves they had to free themselves from the psychological and political consequences of oppression. In assessing Garvey’s contributions to self-esteem, Jordan (1975) notes that Garvey emphasized that the emancipation of black people needs to be centered on both their pride in their skin color and their African past.

There were in fact many examples in the works about Garvey and the UNIA that showed Garvey’s attempts to translate the principles of self-respect and self-esteem into an action agenda. For example, at the first International Convention of the Negro Peoples of the world in 1920, the UNIA promoted the use of the Red, Black, and Green flag. Red stood for the blood of the race, which should not be shed in vain; black was used to show pride in the color of the race; and green was used to promote and new and better life (Hill, 1983). This color combination and symbolism was used throughout the UNIA movement and can be seen today in Kwanzaa rituals and other symbols of African pride and respect.

Garvey's concern about the promotion of self-esteem and self-respect included promoting not just racial pride but also cultural appreciation. When Garvey returned to Jamaica in 1927, he used the Edelweiss Park headquarters of the UNIA as a focus point for a multitude of cultural events ranging from dances, dramatic presentations, musical revues, vaudeville, comedies, oracle renditions, public speaking, singing and dancing contests, films, picnics, and fairs (Hamilton, 1991). The purpose of these events was to provide public recreation and cultural entertainment for the poorer people of the Kingston Jamaica capital and the St. Andrew area (Hamilton, 1991). Some of the events included works written by Garvey (*Roaming Jamaicans, Slavery from Hut to Mansion, Coronation of An African King, Let My People Go, Ethiopia at the Bar of Justice, A Night in Havana and Wine, Women and Song*); mock trials (at least three of which written by Garvey); dance training for 200 women and 100 men; and the directorship of two choirs, a concert orchestra, and a jazz orchestra (Hamilton, 1991).

Fostering Self-Determination

Along with promoting positive self-esteem and self-respect, Garvey used the organizational structure of the UNIA to foster self-determination for persons of African descent. First, the UNIA developed paramilitary organizations to foster discipline and professionalism. For the men there was the Universal African Legion. For the women there was the Universal African Motor Corps (the first corps of its type for African American women; Martin, 1991). Along with military training, the Universal African Legion also emphasized employment training. A second structural component developed by the UNIA was the Black Cross Nurses for women. This organization consisted of nurses who were both medical professionals and caretakers of children in the Juvenile Division. One of the implicit goals of the Black Cross nurses was to have the children play with black dolls early on to develop positive self-esteem, an issue that later became the focus of research by Kenneth Clark (Clark & Clark, 1939; Clarke & Clark, 1947; Jordan, 1975). A third structural component of the UNIA was the annual conventions, whose purpose was to formulate plans for improving the status of Africans in Africa and the diaspora.

Women were not only represented in the rank and file of the organization but also among the leadership. Amy Ashwood Garvey, Marcus Garvey's first wife, was the co-founder of the UNIA in 1914 (Ford-Smith, 1991). Amy Jacques Garvey, Marcus Garvey's second wife, worked as an editor of *The Negro World* and worked tirelessly during Garvey's imprisonment to keep the UNIA going (Ford-Smith, 1991). Henrietta Vinton Davis served as a vice-president of the UNIA on several occasions (Martin, 1991). Lillian Galloway ran a string of businesses called the Negro Factories Corporation. Garvey also came into contact with Ida B. Wells-Barnett, known for her sustained campaign against the lynching of African Americans, and Madame C. J. Walker, the cosmetologist who became the first African American millionaire (Martin, 1991).

Other examples of the direct translation of principle of self-determination into action was the development of businesses and economic cooperatives. Examples of these enterprise efforts include a restaurant, a hat factory, a millinery shop, a steam laundry, a number of grocery stores, and a dressmaking and tailoring shop.

Probably the most talked-about enterprise of the Garvey Movement was the development of the Black Star Line, whose significance needs to be viewed in the context of the period. Stein notes that at the time of the Black Star Line, the U.S. Navy and Marine usage of ships for military purposes was still in its own embryonic stages. During World War I, “most American men and women and material went to war on foreign ships, but the establishment of the U.S. Shipping Board and a shiploading auxiliary in 1916 revealed the governments’ commitment to commercial expansions and naval power” (Stein, 1991, p. 205). Stein (1991) equates the notion of the plan to build a shipping line in the Garvey era with the equivalence of possessing nuclear weapons in the later stage of the twentieth century. Under the Black Star Line, Garvey purchased three ships, worth then a total of 2 million dollars, for the purposes of transporting African Americans back to Africa (Hill, 1983). His plan to transport Africans was derailed by the U.S. government, who accused Garvey of mail fraud in his attempt to solicit money for the acquisition of these ships.

The Garvey Movement in the Context of History

While the efforts of Marcus Garvey appear notable in their own light, they loom even larger in history once one contrasts his achievements with historical issues which occurred during his time. The time of the Garvey Movement was characterized by the loss of political power by African Americans following the *Plessy v. Ferguson* court ruling approving separate but equal institutions for African Americans (AKA Jim Crow legislation); the mass migration of African Americans from the U.S. South to northern states; racial riots and competition between African and immigrant Americans over living space; lynchings; and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan (Edwards, 1991). In the summer of 1919, race riots exploded in most major cities. Violence was used to enforce the second-class status of Blacks. Lynching was rampant, and the police often turned a blind eye to instances of crime when it was targeted at Blacks (Grant 2003). In 1920 there were 61 lynchings, and in 1921 there were 62, including “soldiers returning from the Great War who after fighting and winning significant victories—just as they had fought in the Revolutionary and Civil wars” (Eburne, 2014, p. 2). The NAACP (n.d.) reported that between 1882 and 1968 there were 4,743 lynchings in the United States. Olusanya (1994) notes that, by 1920, “the whole of the African continent, except Ethiopia and Liberia, had been parceled out among European colonial powers,” and, as a result, Africans who “had been brought to the reality of colonization with its racial intolerance, economic exploitation and social injustice” would welcome “any movement which sought to emancipate them from European subjugation” (p. 123).

Liberia presented a unique dilemma because while the country was “established” through the efforts of the American Colonization Society in the 1820s, it was built upon the infusion of freed African Americans (called Americo-Liberians) to an already established community in West Africa, which set the stage for decades of internal conflict and civil war (Cooper, 2008). In fact, these Americo-Liberians did not want an anticolonial movement led by Garvey in Liberia (Lewis, 1988, pp. 71–75). Note one of the key figures of colonialism in Africa in the 19th Century, Cecil Rhodes, set forth a colonialist philosophy that was directly opposed to empowerment in self-determination. In referring to the British Colonial presences around the

world, Rhodes stated “I contend that we are the first race in the world, and that the more of the world we inhabit the better it is for the human race” (Parkinson, 2015, para. 13). With regards to Africa, Rhodes’ “famous desire” was his wish to “‘red line’ from Cairo to Cape Town, building a railway across the entire continent without ever leaving British territory” (Parkinson, 2015, para. 13).

Before 1890, less than 10 percent of the African Americans in the United States lived in urban areas; by 1940, half of them lived in urban areas (Farley and Allen, 1989; Wilson, 1980). While social welfare programs such the Freedmans Bureau proliferated after the Civil War in the South to improve the plight of African Americans (Franklin, 1970), the progress in social welfare programs and political activity achieved during the reconstruction period was stripped by the *Plessy v. Ferguson* supreme court ruling which relegated African Americans to inferior schools, housing, employment, and living accommodations.

The passage of the Jim Crow laws in turn contributed to the great migration of African Americans to the north which began after 1890. The great migration of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North was also influenced by a loss of jobs and poverty combined with the promise of a better life in the North. In 1917, the *Chicago Defender* used claims of high paying jobs, better school systems, voting rights, and freedom from lynchings and terrorism by whites to lure African Americans to the urban North (Spear, 1967). However, industrialists used African Americans in urban areas to break strikes by immigrant workers organizing for a better work environment (Wilson, 1980). This led to race riots between indigenous, African, and immigrant Americans. These race riots around issues of employment did not decrease until President Franklin Delano Roosevelt passed legislation in 1933 that provided legal protection for workers to organize for better working conditions, hours, and wages (Davis, 1986; Wilson, 1980).

American social policy and social welfare activity in the early part of the twentieth century was influenced by two strands of thought: Social Darwinism and Progressivism. Social Darwinism argued in favor of “survival of the fittest.” Its most notable proponent, Herbert Spencer, argued that the progress of humans was dependent on acquired physical and mental abilities, which were genetically transmitted (Hofstadter, 1944). This type of philosophy led to the suggestion by some that social legislation (e.g., child labor laws) should not be passed to improve the plight of the poor because they interfered with the natural development of society. The most insidious application of this notion, though, was its use as a justification for a “natural experiment” on African Americans with latent untreated syphilis which began in 1932 and ran until 1972 (Brandt, 1978). In the years preceding the initiation of this experiment, “scientists” reported in medical journals that African Americans would make a favorable subject for such a study as a result of their sexual prowess and low level of intellectual activity (Brandt, 1978).

In contrast to the Social Darwinists, advocates of the Progressive movement believed that the environment could be changed to improve the plight of individuals (Hofstadter, 1944). Examples of these proponents include social workers who were part of the settlement movement in the U.S. Settlement workers such as Jane Addams, Sophonisba Breckenridge, Graham

Taylor,, Louise DeKoven Bowen, Raymond Robins, Celia Parker, and Mary McDowell used their skills to examine the systematic unfairness in labor, housing, and health in urban neighborhoods (Diner, 1970; White, 1959; Davis, 1959). They fought for better housing laws, shorter working hours, and better working conditions; additionally, they conducted research on social problems to develop programs for the poor.

However, while they all have had a consistent track record in addressing the plight of poor Americans, the actions of these early Progressive era leaders demonstrated some ambivalence with regards to their commitment to resolving the plight of African Americans. An example of such ambivalence is noted in the activities of Louise DeKoven Bowen, a leader in both the Chicago Bureau of Charities and Hull House in Chicago (Diner, 1970). While she was heralded as being one of the few Chicagoans in the progressive era who was concerned about the plight of African Americans, Ms. Bowen felt that interventions to solve the problems of African Americans should focus on the individual instead of their environment (Diner, 1970).

Graham Taylor, the founder of what was to become the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration, showed even less of a concern for the plight of African Americans. While Taylor praised the potential contributions of American immigrants to America, he saw African Americans as a problem in this system, calling them “depraved” (Diner, 1970, p. 401). Another leader in the Chicago settlement movement, Mary McDowell, placed African Americans at the bottom of the ladder of group achievement, citing that they were poorer and more ignorant than Greek and Lithuanian immigrants (Diner, 1970). In contrast, other prominent Progressives such as Jane Addams, Julie Lathrop, Sophisba Breckenridge, and Grace and Edith Abbott all worked to develop legislation to improve the plight of African Americans (Diner, 1970).

Overall Reflections

As seen from the window of time, the legacy of Marcus Garvey and the UNIA is truly noteworthy as a potential model for the empowerment of individuals and organizations (Harvey, 1994). In a time where African Americans were considered at best second citizens without political rights, Garvey succeeded in mobilizing large numbers of African Americans to take pride in themselves and their accomplishments and to seize an active role in shaping their future. While the material accomplishments of the Garvey Movement are no longer with us, the legacy is reflected today in cultural traditions in the African American community and the popularization of the notion of “empowerment.”

As we look for ways to foster the self-empowerment of African Americans and other people of color, efforts need to be made to look to successful models as sources of inspiration for social change. The actions of Garvey and the members of the UNIA focused on encouraging the powerless to take a proactive stance in their own development. Given the merits of leaders such as Marcus Garvey, more attention needs to be paid towards using their accomplishments to help in the development of culturally relevant methods of individual and community empowerment.

The “So What” Issue—Why is This Narrative Important?

At the time of the UNIA, social work as profession was in its early phase. In 1915, Flexner criticized social work as not being a profession at all. The work in the field was driven both by psychodynamic therapy and the settlement movement. Yet at the same time there were strategies in motion that (the Garvey Movement) that has led to a long arc of the inclusion of principles of ally ship, empowerment, self-determination and abolitionism in social work. However, the connection between Garveyism and 21st century social work still appears to be understated. One of the important takeaways of this reflective essay is our need to understand more within the context of communities (both locally and globally), how geo-political factors affect the nature of social action to counter oppression. As we move forward it will be important to capture the contextual issues that are occurring in the present and how they may plant the seeds for future empowerment movements.

Social Work Education Recommendations

It remains curious that more than 100 years post Flexner’s report, there is a lack of inclusion of multi-cultural his/her/their-stories of the contributions of international trailblazers such as the persons who have influenced the formation of the UNIA as well as the ripple effects of their focus on social, emotional, and economic liberation, community organizing and advocacy in the U.S., Caribbean, Canada, Africa, and Latin America. At minimum there is a need for social welfare history courses at both undergraduate and graduate levels to infuse content on how grassroots organizers—such as Marcus Garvey, Cesar Chavez, Nelson Mandela, and so on—have created social movements. There is also a need to include in this learning space discussions of how music is being used around the world to mobilize others as exemplified by Caribbean protest music, Reggae Roots Music, Afrobeat music (Nigeria), and Conscious/Political Rap/Hip-Hop (Davis, 2021, Feracho, 2010; Harris, 2022; Hylton, 1975; Opeyemi, & Johnson, 2024).

To say it another way, as Helen Harris Perlman (1959) did, “start with the client” (p. 22)—thus, if the client has their own liberation story to tell, we need to speak to that from both a learning perspective and a praxis perspective (moving theory into practice).

Research Recommendations

There is a need for more knowledge discovery, as opposed to knowledge generation here. Examples would include the production of more special issues in journals that encourage scholars to publish work that dig deeper into the local socio-cultural contest of change—whether it focuses on individual empowerment theory, fostering allyship and accomplice advocates, using the internet for electronic advocacy, evidence of community transformation using models and theories that speak to empowerment/liberation and scholarship regarding policy effects to address social and economic inequities.

Policy Practice Recommendations

Here there is need to see the dissemination of more examples of successful community engagement organizing efforts that lead to the passage of policies that benefit communities. For example, Cornelius and Lawrence Webb (2021) noted the Poor Peoples Movement campaign, started by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr in the 1960s and continues today under Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II focuses promoting fair wages and countering discrimination or all for all. Cornelius and Lawrence Webb (2021) also provided an international example on the use of sovereign wealth by a country to improve the well-being of its citizens, in this case performed by Norway, who currently does so using profits from the oil extracted from the sea. Finally, Cornelius and Lawrence Webb (2021) show how in the U.S. the funds from the 46-state Tobacco Master Settlement Agreement were used between 1999 and 2024 to address public health issues within their communities (Cornelius & Lawrence Webb, 2021).

Final Author Reflections

Community groups today are having discussions about relying less on the public sector (local, state, or federal government) and more on each other to promote empowerment and self-determination. Some are using the South African principle Ubuntu (I am because we are) to reflect this transformation process. We are seeing this transformation occurring in the 21st Century via the development of voluntary online learning communities like the Historically Black educational platform Hillmantok University (active 2025) or via the promotion of advocacy through social media like the grassroots “Win With Black Women” network (active 2019–2025; Duncan, 2024). In the end, irrespective of one’s stance regarding Marcus Garvey and the UNIA movement, it is hoped that practitioners use the empowerment principles presented here to develop culturally responsive practices to address the was to transform their own communities. A great resource to consider if one wants to delve into this matter further is the 100 articles and books that can be found in Harty’s (2020) *Black Contributions to Mutual Aid, Social Welfare, and Social Work History Supplementary Reading Guide*.

Acknowledgement

This paper is dedicated to Mark (Marcus) Garvey Battle, who was Executive Director of NASW from June 1984 to June 1992 and visiting Professor at the University of Maryland School of Social Work in Baltimore from 1992–1999 as his social work leadership reflected the empowerment spirit of his namesake Marcus Garvey.

References

Abdisa, B. M., & Daba, B. A. (2022). Historical origin of Rastafarian, Marcus Garvey and Pan-African Movement. *Journal of Algebraic Statistics*, 13(2), 2789–2801.

- Adjetey, W. N. L. (2021). In search of Ethiopia: Messianic Pan-Africanism and the problem of the promised land, 1919–1931. *Canadian Historical Review*, 102(1), 53–78. <https://doi.org/10.3138/chr-2019-0048>
- Brandt, A. M. (1978). Racism and research: The case of the Tuskegee syphilis study. *The Hastings Center Report*, 8(6), 21–29. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3561468>
- Cronon, E. D. (Ed.) (1973). *Marcus Garvey: Great lives observed*. Prentice-Hall.
- Campbell, H. (1991). Garveyism, pan-Africanism and African liberation in the twentieth century. In R. Lewis & P. Bryant, *Garvey: His work and impact* (pp. 167–188). Third World Press.
- Chevannes, B. (1991). Garvey myths among the Jamaican people. In R. Lewis & P. Bryant (Eds.), *Garvey: His work and impact* (pp. 123–134). Third World Press.
- Christian, M. (2008). Marcus Garvey and African unity: Lessons for the future from the past. *Journal of Black Studies*, 39(2), 316–331. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934708317364>
- Clark, K. B., & Clark, M. K. (1939). The development of consciousness of self and the emergence of racial identification in Negro pre-school children. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 10, 591–599. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.1939.9713394>
- Clark, K. B., & Clark, M. K. (1947). Racial identification and preference in children. In T. M. Newcomb and E. L. Hartley (Eds.), *Readings in social psychology*. Henry Holt.
- Clarke, J. H., & Garvey, A. J. (1974). *Marcus Garvey and the vision of Africa*. Vintage Books.
- Cooper, H. (2008). *The house at Sugar Beach: In search of a lost African childhood*. Simon and Schuster.
- Cornelius, L. J., & Lawrence Webb, C. (2020). Unraveling the persistent legacy of structural racism against poor persons of color in the U.S. *Journal of Poverty*, 24(5–6), 355–368. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10875549.2020.1811444>
- Davis, A. F. (1959). Raymond Robins: The settlement worker as municipal reformer. *Social Service Review*, 33(2), 131–141.
- Davis, M. (1986). *Prisoners of the American dream*. Verso.
- Davis, S. F. (2021). Garvey-Rodney-Marley: A pan-African bridge over Cuba. *Race & Class*, 62(4), 19–37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396820978580>

- Diner, S. J. (1970). Chicago social workers and blacks in the Progressive Era. *Social Service Review*, 44(4), 393–410.
- Domingues, P. (2017). O “Moisés dos pretos”: Marcus Garvey no Brasil [The “black Moses”: Marcus Garvey in Brazil]. *Novos Estudos [New Studies]*, 36(3), 129–150.
- Duncan, J. (2024, October 31). “Win With Black Women” founder Jotaka Eaddy on how the group is embracing its role in a historic election. CBS News. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/win-with-black-women-founder-jotaka-eaddy-2024-election/>
- Edwards, J. (1991). Garveyism: Organizing the masses or mass organization. In R. Lewis & P. Bryant, *Garvey: His work and impact* (pp. 215–228). Third World Press.
- Fanon, F. (1963). *The wretched of the earth*. Grove Press.
- Farley, R., & Allen, W. R. (1989). *The color line and the quality of life in America*. Oxford University Press.
- Feracho, L. (2010). Hip hop and global politics in Caribbean music: Debates in transnationalism and resistance in Caribbean hip hop. In D. P. Alridge, J. B. Stewart, & V. P. Franklin (Eds.), *Message in the music: Hip hop, history, and pedagogy* (pp. 239–260). Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History.
- Ford-Smith, H. (1991). Women and the Garvey Movement in Jamaica. In R. Lewis & P. Bryant (Eds.), *Garvey: His work and impact* (pp. 73–86). Third World Press.
- Franklin, J. H. (1970). Public welfare in the South during the Reconstruction Era, 1865–80. *Social Service Review*, 44(4), 379–392. <https://doi.org/10.1086/642601>
- Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Herder and Herder.
- Garvey, A. J. (Ed.) (1969). *Philosophy and opinions of Marcus Garvey (Vols I and II)*. Charles Scribner’s Sons.
- Girvin, N. P. (1991). The political economy of race in the Americas: The historical context of Garveyism. In R. Lewis & P. Bryant (Eds.), *Garvey: His work and impact* (pp. 11–22). Third World Press.
- Grant, O. B. (2003). Social justice versus social equality: The capitalistic jurisprudence of Marcus Garvey. *Journal of Black Studies*, 33(4), 490–498. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934702250031>

- Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission. (2006). *Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission report: Executive summary*.
http://www.greensborotrc.org/exec_summary.pdf/
- Gutierrez, L. M. (1990). Working with women of color: An empowerment perspective. *Social Work*, 35(2), 149–153. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/35.2.149>
- Hamilton, B. (1991). Marcus Garvey and cultural development in Jamaica: A preliminary survey. In R. Lewis & P. Bryant (Eds.), *Garvey: His work and impact* (pp. 87–112). Third World Press.
- Harris, A. L. (2022). Black protest as public theology: Considering Bourdieu's *habitus* theory with a comparative analysis of protest approaches in the Civil Rights Movement and the hip-hop generation. *International Journal of Public Theology*, 16(4), 422–446.
<https://doi.org/10.1163/15697320-20220059>
- Harty, J. S. (2020). *Black contributions to mutual aid, social welfare, and social work history: Supplementary reading guide*. University of Chicago.
https://www.prof2prof.com/system/files/resources_files/Harty-BlackSocialWork-v2-20201122.pdf
- Harvey, A. R. (1994). A Black community development model: The Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League 1917–1940. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, 21(1), 113–124. <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.2112>
- Hill, R. A. (1983). *The Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers Vol. I-X*. University of California Press.
- Hofstadter, R. (1944). *Social Darwinism in American thought*. Beacon Press.
- Hylton, P. (1975). The politics of Caribbean music. *The Black Scholar*, 7(1), 23–29.
- Jones, D. R. (2021). 'The League will not ignore the cry of the Negro race for justice': Marcus Garvey, the League of Nations and South-West Africa. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 48(1), 103–117. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2022.2018828>
- Jordan, J. S. (1975). *Beyond contribution: Marcus Garvey as the subject of a case study approach to understanding Afro-American participation in American history and culture*. PhD Dissertation, Columbia University.
- Lewis, R. (1988). *Marcus Garvey: Anti-colonial champion*. Africa World Press.

Lewis, R. (2011). Marcus Garvey: The remapping of Africa and its diaspora. *Critical Arts: A South-North Journal of Cultural & Media Studies*, 25(4), 473–483.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2011.639956>

Liberty Hall: The Universal Negro Improvement Association in Cleveland. (n.d.). *UNIA parade in Harlem* [Photograph]. Cleveland Historical.

<https://clevelandhistorical.org/files/show/10004>

Martin, T. (1991). Women in the Garvey movement. In R. Lewis & P. Bryant (Eds.), *Garvey: His work and impact* (pp. 67–72). Third World Press.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs Sri Lanka. (2011). *Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation*. <https://peace-srilanka.org/images/publications/LLRC-Report-in-Sri-lanka.pdf>

Moran, R. F. (2022). The pocketbook next time: From civil rights to market power in the Latinx community. *American University Law Review*, 71(2), 579–647.

<https://scholarship.law.tamu.edu/facscholar/1900>

NAACP. (n.d). *History of lynching in America*. <https://naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/history-lynching-america>

National Truth Commission Brazil. (2014). Conheça e acesse o relatório final da CNV [Get to know and access the CNV final report]. <http://cnv.memoriasreveladas.gov.br/index.php/outros-destaques/574-conheca-e-acesse-o-relatorio-final-da-cnv>

Olusanya, G. O. (1994). Garvey and Nigeria. In R. Lewis & M. Warner-Lewis (Eds.), *Garvey, Africa, Europe, the Americas* (pp. 121–134). Africa World Press.

Opeyemi, B. N., & Johnson, A. A. (2024). Nonviolent protest in Africa: Echoes and lessons from Fela Anikulapo Kuti. *Ramon Llull Journal of Applied Ethics*, 15, 63–90.

<https://doi.org/10.60940/rljaev1n15Id424041>

Page, M. E. (2022). A century of Black Nationalism in Malawi: Echoes of Marcus Garvey, 1914–2020. *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 55(1), 115–130.

Parkinson, J. (2015, April 1). *Why is Cecil Rhodes such a controversial figure?* BBC News Magazine. <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-32131829>

Perlman, H. H. (1959). *Social casework: A problem-solving process*. Chicago University Press.

Philp, G. (2017, February 14). *Marcus Garvey and President Obama's missed opportunity*. GlobalVoices. <https://globalvoices.org/2017/02/14/marcus-garvey-and-president-obamas-missed-opportunity/>

Reed, B. (2025, January 26). *Inside the 100-year fight to get a Black revolutionary pardoned*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2025/jan/26/marcus-garvey-pardon-campaign>

Simon, B. L. (1990). Rethinking empowerment. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, 1(1), 27–39. https://doi.org/10.1300/J059v01n01_04

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and Reference Division, The New York Public Library. (1920). *Negro World*, vol. 8 no. 24, front page [Photograph]. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/a4fcc980-c60d-012f-b16c-58d385a7bc34>

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, The New York Public Library. (1941). *Marcus Garvey, eminent scholar* [Photograph]. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/a4fcc980-c60d-012f-b16c-58d385a7bc34>

Simon, B. L. (1994). *The empowerment tradition empowering the powerless*. Columbia University Press.

Solomon, B. B. (1976). *Black empowerment: Social work in oppressed communities*. Columbia University Press.

Spear, A. (1971). The origins of the urban ghetto, 1870–1915. In N. I. Higgins, M. Kilson, & D. M. Fox (Eds.), *Key issues in the Afro-American experience*. Harcourt Brace Jovanich.

Stein, J. (1991). The ideology and practice of Garveyism. In R. Lewis & P. Bryant (Eds.), *Garvey: His work and impact* (pp. 199–214). Third World Press.

Swan, Q. J. (2010). Bermuda looks to the east: Marcus Garvey, the UNIA, and Bermuda, 1920–1931. *Wadabagei: A Journal of The Caribbean & its Diasporas*, 13(1), 29–61.

Tanis, F., Brown, S., Wagner, W. C., Tesfay, N., Tomlinson, Y., & Middleton, T. (2017). *When truth is justice and not enough: Executive summary of the Black Women's Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report*. Black Women's Blueprint.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2016). *Honouring the truth, reconciling for the future: Summary of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*. https://nctr.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Executive_Summary_English_Web.pdf

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa (n.d.). Promotion of national unity and reconciliation act 34 of 1995. <http://www.justice.gov.za/legislation/acts/1995-034.pdf>

United States Institute of Peace. (2001). *Truth Commission: Peru 01*. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2001/07/truth-commission-peru-01>

United States Institute of Peace. (2002). *Truth Commission: Timor-Leste (East Timor)*.
<https://www.usip.org/publications/2002/02/truth-commission-timor-leste-east-timor>

United States Institute of Peace. (2004). *Truth Commission: Morocco*.
<https://www.usip.org/publications/2004/12/truth-commission-morocco>

United States Institute of Peace. (2009). *Truth Commission: Kenya*.
<https://www.usip.org/publications/2009/07/truth-commission-kenya>

Watson, R. (2014). Literacy as a style of life: Garveyism and gentlemen in colonial Ibadan. *African Studies*, 73(1), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00020184.2014.887750>

White, G. C. (1959). Social settlements and immigrant neighbors, 1886–1914. *Social Service Review*, 33(1), 55–66. <https://doi.org/10.1086/640616>

Wilson, W. J. (1980). *The declining significance of race: Blacks and changing American institutions*. The University of Chicago Press.

About the Author: Llewellyn J. Cornelius, PhD, LCSW is Donald L. Hollowell Distinguished Professor and Director, Center for Social Justice, Human and Civil Rights, School of Social Work, University of Georgia, Athens, GA (lcornel@uga.edu).

Funding Needs in Public Schools: Social Workers Advocating for Ethical Decision-Making

Jaelyn Childs and Christopher Robinson

Abstract: Sustainable funding plays a pivotal role in the effectiveness and longevity of educational systems, with particular emphasis on public schools. This article explores the concerted efforts of mental health professionals, dedicated educators, community leaders, and diverse advocates who are working tirelessly to drive meaningful improvements within the public school system. As recent legislative changes and regulatory measures have led to significant reductions in funding, it is increasingly vital to prioritize the stability and future of children enrolled in these schools. Ensuring that every child has access to a robust and supportive education is essential for their development and well-being.

Keywords: advocacy, necessity, ethics, equity, funding, resources, sustainability

Introduction

At the time of writing this article, I (Childs) am currently a junior majoring in social work with a minor in psychology. Throughout my courses, it has become abundantly clear that one of my roles as a mental health professional is to advocate for and speak on behalf of individuals who may not be able to represent themselves. It is essential to treat all people with respect and dignity, regardless of their background. Advocacy is a crucial aspect of social work, which includes ensuring that individuals have access to the resources they need.

As children progress through the rapid stages of growth and development, we recognize that they require adequate funding for school lunches, educational resources, books, and fair wages for teachers to ensure a reliable and sustainable education system. These resources are essential not only for children to stay academically afloat but also to enjoy their school experience.

I aspire to work at both the micro and mezzo levels of social work, and I plan to dedicate a considerable portion of my career to working within the public school system, where my services are most needed. Given the ongoing political challenges, such as budget cuts and program shortages, we find it especially important to advocate for public schools in low-income areas to receive the proper resources. This includes ensuring that students have access to clean, up-to-date textbooks, modern technological tools that align with today's digital landscape, and extracurricular activities that promote healthy development.

Collectively, Dr. Robinson and I view extracurricular programs—both inside and outside of schools—as vital for reinforcing positive and productive activities that support children's academic and personal growth. These programs should include funding for after-school tutors, recreational centers, sports equipment, and the establishment of school sports teams. Additionally, we believe funding should be allocated to vocational training programs where various trade professionals, such as electricians, plumbers, cosmetologists, and dental technicians, can educate students about different career opportunities.

We passionately believe that advocating for children in public schools is crucial. They deserve all the necessary resources to succeed and thrive in life, and it is our responsibility to ensure that these needs are met.

Advocacy and Ethical Decision-Making in Public Schools

Advocacy and ethical decision-making are crucial for all mental health professionals and clinicians. These principles ensure that clients receive the necessary resources and support to live comfortably. From my perspective, the work of mental health professionals is grounded in ethics and advocacy, regardless of their specific occupation or setting.

We understand that funding in the school system is crucial for providing students with the necessary tools to succeed and actively engage in the learning process. This is particularly significant in public schools located in underprivileged areas, where funding disparities often reflect systemic inequalities. Public schools in high-income areas receive more funding and offer numerous programs that promote social, physical, and cognitive development. These programs make schools more engaging and beneficial for students in wealthier neighborhoods. In contrast, I have observed that children in low-income areas often lack access to new books, after-school programs, and recreational activities due to inadequate funding (Jones et al., 2020). Advocacy and ethical decision-making are crucial to ensuring that resources are distributed equitably, enabling all students, regardless of their socioeconomic background, to have the opportunities they need to thrive.

Emerging policies have prompted me to see the need for mental health professionals to advocate for ethical decision-making in politics, particularly concerning school funding. Together we see that adequate funding ensures that schools can employ qualified teachers, social workers, and other essential professionals. Ethical policymakers and advocates who prioritize the well-being of students strive to secure equal and equitable educational rights (Cruz et al., 2022). However, we have noticed that political debates often influence funding decisions, leading to disparities between public and charter schools. We both find this unfair and unethical because all schools should have the financial stability and resources necessary for students to succeed. When political agendas dictate funding allocations, we believe that social workers and ethical policymakers must take the lead to ensure that student needs remain the top priority.

To me, policies have the power to either contribute to or dismantle systemic oppression. In the school system, we see that funding plays a critical role in shaping students' futures. Insufficient funding limits opportunities for social mobility, and I worry that children who lack the necessary educational resources may develop negative perceptions of school, discouraging them from pursuing higher education or trade school. Without access to these pathways, they may struggle to secure stable careers, perpetuating cycles of poverty and oppression (Karna et al., 2025). We believe that advocating for equitable school funding in politically charged environments can help create economic opportunities and strengthen the future workforce. In my view, education is the foundation for upward mobility in both socioeconomic and social status.

Furthermore, advocacy and ethical decision-making ensure that policies are implemented with transparency and in the best interests of students and the communities they serve. Together we feel decisions should be guided by data, student needs, and community input rather than political agendas. In the public school system, I view advocacy and ethical decision-making as vital tools for upholding student rights, addressing educational disparities, and promoting equity in politically charged landscapes.

How I Believe Mental Health Professionals Can Adapt and Apply Intervention

When funding has been eliminated, and social workers and other school-based professionals have advocated extensively to regain financial resources without success, it becomes crucial for us as professionals to develop creative and innovative ways to continue supporting children and young scholars.

One way I would adapt is by identifying organizations willing to collaborate with nonprofits, mental health clinics, and universities to provide free or low-cost services. This ensures that students continue receiving adequate support from multiple sources. I also see a crucial role for social workers in writing grants and otherwise requesting funding for specific needs within a school or district (Richter et al., 2022).

Additionally, I would support mental health professionals in training teachers and aides on trauma-informed care and basic mental health concepts. This allows educators to recognize and address maladaptive behaviors in students promptly and effectively. Early intervention is the best form of intervention, as it addresses issues before they escalate into more significant problems.

I believe that support groups can also be implemented to provide students with a platform to express their concerns about funding cuts in the school system. I view community engagement as a vital tool for advocating for the financial resources that public schools require (Heinrich et al., 2023). Encouraging parents, students, and school professionals to participate in petitions, town hall meetings, and school board meetings can be a powerful way to push for equitable funding.

Fundraising, in my view, can serve as an additional means of addressing budget shortfalls in public and charter schools, enabling the community to contribute financially toward enhancing the educational environment. When funding is cut, it is vital to allocate the remaining budget efficiently by prioritizing teacher salaries, mental health professionals' wages, and essential student resources. These may include heating and air conditioning, a sanitary learning environment, running water, alternative meal options, sustainable textbooks, and other necessary learning tools.

Both of us understand that addressing funding cuts in the school system requires a multifaceted approach involving extensive advocacy, alternative funding strategies, and efficient budgeting measures.

Conflict Theory and Critical Race Theory

The Conflict Theory, derived from Karl Marx (1867/1976), helps me understand the scarcity of resources and how power dynamics play a crucial role in the competition between different socioeconomic groups. This theory highlights social inequalities, particularly in the need for funding within public schools, which I see as a pressing social issue. The lack of necessary resources affects children's ability to learn and thrive within the educational system.

Conflict Theory provides me with a framework for understanding the reinforcement of socioeconomic inequalities. In wealthier neighborhoods and communities, residents have more political influence and pay higher taxes, which translates into better-funded schools. These schools benefit from numerous educational and fundamental programs, updated textbooks, advanced technology, nutritious lunches, and a diverse range of staff members, including multiple social workers, teachers, aides, and specialists who support students' well-being.

In contrast, we have observed that schools in low-income areas often have limited or insufficient resources, perpetuating a cycle in which underprivileged, underfunded students struggle to compete for opportunities such as employment, higher education, and homeownership. We also understand that social mobility is another critical aspect of Conflict Theory, as education plays a key role in improving one's socioeconomic status. However, public schools in low-income areas often have outdated materials and fewer resources, making it difficult for students to achieve the same level of success as their wealthier peers.

Another relevant perspective I have explored is Critical Race Theory (CRT; Crenshaw, 1991), which examines how systemic racism is embedded in policies and institutions. CRT helps social workers understand the disparities present in public school systems, where schools in affluent communities benefit from higher tax revenues, while schools serving Black and Brown students often lack the necessary resources for quality education.

We recognize that historically, racist policies such as redlining and segregation have contributed to the underfunding of schools, placing Black and Brown students at a disadvantage due to inadequate educational resources. In today's political climate, I see that privatization has further exacerbated these disparities. Many politicians advocate for school choice, diverting resources away from already underfunded public schools disproportionately affecting marginalized communities.

CRT also addresses the criminalization of Black and Brown youth in public schools. We both have noticed that a shortage of mental health providers in underfunded schools limits students' access to counselors who could help them process their emotions and develop healthier coping mechanisms. Instead, many schools prioritize funding for police officers, reinforcing harmful stereotypes that label Black and Brown students as dangerous, irrational, or violent.

This is connected to Charles Horton Cooley's (1902) Looking-Glass Self Theory, which suggests that people shape their self-perception based on how they believe others perceive them.

When children grow up in a school system where they are treated as threats from an early age, it reinforces negative self-perceptions and contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline. Misallocated educational funding further perpetuates this cycle, as resources are not distributed in a way that prioritizes student success and well-being.

As social workers, we view Critical Race Theory as a viable framework for understanding how historical racism continues to shape today's social inequalities. However, I have also noticed that some politicians argue that race should not be considered in policy decisions, dismissing the historical factors that have contributed to disparities in school funding. This perspective disproportionately affects marginalized communities and school systems with fewer resources and less economic assistance, further entrenching educational inequities.

How Mental Health Professionals Can Mitigate the Issue

I believe that mental health professionals can help mitigate the issue of underfunding in public schools by advocating for the rights of students and teachers, serving as a voice for those who cannot speak for themselves. I intend to engage at all levels of the legislative process—local, state, and federal—to contribute to planned changes that benefit everyone. Additionally, I plan to advocate for policies that address systemic racism and promote equity for underserved communities.

Another way we, as social workers, hope to address this issue is by collaborating with advocacy groups to raise awareness and garner the attention of policymakers. This ensures that the concerns of individuals in low-income communities and underfunded schools are heard and addressed. I find it both unethical and inhumane for public schools to lack essential resources and amenities.

As a social worker, I would like to participate in grant writing for causes I find meaningful. Writing grants is another form of advocacy that sheds light on critical issues and emphasizes the need for additional resources.

Furthermore, we believe prioritizing funding for teachers, aides, and mental health professionals in schools—rather than diverting funds to school policing—can help create a more supportive educational environment. Addressing the issue of school underfunding requires a multifaceted approach that considers historical context, institutionalized racism, and ethical decision-making.

The Driving Forces of Empowerment and Resilience

In my academic journey, from my first year to my current junior year, I have noticed that advocacy and resilience have been recurring themes in my life. These concepts are essential for uplifting individuals, families, and communities in times of turmoil. When schools lack sufficient funding, social workers, counselors, and other helping professionals must foster resilience and empower students to focus on their strengths rather than the challenges they face.

Mental health professionals, including Dr. Robinson and I, can achieve this in the future by organizing mentorship programs where teachers, aides, social workers, and counselors meet with students individually to provide guidance and connect them with available resources. Within these mentorships, we believe resilience and empowerment can be cultivated by equipping students with effective coping mechanisms to navigate life's difficulties.

I see that empowerment and resilience can be taught in many ways, particularly in the school setting. This includes critical thinking, financial literacy, and extracurricular activities, which can be supported through fundraising and donations from parents and community members. We also believe promoting diversity in the school system is a powerful way to foster resilience and empowerment, as representation matters. When students see role models who share their race, gender, or disability, they learn that their identity is not a barrier to success.

Fostering resilience, empowerment, and courage requires motivation and positive reinforcement. Giving students verbal affirmations and encouraging them to strive for excellence helps instill confidence and ambition. In the school setting, building resilience and empowerment requires emotional support, skill development, and strong community engagement through partnerships with various organizations.

References

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

<https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>

Cruz, R. A., Lee, J.-H., Aylward, A. G., & Kramarczuk Voulgarides, C. (2022). The effect of school funding on opportunity gaps for students with disabilities: Policy and context in a diverse urban district. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 33(1), 3–14.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1044207320970545>

Heinrich, C. J., Colomer, A., & Hieronimus, M. (2023). Minding the gap: Evidence, implementation, and funding gaps in mental health services delivery for school-aged children. *Child and Youth Services Review*, 150, Article 107023.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2023.107023>

Horton Cooley, C. (1902). *Human nature and the social order*. Charles Scribner's Sons.

Jones, T. M., Fleming, C., Williford, A., & Research and Evaluation Team of Seattle Public Schools. (2020). Racial equity in academic success: The role of school climate and social-emotional learning. *Child and Youth Services Review*, 119, Article 105623.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105623>

Karna, U., Lee, M. S., List, J. A., Simon, A., & Uchida, H. (2025). Measuring racial educational disparities over time amongst top achievers. *Nature*, 639, 976–984.
<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-024-08536-0>

Marx, K. (1976). *Capital: A critique of political economy* (Vol. 1). Penguin Books. (Original work published 1867)

Richter, A., Sjunnestrand, M., Romare Strandh, M., & Hasson, H. (2022). Implementing school-based mental health services: A scoping review of the literature summarizing the factors that affect implementation. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(6), Article 3489. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19063489>

About the Authors: Jaelyn Childs, BSW (she/her) is Graduate, Department of Social Work, Coppin State University, Baltimore, MD (jaelynchilds12@gmail.com); Christopher Robinson, EdD, LMSW (he/him) is Associate Professor, Department of Social Work, Coppin State University, Baltimore, MD (chrirobinson@coppin.edu).

Delivering Accessible Reproductive Care in a Post-*Dobbs* Era: A Social Worker's Narrative on Policy, Ethics, and Practice

Kaylisa Estes

Abstract: This narrative analysis examines the professional, ethical, and structural challenges of delivering reproductive healthcare in the United States following *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*. Drawing on clinical experience, policy analysis, public health literature, and RStudio analysis of the 2022–2023 National Survey of Family Growth, I explore how the post-*Dobbs* landscape has reshaped clinical practice and access to essential services. Grounded in social determinants of health and reproductive justice frameworks, my article examines contraceptive care deserts, digital misinformation, insurance barriers, and restrictive policies as interconnected threats to reproductive autonomy, with disproportionate consequences for marginalized populations. It identifies digital health literacy as an increasingly important determinant of reproductive health and calls for a coordinated response encompassing legislative advocacy, digital care navigation, interdisciplinary partnerships, and systems-level reform. Within, I urge social workers and other helping professionals to strengthen ethical, equitable, and accessible reproductive healthcare within an evolving policy landscape.

Keywords: contraceptive deserts, health, accessibility, digital, social determinants of health

Introduction

Upon entering the field of social work, I was excited to become a reproductive care therapist. I envisioned creating accessible resource networks, delivering evidence-based education, and offering clients transformative, thought-shifting therapeutic services. These hopes were grounded in a belief that reproductive care is a fundamental component of health equity and human dignity.

However, as I began my Master of Social Work (MSW) program in 2020, I had no idea of the storm that lay ahead. March 2020 marked the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. Social workers were called to the front lines—providing crisis interventions, therapy, resource navigation, and medical social work support. Mental health disparities deepened, domestic violence surged, and millions lost income due to mass layoffs. Social care crises unfolded across every industry and sector. And beneath this crisis, another was taking root: the unraveling of *Roe v. Wade* and the looming *Dobbs v. Jackson* decision, which would radically reshape reproductive care delivery in America.

This narrative explores how policy shifts following the *Dobbs* decision impacted my emerging identity as an aspiring reproductive care therapist and the broader field of social work. I examine themes of digital misinformation, policy implications, and practice restrictions. My goal is to demonstrate how these changes compromise both providers' ability to practice and patients' ability to access care.

Overturning Reproductive Legislation

On June 24, 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* overturned *Roe v. Wade*, shifting reproductive policy authority to individual states and reshaping the landscape of reproductive healthcare delivery (American Society for Reproductive Medicine, 2023). These decisions shifted reproductive rights to the states, restricted abortion access, and targeted reproductive pharmaceuticals such as birth control and mifepristone (American Society for Reproductive Medicine, 2023). As a scholar and aspiring practitioner, I was devastated. I wondered: How will these decisions impact me professionally? What new mental health disparities will arise? How will clients continue to access equitable care?

Digital Misinformation and Literacy

In the months that followed, a wave of medical mistrust and misinformation took root—particularly in digital spaces. Misinformation about social work and reproductive care spread rapidly across Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok. In my regular scrolling, I encountered misleading posts and sensationalized warnings: “Don’t tell your therapist about your abortion. They can report you and you can go to jail,” or “Remember how they sterilized us [African-Americans]? [Providers are] trying to do that again.” Others advised, “Stop talking about sex with your provider.” On TikTok, veiled videos offered homemade methods for self-managed abortions in areas where access had been restricted. In therapy sessions, my clients would often ask, “Is this true? Will I really be reported if I talk about this with you?” These questions were born out of fear—and fueled by misinformation. The consequences were not abstract; they were immediate and harmful.

Health information literacy has the propensity to impact long-term health outcomes among youth. Yet many youth lack adequate digital literacy skills (Taba et al., 2022). As digital literacy becomes a new determinant of health, interventions are needed to increase literacy rates in order to reduce ethical concerns associated with care. Experts fear that patients may be prosecuted for seeking care online, and such criminalization may negatively impact accessibility outcomes (Spector-Bagdady & Mello, 2022). These risks, combined with low levels of digital health literacy, may further exacerbate reproductive health disparities.

Demographic Impacts

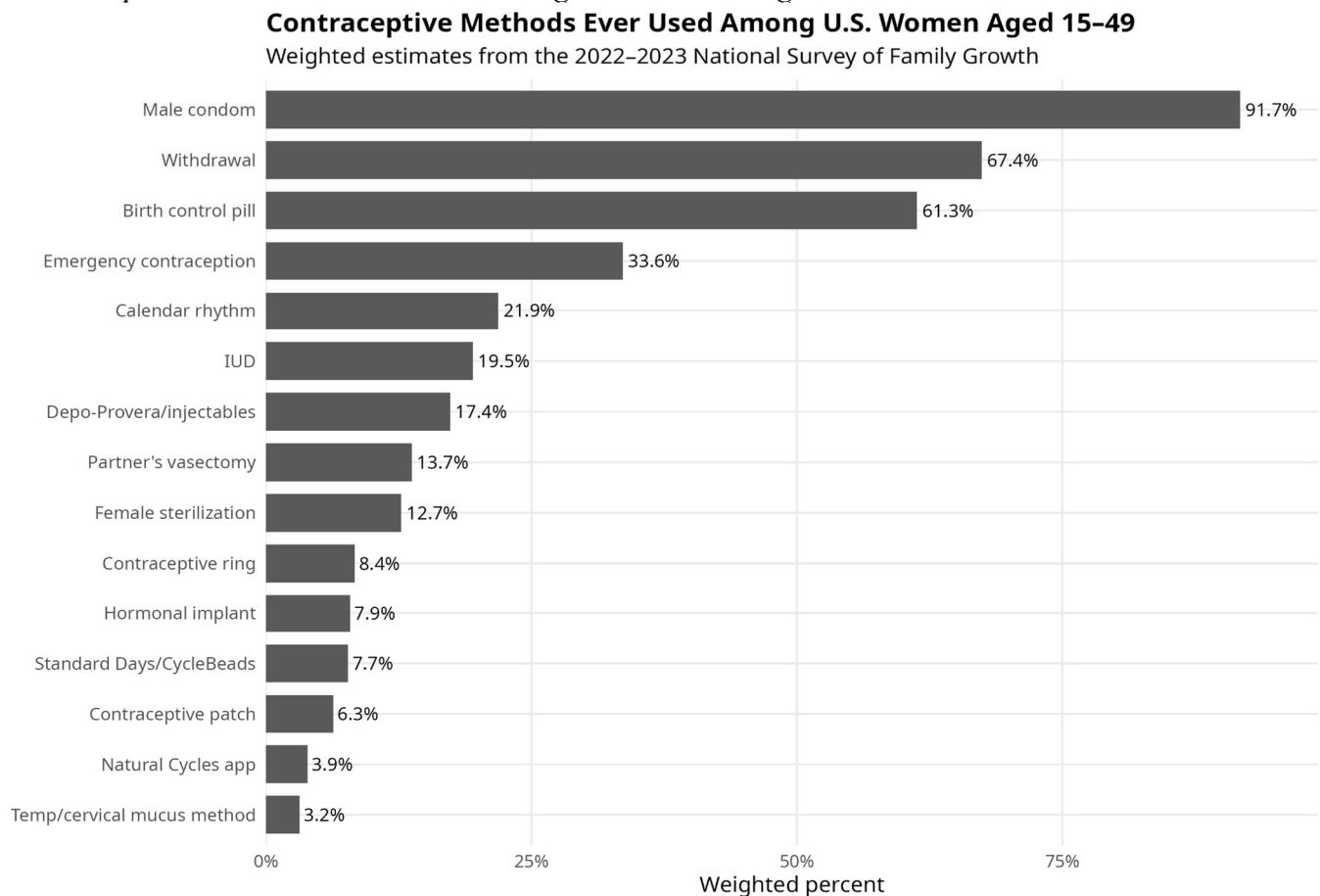
As a new clinician, I began to see these policy shifts reflected in demographic data. Vulnerable populations were becoming the most affected (Braveman et al., 2011). During this period, reproductive health concerns among adolescents intensified as access to contraception, sexual health services, and evidence-based reproductive education became increasingly contested across states (Doyle et al., 2024; Kaiser Family Foundation, 2024). Access to contraceptive products, reproductive care, and sex education diminished throughout these shifts.

To contextualize the importance of these shifts, it is important to assess national patterns of contraceptive engagement, and to examine the methods most commonly used among the populace within the United States. Contraceptive use in the United States spans a range of methods, including short-acting, long-acting, permanent, and emergency contraception. The most common methods used include condoms, oral contraceptive pills, female sterilizations, long-acting reversible contraceptives (LARCs), injectables, and emergency contraception (CDC, 2024). The most frequently reported methods among users include short-acting hormonal and barrier based contraceptive methods (American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, 2023; Kavanaugh & Jerman, 2018). Recently, there has been a rise in LARCs in the past decade due to improved accessibility, clinical recommendations, and rates of product effectiveness (American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, 2023; Kavanaugh & Jerman, 2018). To further contextualize national patterns of contraceptive use, Figure 1 displays weighted estimates of contraceptive methods ever used among U.S. women aged 15–49 using data from the 2022–2023 National Survey of Family Growth (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024). These patterns reflect not only individual contraceptive behavior but also underlying structural access dynamics shaped by geographic, policy, and provider availability constraints.

Nationally, short-acting methods such as condoms and oral contraceptives remain the most widely used, while long-acting reversible contraceptive use continues to rise but remains uneven across geographic regions. Following *Dobbs*, numerous reproductive health clinics experienced service reductions, closures, or operational challenges in states with restrictive reproductive policies. Many of these facilities, which provide the full range of available contraceptive care methods, were unable to withstand the legal and compliance burdens that were exacerbated by the pandemic. A cascade of other troubling statistics began to emerge within this public health crisis. Researchers have raised concerns regarding the potential public health consequences of reproductive restrictions, including disruptions in contraceptive access, delayed care-seeking, and widening health disparities. Post-pandemic studies have since called for targeted interventions in geospatial regions most affected by care restrictions and product inaccessibility.

Figure 1

Contraceptive Methods Ever Used Among U.S. Women Aged 15–49



Note. Figure created by the author using R. Estimates calculated using survey weights (WGT2022_2023) and complex sampling design variables.

Compliance and Regulation Concerns

As policy clashed with practice, I considered how legislation affects resource sharing, information dissemination, and ethical care. In states with broader reproductive rights, lawmakers faced potential prosecution from neighboring states for aiding patients who crossed state lines (Bennet, 2022). The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) grappled with regulatory issues around compact licensing. Cross-state restrictions, interstate shield laws, and telehealth regulations directly conflicted with social work ethics and healthcare standards. Many providers feared license revocation or legal consequences. This crisis has brought contraceptive care accessibility to the forefront of compliance and regulatory decision-making.

Notably, understanding contraceptive care deserts also requires a clear definition of what constitutes comprehensive reproductive health services. Comprehensive reproductive health services extend beyond pregnancy prevention and include preventive, diagnostic,

and treatment-based care across the reproductive life course. These services typically encompass contraceptive counseling and provision; pregnancy testing and options counseling; prenatal and postpartum care; sexually transmitted infection (STI) and HIV testing and treatment; cervical and breast cancer screening; infertility evaluation; abortion care; and reproductive health education and digital health navigation (American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, 2023; Killewald et al., 2024). Access to this full spectrum of services is increasingly shaped by geographic availability, insurance coverage, digital literacy, and evolving state policy environments, contributing to the emergence of contraceptive care deserts across the United States (Power to Decide, 2023; Kaiser Family Foundation, 2024).

In order to encompass the magnitude of this emerging crisis, the term *contraceptive desert* (or, for clarity in this paper, *contraceptive care desert*) was coined to describe regions with limited access to the full range of contraceptive services; Power to Decide (2023) estimated that 19 million women live in such areas. Due to clinic closures and funding cuts, I was made to adapt my case planning to include cross-state resources. As clients searched for answers, my reach for services and products became further and further away. In practice, the absence of comprehensive reproductive health services reflects not only geographic gaps but also structural inequities in policy, funding, and digital access that collectively shape reproductive autonomy and providers' ability to engage in service provision.

Accessibility

As of 2025, heat maps show significant concentrations of contraceptive care deserts in the U.S. Midwest, Northeast, and Southwest regions (Power to Decide, 2023). These regions often overlap with states that restrict comprehensive sex education (Guttmacher Institute, 2025). These policies impact both patients' access and providers' ability to ethically practice. Conversely, high-restriction states now face serious workforce shortages, with many medical trainees avoiding these regions due to training limitations and restrictions on reproductive healthcare education.

As a medical social worker, I witnessed the real-time consequences of reproductive health bans. Emergency rooms turned away patients experiencing miscarriages. Individuals with severe fetal complications were deprioritized due to restrictions on pregnancy terminations. Cases like that of Amber Nicole Thurman—who died after being denied post-abortive care—made national headlines (Surana, 2024). I felt ethically torn, balancing my professional responsibilities with legal constraints. Many of my colleagues worried about licensure risks simply for offering accurate information.

Call to Care

Now, as I continue in this profession, I call on fellow practitioners to think critically about how reproductive care is disseminated. We must push for policy reforms, dismantle access barriers, and build resilient networks of care. Evidence-based practice, timely

interventions, and sound data are vital. We must engage reproductive policy through the Micro, Mezzo, and Macro lenses of social work. By strategically integrating digital platforms and legislative advocacy, social workers are uniquely positioned to reshape reproductive care in this country. Recommendations for practitioners include strategic planning efforts, data acquisition, and legislative interventions. By doing so we can employ necessary skill sets that will drive interventions that will lead us towards positive outcomes within the practice.

Reproductive healthcare access functions as a structural determinant of health shaped by geography, policy and digital access. Social workers are uniquely skilled to intervene across micro, mezzo, and macro levels of care. Strategies that incorporate political advocacy, digital literacy initiatives, and interdisciplinary collaboration may strengthen reproductive healthcare access and improve population health outcomes. Advancing equitable public health interventions associated with reproduction include contraceptive care expansion and accessibility. Sustained policy engagement, data-driven intervention, and a commitment to protecting autonomy associated with the body and choice is imperative in restructuring a vital sector within the healthcare industry and social fabric of society.

References

- American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. (2025, November). *Access to contraception*. <https://www.acog.org/clinical/clinical-guidance/committee-statement/articles/2025/11/access-to-contraception>
- American Society for Reproductive Medicine. (2023, March 17). *Changes ahead: Abortion policy proposals affecting reproductive medicine*. https://www.asrm.org/globalassets/_asrm/advocacy-and-policy/dobbs/asrm-cpl-changes-ahead-mar-2023-1.pdf
- Braveman, P., Egerter, S., & Williams, D. R. (2011). The social determinants of health: Coming of age. *Annual Review of Public Health*, 32, 381–398. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-publhealth-031210-101218>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2024). *2022–2023 National Survey of Family Growth: Female respondent file: Public use*. National Center for Health Statistics. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg/nsfg-2022-2023-puf.htm#female>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2024, October 10). *Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance—United States, 2023: Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 73(Suppl. 4). <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/73/su/pdfs/su7304-H.pdf>
- Doyle, A. A., Liu, S. M., & Tyson, N. A. (2024). Adolescent reproductive health in a post-Dobbs landscape: A review. *Current Opinion in Obstetrics and Gynecology*, 36(6), 414–419. <https://doi.org/10.1097/GCO.0000000000000980>

Kaiser Family Foundation. (2024). *2024 women's health survey*. <https://www.kff.org/womens-health-policy/womens-health-survey/>

Kavanaugh, M. L., & Jerman, J. (2018). Contraceptive method use in the United States: Trends and characteristics between 2008, 2012 and 2014. *Contraception*, 97(1), 14–21. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.contraception.2017.10.003>

Killewald, P., Leith, W., Paxton, N., Rosenthal, I., Troxel, J., Wong, M., & Zief, S. (2024, September). *Family planning annual report: 2023 national summary*. Office of Population Affairs, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://opa.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/2025-08/2023-FPAR-national-summary.pdf>

Power to Decide. (2023). *Contraceptive deserts*. <https://powertodecide.org/what-we-do/contraceptive-deserts>

Spector-Bagdady, K., & Mello, M. M. (2022). Big data, reproductive health, and patient surveillance. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 386(8), 701–703. <https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMp2118701>

Surana, K. (2024, September 16). Abortion bans have delayed emergency medical care. In Georgia, experts say this mother's death was preventable. *ProPublica*. <https://www.propublica.org/article/georgia-abortion-ban-amber-thurman-death>

Taba, M., Allen, T. B., Caldwell, P. H. Y., Skinner, S. R., Kang, M., McCaffery, K., & Scott, K. M. (2022). Adolescents' self-efficacy and digital health literacy: A cross-sectional mixed methods study. *BMC Public Health*, 22, Article 1223. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-022-13599-7>

About the Author: Kaylisa Estes, MSW, LMSW (she/her) is Medical Social Worker, Emory University Hospital Midtown, and Doctoral Scholar, Morehouse School of Medicine, Atlanta, GA (kaylisa.estes@gmail.com, www.linkedin.com/in/kaylisaestes).

No Time to Rest: Purposeful Approaches to Systemic Racism and the Ongoing Struggle for Justice in Social Work Education

Annette Grape and Peggy Lane

Abstract: This reflective paper explores our experiences as two social work educators confronting systemic inequities intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, political unrest, and ongoing racial injustice. Drawing from our classroom experiences and student narratives, we examine how trauma, marginalization, and disillusionment manifest in student behavior and engagement. We critically analyze how traditional academic policies and Eurocentric curricula can unintentionally perpetuate harm, particularly for students from historically oppressed backgrounds. In response, we implemented intentional, equity-focused changes in pedagogy, course content, and classroom culture to foster psychological safety, empower student voice, and promote civic action. Against the backdrop of a second Trump presidency and increased policy threats to marginalized communities, we underscore the urgent need for educators to move beyond neutrality. This paper calls for a deliberate, justice-centered approach in social work education to support students navigating oppression while preparing them to lead meaningful, systemic change.

Keywords: social work pedagogy, social justice, self-reflection, psychological safety, classroom culture

Introduction

If we're really trying to use education as a force for positive change, then we have to be constantly shifting and challenging ourselves to see the things we do that exclude or marginalize or devalue others.

—David Wick (as cited in Bowman, 2020, para. 10)

Two social work professors reflect on their shared journey, beginning with the profound inequities their students faced during the COVID-19 pandemic and extending into the present marked by political polarization and growing threats to human dignity and rights. These evolving challenges continue to affect student well-being in complex ways. As educators in a master's-level social work program, we have wrestled with the meaning and responsibility of our roles—preparing students to become advocates and agents of justice while they themselves navigate deep injustices, personal fears, and uncertainty about their future in the profession. In this manuscript, we discuss how self-reflection led us to critically examine and alter not only the content of our courses to focus more squarely on systemic oppression, but also how we support our students. Creating safe spaces for students to express their impressions and experiences, allowing for reflection on their learning and growth, and providing them with opportunities to take action against injustice, are ways in which we have responded to student distress.

During COVID-19, our graduate social work students, like many across the U.S., faced significant inequities: limited access to technology, increased caregiving responsibilities, and exposure to the virus as essential workers unable to work remotely (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020).

Many felt overwhelmed, with some viewing withdrawal as their only option. This crisis deepened in our community with the police killing of Daniel Prude during a mental health crisis (Gold & Closson, 2021), exposing students to compounded trauma from both the pandemic and systemic violence.

These experiences revealed the urgent need for change. Students spoke of immense emotional strain, and we saw it reflected in the classroom through absences, late work, emotional outbursts, or discomfort with being called on. Rather than viewing these behaviors as violations of academic policy, we began to understand them as trauma responses (Hunter, 2022). Our policies around attendance, late submissions, and professionalism, though seemingly neutral, risked reinforcing the very inequities we sought to dismantle.

Now, amid a second Trump presidency and regressive federal policy changes harming people of color and marginalized communities, students face renewed fear and discouragement. Many feel powerless in the face of rising political hostility and assaults on rights and dignity. For students engaged in coursework centered on justice, human rights, and systemic oppression, this climate is not abstract—it's deeply personal and emotionally destabilizing.

As two White, middle-class, PhD-prepared faculty members, we committed to critically examining how our teaching practices and institutional policies either challenge or perpetuate inequity. We could not ignore our students' pain or the broader structures causing it. COVID-19 exposed deep-rooted disparities in higher education that are now widening under the current administration (Zafar et al., 2020). Contentious politics continue to harm mental health across the nation, with many reporting anxiety, hopelessness, and even suicidal ideation in response to ongoing political stress (Smith, 2022).

In this paper, we reflect on our responsibility as educators, not just to teach social justice, but to live it. We share how we've adapted our pedagogy and presence to support students navigating trauma, injustice, and disillusionment during these turbulent times.

Look Inside, Act Now, and Speak Up

When I (Grape) saw the call for papers on inequities, I was transported back to March of 2020. The college campus closed, and all classes were to be held online. I had just started my second career as a college professor and had been teaching two years in person—and now students were not going to return to the classroom after spring break, and neither was I. I had taken a few courses on online teaching methods as a PhD student a few years prior but felt a bit unprepared for the sudden switch. What I was really not prepared for was the stark contrast in student experience. Students of color, working students, and students who were parents had more barriers to attending class and completing assignments than many of their single, younger classmates living at home. I am sure this was always the case; I just hadn't noticed the systemic inequities in this way.

This heightened awareness sparked a shift in my approach. I began regularly reflecting on how systemic inequities showed up in my teaching and took steps to address them. I used to delay reaching out to students who missed class or assignments, assuming, “they’re adults and should be responsible.” I came to realize this mindset reflects psychological entitlement. Such assumptions create psychological danger for struggling students, perpetuate inequity, and discourage them from seeking help (Lederman, 2021).

Accepting this was difficult. I saw myself as an approachable faculty member, yet my implicit bias was creating an unsafe space—penalizing students without understanding their circumstances. I began reaching out immediately to ask what was getting in the way of attendance or assignments. Students shared stories of being called into work, taking family members to the ER, or needing mental health days. Many felt deep shame about falling behind, contradicting my assumptions about irresponsibility. I now check my thinking, listen first, and respond equitably based on each student’s situation.

Another area of reflection was how I taught human behavior theories to first-year students. Despite recognizing the major role of systemic forces in shaping lives, I spent more time on individual-level theories from our required textbook and less on critical theory, racism, and structural oppression. Social work education remains rooted in eurocentrism and White power (Anka, 2024; Debnam et al., 2023). While I can shift my own practices, I must also acknowledge how the curriculum itself marginalizes the centrality of race and inequity in students’ lived experiences.

It was up to me to make a change. I had left my previous professional work in a family service agency partly due to frustration with systemic barriers to clients being able to meet their basic needs and function effectively. Now I had an opportunity to take that frustration and channel it into what I knew to be the reality of my students’ experiences, their clients’ experiences and the focus of social work practice. During this exploration, I found inspiration in an article by Zuckerman et al. (2022) relating their experiences focusing coursework on the influence of racism and power on the human condition. I started by adding material on racism, colorism, and critical theory into class sessions and developed a new assignment that had students critically examine and reflect on the ways in which these societal structures influenced daily lives. This was a beginning.

With the Fall 2024 semester came lots of uncertainty about who would win the presidential election. With the new presidency, student concerns centered around doubt in the political system and the ability for citizens to make a difference. It became clear that students needed an opportunity to take action against the power elite, rather than focus on their own fears and helplessness. I designed an assignment for students to participate in a social action event locally and write a reflective essay on their experience in the hope that they would experience their power as citizens.

Many students were initially hesitant, either due to lack of experience with social action or doubts about making an impact. They participated in events such as police accountability board

meetings, protests against immigration policies, meal deliveries to homeless encampments, and calls to legislators opposing pending bills. In their reflections, students expressed surprise at how empowering these actions felt and recognized the influence individuals can have in driving change. Many reported a shift in their thinking and feeling. Feelings of helplessness were replaced by hope, gaining an appreciation for the slow process of change, and a newfound alignment with their role as advocates for change and giving voice to the voiceless.

Psychological Safety: Real or Perception

During a recent MSW group practice class, I (Lane) learned firsthand how vital psychological safety is to the learning process. As an instructor committed to cultural humility and inclusive practice, I entered the session ready to engage students in a discussion about group dynamics and mandated member participation. I did not expect the powerful lesson my students would teach me about the deeper layers of psychological safety—within our program, the scenarios I present, and other classroom experiences.

The discussion focused on how mandated group members might engage in dialogue, particularly when forced to participate. To prompt conversation, I presented a scenario in which a member expressed visible anger and resistance to being required to attend. I asked how a social worker might respond, intending to explore strategies for de-escalation and empathetic engagement. What followed completely shifted our conversation and deepened my understanding of the classroom environment.

A student of color raised their hand and, with a quiet but firm voice, said, “How do you handle a group member’s anger when you have this kind of stuff in your family history with family members who were mandated? And how do I handle my own anger, resentment, hostility, and psychological unsafety with another MSW instructor?” There was a pause. Then the student continued, “I’m speaking just for me, but this instructor shames us if we walk in five minutes late, shames us especially if we are not their favorite student, and belittles Black people’s questions, especially if we are seeking understanding or [questioning] how hard white people work to make us Black people feel like we belong.”

I was stunned.

In that moment, the theoretical became deeply personal. Our program prides itself on promoting cultural humility and inclusion, but a student openly acknowledged that they felt unsafe, unseen, and undervalued within our learning community. More importantly, they had the courage to speak up. As the room absorbed their words, other students began to voice similar concerns. A few shared experiences of being silenced, dismissed, or treated unfairly. Only one white student spoke up, noting that they, too, felt like an outsider, pointing to being neurodivergent and not fitting into the instructor’s “apparent mold of favorite.”

Psychological safety can be defined as the belief that you can speak up, make mistakes, and express your authentic thoughts without fear of being punished or humiliated (Smith, 2022).

This moment illustrated how essential safety is in a social work classroom. It is one thing to teach about group dynamics and another to live through the raw, unfiltered impact of a psychologically unsafe environment. My students were not just discussing group management within trauma theory; they were living it.

This experience forced me to recognize the gap between our stated values as a program and the lived realities of some of our students. I was faced with my Whiteness and the perceptions I must project being a white, educated, middle-aged female. That student's bravery opened a space for real dialogue but also exposed pain and disillusionment that had gone unacknowledged. The classroom became, if only briefly, a microcosm of both harm and healing. It showed me that psychological safety is not just a nice-to-have but the foundation upon which all meaningful learning rests.

For students from marginalized backgrounds, the classroom can replicate the very dynamics of power, exclusion, and oppression that we, as social workers, are trained to challenge. When students feel that their questions are belittled or their experiences dismissed, the message they receive is incongruent with their welcome into an advertised diverse MSW program. Still, in its place, they are wrestling with the fact that this space may not be for them. And yet, when psychological safety is present, students can bring their full selves into the learning process. They can question, reflect, disagree, and grow.

Reflecting on this experience, I realize how essential it is for instructors to create environments where students feel truly safe sharing their truths. This means listening without defensiveness, responding with empathy, and being willing to confront our own biases and blind spots. It also means creating accountability within faculty ranks and ensuring that no student is made to feel like "the other."

The student who spoke up reminded me that psychological safety is not passive; it must be actively cultivated. It requires trust, consistency, and a willingness to be uncomfortable. Their vulnerability transformed our classroom that day. It prompted real conversations, not only about group practice but about the kind of learning environment we all deserve.

I am grateful for the humbling experience, and I carry it forward as both a lesson and a call to action. Psychological safety must be more than a concept we teach—it must be a commitment we live. Only then can we truly model the values of social work and honor the diverse voices of all our students.

Conclusion

As social work educators, our journey through the COVID-19 pandemic and into an era marked by political upheaval has deepened our understanding of the moral and professional responsibilities we carry. The initial disruptions caused by the pandemic exposed longstanding inequities, limited access to technology, increased caregiving burdens, and heightened risks for essential workers, all of which disproportionately affected our students, particularly those from

marginalized backgrounds. These challenges have not subsided; rather, they have intensified within a current political climate defined by divisiveness, growing authoritarian rhetoric, and regressive policy shifts that threaten the rights and well-being of historically oppressed populations.

The return of Donald Trump to the presidency, along with sweeping federal policy changes, has once again placed vulnerable groups at risk and left many of our students feeling disempowered, afraid, and uncertain about their future roles in a profession grounded in justice and advocacy. These sociopolitical realities seep into our classrooms, often manifesting as trauma responses, withdrawal, anger, apathy, or resistance, that are too often misunderstood as disengagement or lack of professionalism. By reframing our understanding of student behavior through a trauma-informed, equity-focused lens, we have begun to create learning spaces that are safer, more responsive, and more attuned to the lived realities of our students.

This paper has detailed our efforts to rethink not only what we teach but how we teach. We critically evaluated curricular content rooted in eurocentrism, adapted assignments to foster reflection and action, and worked intentionally to create psychologically safe classrooms where all students, especially those who have been historically marginalized can speak, learn, and grow without fear of harm, retribution, or dismissal. When students see themselves reflected in the curriculum and experience empathy in the classroom, their sense of agency is restored.

In times of political instability and social regression, social work education must resist neutrality. We must model resistance, cultivate resilience, and equip our students to face injustice with critical analysis and collective action. The call to look inward, act now, and speak up has never been more urgent. Our students deserve more than a degree—they deserve an education that embodies the core values of our profession and prepares them to lead change in an increasingly inequitable world.

References

- Anka, A. (2024). Using the concept of epistemic injustice and cultural humility for understanding why and how social work curricular might be decolonized. *Social Work Education*, 43(9), 2880–2896. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2023.2299245>
- Bowman, K. D. (2020, August 4). *Strategies for countering unconscious bias in the classroom: How international educators can recognize unconscious bias and take steps to address it*. NAFSA. <https://www.nafsa.org/ie-magazine/2020/8/4/strategies-countering-unconscious-bias-classroom>
- Debnam, K. J., Henderson Smith, L., Aguayo, D., Reinke, W. M., & Herman, C. K. (2023). Nominated exemplar teacher perceptions of culturally responsive practices in the classroom. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 125, Article 104062. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2023.104062>

Gold, M., & Closson, T. (2021, April 16). What we know about Daniel Prude's case and death. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/article/what-happened-daniel-prude.html>

Goldrick-Rab, S., Coca, V., Kienzl, G., Welton, C. R., Dahl, S., & Magnelia, S. (2020). *#Realcollege during the pandemic: New evidence on basic needs insecurity and student well-being*. The Hope Center.

Hunter, J. J. (2022). Clinician's voice: Trauma-informed practices in higher education. *New Directions for Student Services*, 2022(177), 27–38. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.20412>

Lederman, D. (2021, September 22). *Academic minute: How entitlement explains inequality* [Audio]. Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2021/09/22/academic-minute-how-entitlement-explains-inequality>

Smith, K. B. (2022). Politics is making us sick: The negative impact of political engagement on public health during the Trump administration. *PLOS One*, 17(1), Article e0262022. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0262022>

Zafar, B., French, J., Araya, P. U., & Aucejo, E. (2020, August 9). *COVID-19 is widening inequality in higher education*. Centre for Economic Policy Research. <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/covid-19-widening-inequality-higher-education>

Zuckerman, R., Jenkins, M., Albritton, T., Taylor, E., & Lippold, M. (2022). Challenging anti-Black racism in HBSE: Using critical race theory to interrogate traditional developmental paradigms. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 42(2–3), 190–206. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08841233.2022.2069203>

About the Authors: Annette Grape, PhD, LCSW is Associate Professor, Department of Social Work, State University of New York Brockport, Brockport, NY (585-749-1584, angrape@brockport.edu); Margaret (Peggy) Lane, PhD, LCSW, LISW-S is Associate Professor, Department of Social Work, State University of New York Brockport, Brockport, NY (585-350-9049, mlane@brockport.edu).

Navigating Field Education in a Politically Evolved America

Candace L. Riddley, Angela R. Savage, Ahfiya J. Howard, Vené C. Baggett,
Brian E. Anderson, and Yarneecia D. Dyson

Abstract: Field education is widely recognized as the signature pedagogy of social work, connecting classroom learning to professional practice. At Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), field education is closely centered on social justice, advocacy, and equity. However, the current political climate has made field placements more difficult, especially because of laws and policy changes affecting LGBTQ individuals, immigrants, reproductive rights, and communities of color. These challenges can make it harder for students to find placements that match their values and may also create concerns about their safety. Because many HBCU students come from marginalized communities, these challenges can limit their opportunities to gain meaningful learning and advocacy experience. In response, social work programs are strengthening oversight, implementing safety protocols, and exploring innovative placement models. This reflective essay examines how politics shape field education at HBCUs and highlights the need for flexibility, innovation, and continued commitment to social work values.

Keywords: social work programs, political climate, historically Black colleges and universities, placement challenges, safety

Field education is widely recognized as the signature pedagogy (Shulman, 2005) in social work education, which practically connects the classroom or virtual learning experience to real-world practice. Traditionally, students enrolled in Council on Social Work Education (CSWE)-accredited programs learn professional skills that serve as a foundation for professional social work practice in micro, mezzo, and/or macro level settings. Many of these field education programs have been significantly impacted by the political climate in the United States as it relates to social workers serving vulnerable populations and their level of preparedness to serve these communities through an equitable and inclusive approach. Additionally, at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), many of their institutions' missions are aligned with a foundation driven by social justice, equality, advocacy, and inclusivity among other issues. Students at these institutions engaged in field education must often balance their interest in serving vulnerable and marginalized communities with potential political, institutional, and agency-related challenges associated with such placements. This reflective essay captures a glimpse of the political environment in field education at HBCUs and its impact on field placement opportunities, student supervision, and the student learning experience. Given the current shortage in the profession, there is also an inherent need to ensure the expansion of the social work workforce through the contribution of equity-centered social work graduates.

The HBCU Experience & Field Education

HBCUs have historically served as a safe space for Civil Rights leaders to meet and an educational setting that provided ongoing nurturing leadership, stressed the importance of building community, and promoted leadership and social responsibility (Jones, 2025). Similarly,

the National Association of Social Workers (2021) Code of Ethics requires social workers to act against injustices that affect vulnerable populations. To support this mandate, field education must take a bold stance in creating meaningful and impactful learning experiences. Most of the CSWE-accredited HBCU programs envision the required 400-hour field practicum for BSW programs and the 900-hour field practicum for MSW programs merely as an extension of their institution's mission statement, as students select field placement sites that serve marginalized and less fortunate individuals (CSWE, 2022). As some political decisions are made, it creates an escalation of fear for our students, particularly at agencies that may have a similar focus to address various populations. This experience puts tremendous pressure on social work programs, especially field education directors and staff, with regard to placing students at agencies and ensuring that they are safe.

Challenging Times in Placing Students in DEI-Related Settings

We have observed that HBCUs are facing incredibly challenging times in identifying, securing, and placing students at field placement sites that are aligned with their institutional missions, particularly those that exist in politically regressive states. We have found that social work programs in states that have passed or are considering legislation targeting LGBTQ individuals, immigrants, reproductive rights, and people of color have experienced a decrease in available agency placement opportunities that align with the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (CSWE, 2022). Due to these political decisions, many of these agencies have chosen to rid themselves of potential controversy, retaliation, or even loss of agency funding. This type of experience negatively impacts the number of field placement sites that are available and willing to serve as training opportunities, especially those students who have an interest in working in these types of settings. Reducing these professional development opportunities not only affects student learning but also deprives communities of valuable experiences that help build stronger connections among members.

Supported Student Supervision at Field Placements

As we place students in field agencies, safety is one of our primary ongoing concerns, especially in potentially hostile environments. Many field education programs have included more dialogue on student safety and effectively balancing student/client/agency roles to prevent potentially conflicting or aggravated engagement during field instructor training and student field placement orientation. Additionally, field instructors are informed that agencies, as well as institutions of higher learning, must provide additional support, include contingency plans for unsafe matters, and check in more regularly with students while onsite. Social work programs are encouraged to add another layer of oversight for students as they may engage in hostile conditions to ensure student well-being is also centered as they navigate the terrain to become professional social workers. After gaining experience in agency settings, the students are purposefully given time during the seminar classes to reflect on experiences at the field placement site, which allows them to engage in politically related matters at the field placement site. Reflecting on safety and real-world experiences within the classroom allows students to deepen their understanding of the profession and its influence on the political climate.

The Political Divide: Student Advocacy & Field Placement Experience

Upon entry, many students at HBCUs are introduced or reintroduced to the institution's mission and goals, with a strong emphasis on embracing their role as change agents. During the student's matriculation at these institutions, these symbolic forms of advocacy take place through the actions of the Student Government Association, department-level student associations, as a member of or in collaboration with a sorority or fraternity. Many social work students at HBCUs bring personal experiences of coming from marginalized communities or being directly or indirectly associated with a disproportionately represented group. In essence, social work students at HBCUs, in many cases, begin the field education experience passionately to effect change. Although students often bring personal experiences or have been exposed to some level of advocacy before or during attending college, certain agencies may have policies that restrict external advocacy efforts. These policies may prohibit support for specific client populations or discourage public engagement that could risk the agency's funding, reputation, or lead to potential retaliation. This type of experience may minimize the student's learning experience while at the field placement site. In support of the student, as an agenda item during the student orientation, the field education director or field education staff should inform students of potential limitations when selecting or being placed at a field placement site. In addition, considering today's political climate, it is paramount to purposefully incorporate time within the seminar course to allow students to reflect on challenges and identify ethical strategies consistent with the social work values without endangering their field placement experience.

Intercepting Politically Driven Placements with Innovative Field & Community Partnerships

Traditionally, HBCUs have always engaged in community partnerships. HBCU social work programs can continue this engagement in seeking and creating advocacy-related field education at the local, regional, national, and international levels. These potential placements can be a grassroots-related field education opportunity or an interdisciplinary collaboration, in-person or remote. Non-traditional placements that meet the practice behaviors associated with CSWE's core competencies help expand the reach of the profession by fostering diverse and inclusive pathways. Supporting multiple streams of learning strengthens the push for innovative and collaborative partnerships. Some field education programs have developed their own placement experience for students, which protects the student, minimizes political conflicts, and allows students educational opportunities to explore their interests.

Remaining Enthusiastic & Safely Engaging Students in this Political Climate

Field education, as the signature pedagogy, is the central part of the curriculum in social work education, as it connects theory and practice to real-world experiences for students. As HBCUs continue to promote their mission as evolving agents of social justice, social work programs will work to remain vigilant, courageous, innovative, and practically relevant to ensure that students are safe, exposed, and educated in effective field settings. Therefore, we believe that as social work educators, we must continue to be willing learners, adaptable, and always prepared to

confront political structures and issues that may threaten the safety and learning environment of our students and impact the expansion of the social work workforce.

References

Council on Social Work Education. (2022). *Educational policy and accreditation standards*. [https://www.cswe.org/getmedia/bb5d8afe-7680-42dc-a332-a6e6103f4998/2022-Educational-Policy-and-Accreditation-Standards-\(EPAS\).pdf](https://www.cswe.org/getmedia/bb5d8afe-7680-42dc-a332-a6e6103f4998/2022-Educational-Policy-and-Accreditation-Standards-(EPAS).pdf)

Jones, C. (2025, February 21). How HBCUs impacted the civil rights movement. *United Negro College Fund*. <https://uncf.org/the-latest/how-hbcus-impacted-the-civil-rights-movement>

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

Shulman, L. S. (2005). Signature pedagogies in the professions. *Daedalus*, 134(3), 52–59. <https://doi.org/10.1162/0011526054622015>

About the Authors: Candace L. Riddley, PhD, LCSW (she/her) is Assistant Professor and Interim BSW Program Chair, School of Social Work, Jackson State University, Jackson, MS (601-955-2709, candace.l.riddley@jsums.edu, <https://www.linkedin.com/in/drcandaceriddley>); Angela R. Savage, DSW, LMSW is Assistant Professor, School of Social Work, Jackson State University, Jackson, MS (601-979-8814, angela.r.savage@jsums.edu); Ahfiya J. Howard, PhD, LMSW (she/her) is Assistant Professor, School of Social Work, East Texas A&M University, Commerce, TX (ahfiya.howard@etamu.edu, 903-468-8100); Vené C. Baggett, MSW, LCSW (she/her) is Assistant Lecturer/Field Coordinator, Social Work, Texas A&M University - Central Texas, Killeen, TX (vene.c.baggett@gmail.com, <https://www.linkedin.com/in/vcbaggett>); Brian E. Anderson, PhD, LMSW is Professor, School of Social Work, Jackson State University, Jackson, MS (601-979-0509, brian.e.anderson@jsums.edu); Yarneccia D. Dyson, PhD, MSW is Dean and Professor, Maconda Brown O'Connor Endowed Dean's Chair, Graduate College of Social Work, University of Houston, Houston, TX (713-743-1051, [@uh_gcswdean](mailto:yddyson@central.uh.edu)).

Reclaiming Our Future from MAGA: Infrastructure and Self-Reliance in the Black Community

Eyitayo Onifade

Abstract: In this paper, I examine the historical and contemporary infrastructure challenges facing Black communities in the United States through a social work lens. I explore how systemic racism, policy shifts, and political volatility have shaped Black responses over the past century—from Pan-Africanism to civil rights and contemporary DEI efforts. I propose a strategic vision of self-reliance, collective empowerment, and transnational solidarity rooted in Afrocentric social work and anti-oppressive practice. My argument is that true empowerment must involve community ownership of institutions, long-term structural planning, and a commitment to systemic innovation that goes beyond symbolic inclusion or reform.

Keywords: Black empowerment, infrastructure, social work, anti-oppressive practice, transnational solidarity

When examining the last century of Black life in the United States through a developmental lens, we observe a series of strategic responses to persistent and often lethal White aggression that I call *omnicidal racism* (e.g., Jim Crow, mass incarceration, White identity extremism/MAGA, and prohibitions against diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives). This form of aggression aims not only to marginalize but to erase. These responses mirror the psychological patterns observed in survivors of codependent abusive relationships, who alternate between strategies of resistance, negotiation, and adaptation for survival (hooks, 2000).

The first major phase of response was marked by movements toward autonomy and escape from systemic oppression, most notably through Pan-Africanism. This approach was championed by Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which sought to unify people of African descent globally and promote economic independence, cultural pride, and political self-determination (Lewis, 1988).

A second phase emerged mid-century, focused on civil rights and legal protection through the mechanisms of the U.S. state. This included landmark victories such as *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, as well as the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Many of these gains were achieved through a combination of grassroots organizing and what legal scholar Derrick Bell later called *interest convergence* the notion that Black progress often aligns with the interests of White elites only when it serves their broader goals (Bell, 1980).

This legal and institutional strategy led to a partial dismantling of de facto apartheid and a reduction in de jure segregation. As a result, Black labor and spending power became more integrated into the mainstream U.S. economy through policies like Affirmative Action and, more recently, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. However, an iatrogenic effect (e.g., harm caused by the very interventions intended to help) was the weakening of Black-owned institutions, businesses, and schools. Dependence on White-controlled political and

corporate structures increased, often leaving Black communities vulnerable to political shifts and backlash (Anderson, 2007; Baldwin, 1963/2016).

As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. famously warned in one of his later interviews, “I fear I am integrating my people into a burning house” (King, as quoted in Belafonte, 2011). His words captured the paradox of legal integration without structural transformation: a move into shared spaces without shared power.

I do not view infrastructure development as a dead investment; especially not for Black communities in the United States. Nor do I believe we lack the capital, the talent, or the vision to fund our own advancement. The core issue is not capability; it’s coordination, value enforcement, and aligning collective efforts with outcomes that genuinely serve us.

Reframing Infrastructure through a Social Work Lens

In social work, we are trained to assess not only the presenting problems but also the systems producing them. Infrastructure must include more than roads and buildings; it must encompass cultural, institutional, and social systems needed for sustaining well-being. For Black communities, infrastructure includes financial capability networks, cooperative economics, culturally responsive mental health systems, political education, and accountability structures that reinforce collective agency and mitigate systemic harm (Bent-Goodley et al., 2017; Schiele, 2000).

These infrastructural components form the basis for structural competence; the ability to identify and intervene in upstream systems shaping outcomes (Metzl & Hansen, 2014). When these systems fail or are insufficiently developed, social workers confront the consequences daily. Inadequate support manifests as underfunded schools, culturally mismatched services, and transient programs that vanish once external funding ends, leaving communities worse off.

The necessity for social workers to participate actively in building robust, community-owned infrastructure is clear. Our profession's core principles: justice, empowerment, and social change, require proactive engagement beyond direct practice to systemic interventions. This includes advocating for and developing social policy that supports long-term investment in community infrastructure, expanding the role of social workers as planners and organizers, not just service providers.

Black Empowerment as Collective Practice

Empowerment within social work is often narrowly conceptualized as individual self-efficacy. However, for Black communities, empowerment must shift towards collective capacity-building. This collective process must be deeply anchored in linked fate, shared history, and community preservation (Gutierrez et al., 1998). Afrocentric social work prioritizes interconnectedness, cultural integrity, spiritual wholeness, and self-determination, providing a strong foundation for collective empowerment (Schiele, 1997).

Social work must challenge the assumption that mainstream services, even when culturally competent, are sufficient. Real empowerment requires communities to own and control institutions that deliver care, education, and social services. Community-led institutions like cooperative banks, mutual aid networks, housing collectives, and culturally grounded educational institutions exemplify tangible empowerment practices necessary for Black self-determination.

We must also address the need to democratize access to resources and tools required to participate fully in new economic ecosystems. For example, ensuring access to broadband, technical training, and data sovereignty are all critical components of modern-day empowerment. Social workers can act as facilitators and advocates to help communities secure these resources and retain control over their development trajectories.

In today's rapidly evolving economic environment marked by gig work, automation, and digital surveillance; traditional pathways to economic stability are eroding. Wealth accumulation increasingly depends on ownership and control over digital and physical infrastructures. Social workers must engage in strategies ensuring Black communities are neither excluded nor made dependent but are instead empowered stakeholders.

Revisiting the Civil Rights Legacy through a Structural Critique

Currently, we are navigating a significant political reset. While the Civil Rights Movement opened essential pathways, its inclusion model often perpetuated structural inequalities. Derrick Bell's (1992) notion of the permanence of racism highlights how systemic inequities remain embedded, even within ostensibly inclusive reforms. Despite many Black individuals experiencing upward mobility, structural disparities especially the racial wealth gap persisted and worsened over subsequent decades (Derenoncourt et al., 2022).

Social workers must critically examine this legacy. Civil rights advances often integrated Black professionals into predominantly White institutions without transforming the underlying power structures. Consequently, intra-racial divides deepened, reinforcing class disparities and undermining solidarity. Social work interventions today must rectify this by fostering institutional sovereignty, supporting Black communities in governing systems crucial to their well-being, such as education, healthcare, and finance (Robinson, 1983; Wright, 2003).

Furthermore, understanding the historical patterns of inclusion followed by exclusion helps us anticipate and resist cycles of tokenism. While civil rights opened many doors, social workers must ensure these doors do not swing shut when political will or economic convenience changes. A transformative approach requires embedding safeguards and redundancy in systems that guarantee long-term equity regardless of the shifting political winds.

Applying Anti-Oppressive and Decolonial Practice

Anti-oppressive social work requires more than acknowledging oppression it necessitates actively constructing alternative systems. In the post-MAGA era, with attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and the rise of overtly exclusionary policies, Black social workers must commit to systemic innovation rather than merely reforming broken systems. Decolonial approaches emphasize creating entirely new helping paradigms free from Eurocentric biases and pathological frameworks (Gray et al., 2008).

Concrete examples include developing sustainable pilot projects: Black-led schools, community-run health clinics, digital cooperatives, housing collectives, and civic forums resilient against political volatility. Philanthropy and public funding should no longer serve as long-term supports but as strategic, temporary accelerants. Funding must align strictly with community governance, transparency, and sustainability requirements.

We must also confront internalized oppression within our own ranks challenging the ways we may unconsciously replicate dominant norms in how we structure programs or evaluate success. A decolonial mindset challenges us to rethink not just what we build, but how we build it—and who benefits.

Long-Term Vision and Transnational Solidarity

Adopting a 100-year strategic horizon shifts our vision from short-term outcomes toward enduring systemic transformation. The ultimate goal is to elevate quality of life, minimize internal inequalities, and retain our most capable youth. Parallel systems reflecting Black cultural, economic, and political values must be fostered intentionally.

Transnational solidarity is critical. Meaningful institutional partnerships should bridge Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) with African institutions, community land trusts in the U.S. with agricultural cooperatives abroad, and digital entrepreneurship initiatives across the Black diaspora. Such alliances should transcend symbolism, actively redistributing knowledge, power, and resources within a global framework of mutual respect and collaboration (Ifatunji & Harnois, 2016).

Social work must move decisively toward these infrastructural alliances, ensuring ideological alignment around redistributive justice and collective self-determination. Building and maintaining such alliances requires commitment to cross-cultural dialogue, knowledge exchange, and the political will to prioritize Black global interests over competitive nationalism.

Final Reflections

Resistance to transformative change is inevitable, manifesting as opposition from those benefiting from existing disparities or through efforts to fragment communities by exploiting

differences. Yet social work equips us to anticipate resistance and create resilient institutions capable of weathering these challenges.

True transformation inherently disrupts the status quo. Infrastructure, in all its forms, is not a luxury for Black communities; it is an essential foundation for liberation and sustained self-determination. For Black America, reclaiming our infrastructure is reclaiming our future. The time for tentative reform is over; our task now is to build and protect systems worthy of the generations to come.

References

- Anderson, C. (2007). *PowerNomics: The national plan to empower Black America*. PowerNomics Corporation of America.
- Baldwin, J. (2016). *The fire next time*. Vintage International. (Original work published 1963)
- Belafonte, H. (2011). *My song: A memoir*. Knopf.
- Bell, D. A., Jr. (1980). *Brown v. Board of Education* and the interest-convergence dilemma. *Harvard Law Review*, 93(3), 518–533. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1340546>
- Bell, D. (1992). *Faces at the bottom of the well: The permanence of racism*. Basic Books.
- Bent-Goodley, T., Fairfax, C. N., & Carlton-LaNey, I. (2017). The significance of African-centered social work for social work practice. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 27(1-2), 1-6.
- Derenoncourt, E., Kim, C. H., Kuhn, M., & Schularick, M. (2022). Wealth of two nations: The U.S. racial wealth gap, 1860–2020 (NBER Working Paper No. w30101). *National Bureau of Economic Research*.
- Gray, M., Coates, J., & Yellow Bird, M. (Eds.). (2008). *Indigenous social work around the world: Towards culturally relevant education and practice*. Ashgate.
- Gutierrez, L., Parsons, R., & Cox, E. O. (1998). *Empowerment in social work practice: A sourcebook*. Brooks/Cole.
- hooks, b. (2000). *All about love: New visions*. William Morrow.
- Ifatunji, M., & Harnois, C. (2016). African-centered social work education: A conceptual review. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 26(4), 255–270. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2016.1273682>

Lewis, R. (1988). *Marcus Garvey: Anti-colonial champion*. Africa World Press.

Metzl, J. M., & Hansen, H. (2014). Structural competency: Theorizing a new medical engagement with stigma and inequality. *Social Science & Medicine*, 103, 126–133.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2013.06.032>

Robinson, C. J. (1983). *Black Marxism: The making of the Black radical tradition*. University of North Carolina Press.

Schiele, J. H. (1997). The contour and meaning of Afrocentric social work. *Journal of Black Studies*, 27(6), 800–819. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2784807>

Schiele, J. H. (2000). *Human services and the Afrocentric paradigm*. Routledge.

Wright, B. E. (2003). *Mentoring: The Black male perspective*. Black Classic Press.

About the Author: Eyitayo Onifade, PhD is Professor, Whitney M. Young, Jr. School of Social Work, Clark Atlanta University, Atlanta, GA (eonifade@cau.edu).