Reflections of Racial Consciousness in Social Work

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This article focuses on select reflections of a White social work student's thoughts on racism within a historical, societal, and systems context. Topics discussed include prejudice, privilege, and power differentials within the White as helper, Black in need dichotomy. Research and personal outlook are interwoven to conclude that as agents of change, White social workers hold a unique responsibility in working towards an anti-racist agenda and confronting their own racist ways of knowing.

To-day the ferment of his striving toward self-realization is to the strife of the White world like a wheel within a wheel: beyond the Veil are smaller but like problems of ideals, of leaders and the led, of serfdom, of poverty of order and subordination, and, through all, the Veil of Race. Few know of these problems, few who know notice them; and yet there they are, awaiting student, artist, and seer, - a field for somebody sometime to discover.

–W. E. B. DuBois

The acknowledgement and unlearning of racism are especially salient to White individuals working within the social work profession. Due to an unequal power structure that categorizes Whites as helpers and people of color as clients[1], Whites must be pro-actively cognizant of the way in which societal and interpersonal contexts affect the multiracial practitioner/client relationship. Borrowing terminology from Belenky, Blythe, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986), this article focuses on a racist way of knowing to describe the distinct way in which Whites in the United States have cultivated their own reality and conclusions regarding the intersection of race, power, and privilege. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that without a conscious understanding of one's own racist ways of knowing, White social workers are primed to disserve their clients of color through various forms of racism.

To embark on this conversation about race, I would first like to acknowledge the simplification of the Black/White dichotomy corroborated by this paper when race is, instead, a complex social construct. The following article is by no means designed to function as a review of social

work literature or the state of racism in America. Rather, it is a heart-mind journey (Seldon, 2000) – reflections of unlearning racism, the questions and challenges it has posed in personal experiences and the professional practice of social work.

A Question of Covert Repression

While working in the South Bronx during my first year field placement, I confronted a daily turmoil involving, of all things, hair. In an agency where I was most often the only blonde, blue-eyed individual, I experienced heightened sensitivity to a culturally induced skewed beauty standard[2] when male clients would express an allure towards my blond hair in front of their female companions. This experience, which occurred regularly with multiple clients, unleashed an inner dialogue and maelstrom within me. I became exceedingly alert to my own fears toward repressing clients and wondered: Is my hair color covertly repressive to a client of color? How does my Whiteness affect my practice? This internal argument was the catalyst for an intense and unremitting journey within my consciousness – a journey of reflection on racist identity and privilege.

Issues of race can be controversial and problematic to self-identity. To be labeled racist invokes defensive fears in all of us. As a White individual, I have come to acknowledge that I am aligned with the perceived class elite and the politically powerful which entitles me to a wealth of privileges regardless of my moral conviction or personal history (Steinhorn & Diggs-Brown, 2000). As McIntosh (1989) suggests, I was socialized to downplay my own racial issues and understand White people's way of thinking as normative, neutral, and ideal. Despite a liberal education that focused on the damaging ideology of hierarchy and oppression, without self-reflection and a personal confrontation of my own racist schemas, I only superficially considered myself part of a racist structure.

When we think of White supremacy, visions of Klansmen and skinheads may pervade our definition; we rarely think of ourselves as the vehicle for oppression. Seldon (2000), however, reminds us that "Prejudice + Power + Privilege = Racism" (p. 26). Because most of my peers are White, and most of our collective clients are people of color, I have become particularly interested in how race and social work intermingle. In 2000, Whites composed close to 70% of Social Work students enrolled in Master's level Social Work programs in the United States (Lennon, 2002). Thus the continuation of the White as helper, Black in need dichotomy is something I have had to critically examine to bring an anti-racist agenda into my practice.

McMahon and Allen-Mearnes (1992) define anti-racist social work as "helping people reflect on their situation so that they can understand the oppressive system they are in and working with them to change it" (p. 538). In contrast, I have chosen to tailor my own model of anti-racism

in a direction towards the self rather than the client. For me, anti-racism encompasses both pro-active critical examination and recognition of individual and institutional involvement in perpetuating racist structures. It also includes an analysis of the subtlety and complexities of racial dynamics in the historical, political, economic, social, and cultural realms of power structures. To be anti-racist is to move towards incorporating racial and social justice into all facets of personal and professional development.

Examining Whites In the Victim Role

In my opinion, the most interesting race-based conversation among social work students revolves around the fear of the walk from the subway station to their placements. I have been privy to thought processes in which students acknowledge and then minimize the racist undertones of their fears and proceed to externalize racism by suggesting their fears of criminality are statistically founded.

In fact, the criminalization of people of color highlights the legacy of slavery inherent within the criminal justice system[3]. To illustrate this point, we can turn to drug sentencing statistics: "Blacks make up 12% of the United States' population and constitute 13% of all monthly drug users… but represent 35% of those arrested for drug possession, 55% of those convicted of drug possession and 74% of those sentenced to prison for drug possession" (Butterfield, 1995, p.A8). Additionally, the media disproportionately focuses on crimes committed by Black men while the dangers people of color face are rarely highlighted (Glassner, 1999; Reiman, 2001).

In understanding how criminal injustice and skewed media portrayals exacerbate stereotypes about people of color, I am reminded that "a person is evaluated, either favorably or unfavorably, not because he does something, or even because he is something, but because others react to their perceptions of him as offensive or inoffensive" (Quinney, 1975, p. 67). To maintain a racist status quo, skewed perceptions supported by criminal injustice and media images fulfill and perpetuate the dominant culture's need to place themselves in the inculpable position of victim. Therefore, students' fears of walking through a neighborhood with the credence that one is in danger sanctions little need to critically examine negative schemas towards people of color and the poor. Focusing on the systematic, institutional structures responsible for the cause and maintenance of crime, poverty, and second class citizenship will make walking through an agency's neighborhood take on an entirely different meaning.

White Social Workers as Averse Racists

By nature of the liberal principles presented in the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 1999), social workers

present themselves as socially progressive, and it is against this philosophy to internalize a racist identity or embrace a racist thought pattern. By externalizing one's own racist lens, however, Whites fall into what Gaertner and Dovido (2000) identify as aversive racism. Aversive racists are described as those who "sympathize with the victims of past injustice; support public policies that, in principle, promote racial equality and ameliorate the consequences of racism; identify more generally with a liberal political agenda; regard themselves as non-prejudiced and nondiscriminatory; but, almost unavoidably, possess negative feelings and beliefs about Blacks" (Gaertner & Dovido, p. 289).

Furthermore, a study of White graduate students showed race-related guilt to be an evident manifestation when talking about Whiteness (Arminio, 2001). Arminio found that often, guilt was associated with efforts at indemnification; privilege was used to avoid recognizing racist patterns and as justification for not seeing oneself as part of the system. Research teaches us that by externalizing racist and negative thought patterns, fears are manifested in apprehension, discomfort, and uneasiness (Gaertner & Doivido, 2000). Considering the impact of racism on the White mentality, White social workers hold a unique responsibility for self-reflection and critical thinking about one's prejudices, privileges, and the implications of both. By the definition of our work, a great disservice is committed if we do not take a proactive stance towards combating externalized racism and confronting how covert fears present themselves in practice.

Venturing Beyond A One-Dimensional Reality

One of my most disturbing experiences as a social work student occurred during a first year required class, Human Behavior and the Social Environment in which the 1986 CBS documentary *The Vanishing Black Family: Crisis in Black America* (Wolff) was shown. The film showcased African-Americans living in Newark, NJ, depicting young men as irresponsible sex-crazed pimps and two generations of women as quintessential Welfare mothers.

A student interrupted this video and stated that she was offended with the content of the film. She labeled it "racist propaganda" and was unsure why the class was viewing it. This comment provoked other students to voice disappointment and anger toward the film's failure to address the root causes of poverty. I remember the professor, outwardly flustered, attempting to conclude the discourse by stating it was taking away from the film's message, and that we would understand its greater meaning if we continued to watch the entire movie.

The film's agenda was to document the disappearance of the Black nuclear family. However, the content did not acknowledge the destruction of the Black family as an essential component of American slavery (Marable, 2000). Without historical connections or context, reality is one-dimensional.

For social work education to function in a one-dimensional manner, which presents race-based material void of the historical and political contexts, our ability to be critical thinkers is injured.

Despite one student asking if we could stop the movie to continue the discussion, the class sat agitated while the professor, obviously bothered, fast-forwarded through the two-hour film to make up the time we had lost talking. While the professor did set aside the last twenty minutes of the following class, one week later, to discuss the film, I felt like we were silenced and frustrated from the previous experience. The discussion lacked the original passion and productivity that was generated by the experience of watching the film. One week later, this discussion seemed deflated and decontextualized. I sense that many students yearn to discuss context and impact, but without a catalyst or encouraging environment, conversations dealing honestly and frankly with race are not permitted to exist.

I am saddened that my experience of social work education has minimally challenged my understanding of power and inequality. It has demonstrated a general lack of energy in its dialogue, unequivocally ignoring and therefore supporting a White supremacist status quo[4]. If "a major objective in social work education is to impart knowledge that helps students engage in critical self-reflection about power and inequality" (Millstein, 1997, p. 491), then we must welcome the potential volatility of such discourse. White students unable to engage and gain proficiency in race-based dialogue within an academic environment will be less likely to initiate internal reflection or dialogue as professionals.

I sometimes listen to social work students' call for more diverse faculty and student body citing the predominantly White student composition, yet I rarely hear a request for anti-racism class or field assignments. While acknowledging the importance of diversity in thought within any healthy community, I must also highlight that the presence of diversity in itself is not sufficient to imply a lack of racism. Academic institutions, such as the Smith College School of Social Work, have challenged themselves to create and implement an anti-racism field assignment, requiring students to recognize racial dynamics within their field practice (Basham, Donner, & Everett, 2001). While this is an intriguing window into the psyche of social work education's response to the conception of an anti-racism field assignment, I challenge all institutions to continue to question how anti-racism assignments could fit into their curriculum, particularly through the full cooperation between faculty, students, and field instructors. If class or field assignments were designed to incorporate anti-racism in their agenda, what would they look like? How would the faculty and field advisors execute and evaluate them? How would the students receive and develop through them?

Call for Anti-Racism as a Critical Component of
Social Work Education

Social work academia as an institution has an obligation to demand reflective, in-depth materials regarding anti-racism as a baseline for students pursuing social work. For cultural competence standards to truly be addressed, existing social work literature must be critiqued for its thoroughness and ability to address concerns in an unveiled, shameless manner. Critically examining not only issues of race, but those of class, ethnicity, religion, sex, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and societal definitions of deviance should be what sets social work apart from other professions.

While the Code of Ethics of the NASW (1999) provides multiple principles for the creation and maintenance of a culturally competent practice, the existing social work literature geared toward the promotion of social work's specific responsibilities in unlearning racism, is at best, inconsistent. I have found texts, such as Allen-Mearnes & Garvin, 2000; Burgest, 1985; Vacc, DeVaney, & Brendel, 2003; Vacc, DeVaney, & Wittmer, 1995, that range from one paragraph on cultural competency to entire chapters on self-awareness. To dedicate a section or chapter to the issue of race perpetuates the illusion that discussion and examination should exist within a designated box or timeframe. McMahon and Allen-Meares (1992) believe, "The literature of a profession is the text of what that profession believes is important for knowledge and practice" (p. 537). It would be my hope that future social work literature dealing with issues of race be multifaceted, highly developed, thorough, and seamless in composition.

For social work to achieve self-respect, I feel it must aspire to be not only anti-racist but also pro-actively vigilant in the process of achieving racial and social justice. It is for this reason that academic curricula's treatment of social justice must be examined for integration and thoroughness of anti-racist training and policies. Ultimately creating an anti-racist climate. Social work must acknowledge that accessing higher education is a privilege that prevents people of color from empowering their own underserved communities. To achieve social justice, social work should confront the institutional structures that contribute to the disproportionate racial composition of its graduates.

Reflections on Racial Consciousness

Like McIntosh (1989), I struggle with my own position within the system of dominance and oppression from which I benefit. It was in social work practice that I first had to confront my own intellectualization of prejudice and meet head-on my own racist ways of knowing. I spent most of my first year of my Master's program attempting to pick up the pieces of a shattered White knowledge base. My sensitization to the complexity of these issues

has made them salient in life to the point that I am sometimes alienated by my own awareness. Through the equally invigorating and exhausting time I have spent unlearning a history authored by Whites, I have increasingly felt more detached from my social work peers. I have come to understand that silence creates a vacuum, and the absence of antiracist awareness personally, politically, and academically signals the presence of covert racism.

Reflecting on this progress, I acknowledge a previous clandestine discomfort with my own Whiteness, which undoubtedly influenced my competency in working with clients of color. Through the process of thinking, writing, and editing this article, I have been forced to confront my own fears of defensive intellectualization as well as attempt to enmesh a continually transforming view of my own cultural competence and understanding of racist ways of knowing. During my deepest and most painful thought processes around racism, I often roll around the phrase "ignorance is bliss". I sometimes think this because I am feeling fatigued, sad, and dejected. I am able to think this because, as a White individual and even as a White social worker, I can survive and thrive unaware as Whites have done for generations. However, I feel a profound responsibility to enter into the pain and discomfort of identifying and acknowledging my racist ways of knowing and to welcome and truthfully confront problems that arise interpersonally, politically, and in practice. My personal journey towards an anti-racist ideology has led me to feel more powerful as an individual, and as a social worker, than I ever have before.

W.E.B. DuBois believed that racism should not just be a burden on the backs of nonWhites but had to be thoroughly acknowledged by progressive Whites as well. It would not be until this White awareness, that antiracist politics and attention to the needs of the oppressed could be addressed (1924). Social work, as a profession, has dedicated itself to the mission of social change and is therefore obligated to be a leader in anti-racist policies, academia, training, and practice.

Endnotes

[1] I have chosen to focus on the Black/White duality due to a legacy of slavery and White superiority that has economically exploited and politically underdeveloped Black America. For the purpose of this paper, the term African-American is used to distinguish the descendants of the North American slave trade from that of Black which is used as an umbrella term to include African-Americans as well as those who wish to identify as recent generation Blacks, Caribbean-Americans, Haitian-Americans, and so on. The term "people of color" is used to identify those who are not Caucasian or of West European decent.

[2] Research highlights the pervasive nature of a distorted beauty standard that favors Eurocentric ideals and supports what Malcolm X in 1963 referred to as "brainwashed", "slavemaster worship" (Hill, 2002; X, 1999, p. 166).

[3] Statistics show that 64% of the prison population is people of color and 32% of Black men could expect to serve in federal prison at some time in their life (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2001).

[4] I suggest that social work, as a profession, exists under what Helms (1990) terms pseudo-independence. In the Helm's model of White racial identity development, pseudo-indepedence exists as a stage which devotes much of its time to helping the other and inadvertently supporting a belief system which perpetuates Whites as superior instead of transforming the dominant paradigm. In this stage, Whites are used as the normal model, while the focus of interaction revolves around assisting Blacks in transforming their lives to look like that of Whites (Helms).

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