

Assessing Antiracism as a Learning Outcome in Social Work Education: A Systematic Review

Phillipe Copeland
Abigail Ross

Abstract: *The current political climate and reversals of gains made during the Civil Rights Movement underscore the urgent need for preparing emerging social workers to effectively address white supremacy in social work practice. Antiracism education in social work aims to ensure competent antiracist social work practice towards the goal of eradicating white supremacy in all its forms. Given the widening racial disparities evident in income, health and educational outcomes, it is essential to examine the degree to which social work education adequately prepares emerging social work practitioners to engage in antiracist social work practice. This paper presents findings of a systematic review of social work research assessing antiracism as a learning outcome. After reviewing more than 150 studies published between 2008 and 2018, none of them focused on assessing antiracism as a learning outcome. Our review demonstrates that despite the importance of antiracist social work practice, published research on assessment of antiracism as a learning outcome is sparse and is not antiracism-focused as much as it is antiracism-inclusive. More attention to identifying and disseminating best practices for assessing student competence in antiracism practice is required to defeat white supremacy.*

Keywords: *White supremacy, antiracism, racism, social work education*

How do we know that learning has occurred? The simple answer is that we look to see if there has been some kind of change in what a student can do. (Wehlburg, 2010, p. 45)

White supremacy is an historically based system of exploitation and oppression that generates and concentrates wealth, power, and privilege among White people at the expense of non-White people. This system is perpetuated through culture, beliefs, ideas, policies, laws and institutions that make it appear to be rational and/or ethical. Culture, beliefs, policies, laws and institutions also work together to obscure the existence of White supremacy, how it operates, its impact, and who benefits from it (Copeland et al., 2019). Antiracist social work practice is activism to resist and ultimately eliminate White supremacy, empowered by recognizing it accurately and thinking critically about White supremacy's origins, manifestations, and impact. Antiracism education in social work aims to ensure competent antiracist social work practice. It is comprised of knowledge, values, skills, and cognitive and affective processes (Gollan & O'Leary, 2009; Miller & Garran, 2017; O'Neil & Miller, 2015; Tisman & Clarendon, 2018). In recent years, white nationalism has emerged as a disturbing feature of political life (Birkhold, 2019). White supremacist ideas are openly expressed and rationalized as free speech, science, or differences of opinion (Beauchamp, 2019). Specifically, harassment, hate crimes, and domestic terrorism are on the rise (Beckett, 2019; Carasquillo, 2019; Williamson & Gelfand, 2019); a 2018 report by the Southern Poverty Law Center indicates that the

Phillipe Copeland, PhD, Clinical Assistant Professor, School of Social Work, Boston University, Boston, MA. Abigail M. Ross, LICSW, MPH, PhD, Assistant Professor, Graduate School of Social Service, Fordham University, New York, NY.

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number of known hate groups in the United States rose to an all-time high in 2018, up 30% in the three year period ending in 2017. Hard won gains like voting rights are being undermined through systematic and governmentally-sanctioned voter suppression efforts targeting Black and Brown communities (McCarthy, 2019). Human rights are being violated at national borders (Gumbel, 2019), on indigenous lands (Serpe, 2019), and within impoverished communities (Alcorn, 2019). The current sociopolitical climate underscores the danger posed by White supremacy and the urgency of educating social workers who can competently practice antiracism to defeat it.

Background

Antiracism Education in Social Work

Antiracism education in social work seeks to develop practitioners who can effectively counter racism and White supremacy. It is comprised of knowledge, values, skills and cognitive and affective processes involved in recognition, critical thinking, and activism. Both inwardly and outwardly directed, recognition requires students to develop capacities for self-awareness and reflection about their personal racial identities (Gollan & O'Leary, 2009; O'Neil & Miller, 2015; Simmons et al., 2008). Emerging social workers should also be attentive to the ways clients self-identify (Butler et al., 2003), recognize the various ways in which racism permeates society (Miller & Garran, 2017; Tisman & Clarendon, 2018), and the role of history in the creation and perpetuation of racism (Miller & Garran, 2017; O'Neil & Miller, 2015; Tisman & Clarendon, 2018).

Recognition is complemented by critical thinking about racism as a structural issue that impacts white people and people of color differently (Gollan & O'Leary, 2009; Simmons et al., 2008; Tisman & Clarendon, 2018). Some authors emphasize analysis of white identity and/or differential tasks for white people and people of color as necessary for antiracism (Kivel, 2006, as cited in Deepak & Garcia Biggs, 2011; Gollan & O'Leary, 2009; Simmons et al., 2008; Tisman & Clarendon, 2018). Gollan and O'Leary (2009) refer to this analysis as accountability, which requires white people to understand their social position and cultural identity, how power through racial domination shapes relationships, the invisible nature of whiteness and institutional racism, and how these factors can play out relationships with clients/communities. In addition, recognition requires a focus on the experiences of those living with racism versus the intentions or feelings of those in the dominant group. While all individuals are living with racism in some form, all social work students must learn to recognize and be sensitive to the impact of racism and oppression—and the ways in which oppressive ideas can be transferred across targeted identities and groups. Social work students must also learn to demonstrate the ability to apply diverse sources of literature reflecting a range of perspectives on practice and the multiethnic nature of the profession (Butler et al., 2003). The ability to comprehend and critically engage the historical development of racism is also essential (Tisman & Clarendon, 2018).

Antiracism applies recognition and critical thinking to activism at multiple levels, from the personal to the structural (Werkmeister Rozas & Miller, 2009). For example, it is not sufficient to recognize or think critically about one's racist ideas or beliefs; they must also

be resisted and changed (Werkmeister Rozas & Miller, 2009). Kivel (2006, as cited in Deepak & Garcia Biggs, 2011) argues that white people must acknowledge their active and passive participation in racism as well as actively commit to interrupting racism and becoming allies with people of color. Antiracism also promotes connection and solidarity (O'Neil & Miller, 2015; Werkmeister Rozas & Miller, 2009), which includes developing authenticity, empathy, and mutuality (Davis, 2016). Although antiracism underscores the importance of structural analysis and social change through policy advocacy, it must also be used in clinical practice with individuals, groups and families (Butler et al., 2003; Hamilton-Mason & Schneider, 2018; O'Neil & Miller, 2015; Tisman & Clarendon, 2018).

In light of the emphasis on competency-based education in social work (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2008, 2015), antiracism education can be understood as focused on developing competency in antiracist social work practice. Specifically, antiracist social work practice is activism to resist and ultimately eliminate White supremacy, empowered by recognizing it accurately and thinking critically about White supremacy's origins, manifestations, and impact. In the current structure, antiracism could be conceptualized within Competency #3: advancing human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice. A competency-based approach to assessment of antiracism learning outcomes in social work is critical not only for policy and community practitioners, but also for clinicians (Goggin et al., 2016; Varghese, 2016).

Assessing Learning

Competency-based education is focused on learning *outcomes* (CSWE, 2008, 2015). This can be understood as a "value-added" approach, defined as what the learner gains from a course of study (Department of Education, 2006 as cited in Drisko, 2014), as opposed to the experiences a student has or the processes through which they learn. Optimal measures of competence are based in real-world performance, address open, dynamic, and complex practice situations and require learners to make considered judgments in specific contexts while incorporating professional values (Drisko, 2014). Social work education assessment metrics should also evaluate the multiple dimensions of competence including knowledge, values, skills, and cognitive and affective processes (CSWE, 2015).

Recommendations for assessing competence include course assignments or graded tests with rubrics directly linked to identified competencies or the use of standardized measures (Drisko, 2014; Poulin & Matis, 2015). Practice assessment in student field placements is another approach (Drisko, 2014; Poulin & Matis, 2015). While assessment methods, such as self-efficacy measures, student self-evaluations, alumni surveys, and course evaluations may be commonplace, they present a host of limitations when used in isolation. Self-reported measures of self-efficacy may capture readiness and confidence, but not actual practice ability. Alumni surveys fail to address the ways in which experiences beyond the program threaten internal validity. Course evaluations are typically designed to evaluate course content or instructor performance, rarely assessing student competency; in addition, they may be subject to attribution bias and questions of validity (Drisko, 2014). Feedback questionnaires administered at the end of a course or program are limited due to

the lack of baseline data. Without comparison or control groups, observed changes cannot be attributed exclusively to an educational intervention (Carpenter, 2011).

The Present Study

Given the necessity of competent social work antiracist practice, social work educators must know if they are adequately preparing students to engage in it. This requires assessing antiracism as a learning outcome. To effectively assess antiracism as a learning outcome involves determining if a student has demonstrated the knowledge, values, skills, and cognitive and affective processes required for antiracist social work practice. The goal of the present study was to critically review the research literature on antiracism education in social work and the manner in which learning is assessed. To our knowledge, this is the first systematic review of such research.

Study aims:

- To examine the extent to which antiracism is assessed as a learning outcome in social work education;
- To consider, identify, and evaluate the different approaches to assessing antiracism as a learning outcome.

Methods

The systematic review was designed, conducted, and reported according to guidelines provided by the Social Care Institute of Excellence (Rutter et al., 2010). Refer to Figure 1 for specific database search terms.

Search Strategy

To achieve specificity, use of these search terms was limited to titles and abstracts. The authors chose to limit inclusion of studies to those published between 2008 and 2018, as competency-based education guided by specific criteria has been a focus of social work education since 2008 (CSWE, 2008).

The authors employed a double-search and screening strategy to increase reliability (Rutter et al., 2010) that was divided into three phases. In Phase 1, inclusion criteria were applied to titles retrieved through the search strategy to determine relevance. Specifically, only titles with all three of the primary review concepts/keywords were retained for additional screening. These included “racial justice” or “antiracism”, “education”, and “social work”. In Phase 2, each abstract for the included titles was reviewed and retained for inclusion in Phase 3 if it met the following criteria a) contained an empirical assessment of student learning outcomes, b) referenced explicit assessment of student learning outcomes related to racism, c) examined a sample comprised of social work students, d) was peer-reviewed and e) published in English.

Phase 3 involved full text review of articles retrieved during Phase 2. During each phase of the review process, each author independently assessed all studies to ensure they met inclusion criteria; disagreements were resolved through discussion and consensus.

Included studies were subsequently categorized as either antiracism-*inclusive* or antiracism-*focused*. Studies were classified as antiracism-inclusive if they did not explicitly assess antiracism as a learning outcome, but did assess aspects of antiracism education described in the literature that served as the background for this study. Examples included:

1. The ability to identify forms of oppression at individual, institutional and societal levels;
2. The ability to attribute racial inequality to structural vs. individual causes;
3. The ability to understand racism as an experience of oppression and marginalization;
4. The ability to understand white privilege.

Alternatively, studies were classified as antiracism-focused if the explicit purpose of the study was to assess antiracism as a learning outcome.

Figure 1. *Study Databases and Search Terms*



Results

The search yielded 150 unique records published in English between January 1, 2008 and September 1, 2018. Of these, 23 abstracts (15.3%) met inclusion criteria. Full text review eliminated 20 articles that lacked the required information. The final sample contained three (2.0%) unique studies that met all inclusion criteria, with publication dates ranging from 2016-2018. Despite the international scope of the search parameters, all studies meeting inclusion criteria were conducted in the United States. Based on the aforementioned criteria, all studies were classified as antiracism-inclusive.

Study Characteristics

All included studies drew from samples of Masters (Dessel & Rodenberg, 2017; Pitner et al., 2018) and Bachelor-level (Block et al., 2016) social work students, with sample sizes ranging from 126 to 286 subjects. All studies were longitudinal in nature, evaluated structured learning activities that were required (not optional), and used student surveys administered at pretest (prior to commencement of learning activities) and posttest (near the end or after completing the learning experience) as methods of evaluation. All data were collected via self-report.

Two studies utilized single group pretest-posttest designs; each of these studies evaluated student participation in a class required of all students enrolled in their respective social work programs. Block and colleagues (2016) examined student learning outcomes of a Bachelor in Social Work (BSW) course that focused on exploration of students' cultural awareness, bias and competence, as well as skills of understanding and empathizing with the experiences of diverse populations. Dessel and Rodenberg (2017) evaluated student learning outcomes of a course using Inter Group Dialogue (IGD) pedagogy, which involved structured, facilitated interactions between students with different social identities designed to build relationships across difference, increase understanding of the experiences of those different than themselves, and promote social justice.

The third study utilized a quasi-experimental design to examine the utility of two strategies designed to enhance social work student learning outcomes. Specifically, Pitner and colleagues (2018) examined whether student learning outcomes differed across students assigned to a dedicated diversity course (n=83), or those who participated in a more general infusion model employed in their social work program of study (n=107). The researchers also included a group of psychology undergraduate students (n=106) as a null comparison group, as they were not exposed to either pedagogical strategy.

Competency Assessment Tools and Target Domains

Each of the three studies referenced the Council on Social Work Education Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (CSWE EPAS) (2015) competencies as their basis and either utilized validated instruments or developed project-specific measures to assess a) attitudes and perceptions, b) acquisition of knowledge and skills, or c) changes in behavior.

Block and colleagues (2016) used the California Brief Multicultural Competence Scale (Der-Karabetian et al., 2008) to assess cultural competence. Dessel and Rodenberg (2017) created the Multi-University IGD Research Project Scale that examined student target outcomes of social awareness, knowledge about inequality, confidence in specific use of micro/macro skills, and confidence in capacity to engage in social justice action. The posttest also included a question about student behavior since course inception, inquiring about the degree to which social justice action engagement had occurred (University of Michigan, n.d.). Pitner and colleagues (2018) adapted a variety of validated instruments, including the Transcultural Self-Efficacy Tool (Jeffreys & Smolaka, 1996, 1998), the Multicultural Awareness, Skills and Knowledge Survey (Andrea et al., n.d.), the Survey of Graduate Students' Experiences with Diversity (Talbot, 1992), the Social Work Competencies Self-Assessment Pretest (Lum, 2010) and Social Work Cultural Competencies with Culturally Diverse Groups and Social and Economic Justice Pretest (Lum, 2010). All instruments were administered via survey and relied on student self-report.

Study Findings

The majority of students were White, female, and young adults; findings from all studies showed that social work educational initiatives did in fact improve student learning outcomes. Specifically, findings from Block et al (2016) show that students self-reported levels of multicultural competency increased significantly after completing a required BSW course in cultural diversity. Similarly, Dessel and Rodenberg's (2017) evaluation of IGD found that at post-test, students reported significant increases in self-awareness as pertaining to membership of social identity groups, knowledge about structural group inequality, and both confidence in and motivation to bridge differences and take action to address prejudice, discrimination, and injustice. Further analyses showed that participant race and social contact did not predict change in confidence in and frequency of taking social justice action; similarly, baseline levels of knowledge about racial inequality and motivation to bridge differences did not predict change in action at posttest.

The results of Pitner and colleagues (2018) showed that both the dedicated diversity course and the infusion groups outperformed the non-exposed comparison group on four of five outcomes of 1) awareness of cultural background influences, 2) identifying forms and 3) identifying levels of oppression, and 4) cultural responsiveness. The authors note that there were no between-group differences observed on the fifth outcome of awareness of beliefs and biases across any exposed or non-exposed group. Students participating in the dedicated diversity course also scored significantly higher on outcomes of identifying levels and forms of oppression and cultural responsiveness when compared to the students exposed to the infusion model.

Discussion and Implications

This systematic review sought to identify and evaluate empirical social work literature assessing antiracism as a learning outcome. The primary finding was that no antiracism-focused literature meeting inclusion criteria were identified. Thus, such literature could not

be evaluated. This finding is remarkable, given the emphasis placed on antiracism education in social work (Blitz et al., 2014; Kivel, 2006, as cited in Deepak & Garcia Biggs, 2011; Miller & Garran, 2017; O'Neill & Miller, 2015; Werkmeister Rozas & Miller, 2009). A possible explanation is current EPAS standards (CSWE, 2008, 2015) do not explicitly specify antiracism as a competency to be taught, learned, or assessed.

The search strategy yielded three studies characterized as antiracism-inclusive (2.0%). Methods used to assess race and racism involved learning activities aligned with the EPAS (CSWE, 2015, p. 7) framework, wherein outcomes were included explicitly or implicitly under "Engaging Diversity and Difference" (Block et al., 2016; Dessel & Rodenberg, 2017; Pitner et al., 2018). Included studies primarily assessed the knowledge and cognitive processes dimensions of learning (Carpenter, 2011; Drisko, 2014, 2015; Poulin & Matis, 2015), with only one study (Pitner et al., 2018) including a question about behavior (self-report). In general, study findings offered little insight about changes in affective processes, values, or skills, much less practice behaviors. In addition, the absence of randomized trials makes it challenging to draw conclusions about the efficacy of particular teaching methods, courses, or pedagogies. Future studies should include more rigorous study designs that employ observational measures and explicitly link the competency domains to learning outcomes, while addressing all of the domains rather than just some of them.

It is possible that the paucity of studies meeting inclusion criteria may not accurately reflect the current state of social work education with regard to antiracism. Interestingly, none of these studies included an evaluation of field education, the signature pedagogy of social work and arguably the domain in which observation could effectively occur. All accredited schools of social work require field education evaluations by supervisors; these could provide a rich source of information about antiracist practice competencies. In addition, classroom-based social work educators may in fact be teaching antiracism, but choose not to conduct research on student learning outcomes or disseminate findings through peer-reviewed journals. The absence of reliable and valid measures that assess antiracist student competencies may also interfere with assessment capacity and hinder dissemination activities. Future research should include development of psychometrically sound metrics for assessing student competency in antiracist practice.

This systematic review suggests a number of implications for social work education and research. First, more research that specifically assesses antiracism as a learning outcome must be conducted. It is critical to examine whether students are learning antiracist social work practice and which teaching methods are most effective for accomplishing this goal. For example, findings from Pitner and colleagues (2018) showed that while both dedicated and infusion course models yield positive outcomes, the dedicated diversity course outperformed the infusion model. Although findings are not generalizable to all social work student populations, more research is needed to evaluate various models of delivering antiracism education. Ultimately, including antiracism-related items within explorations of diversity or cultural competency is simply not sufficient. Such concepts fail to adequately address the nature of the problems that racism and White supremacy represent, or provide solutions to them (Abrams & Moio, 2013).

Review findings also raise important questions. Specifically, while all included studies were characterized as antiracism-inclusive, further investigation of specific content – and whether it is antiracist – is warranted. Although social work education typically includes the concept of microaggressions, a term first coined by Chester Pierce in 1970 that to describe subtle racial putdowns that degrade health over a lifetime (Pierce, 1970), Dr. Ibram Kendi maintains that these instances are not at all “micro” and are more aptly termed “racial abuse” (Kendi, 2019, p. 47). Given that results showed that EPAS (CSWE, 2015) competency definitions appeared to drive assessment orientation and competency conceptualization, it is possible that, if future revisions of EPAS were to make antiracism an explicit and discrete competency, more studies examining antiracism as a social work student learning outcome would be conducted. What impact might this have on teaching, learning, assessment, and dissemination of antiracist concepts and practice in social work education? How might this empower social work education to better prepare student to resist and ultimately eliminate White supremacy?

Study Limitations

These results must be considered in light of study limitations. While applying rigorous review methods, it did not include sources beyond peer-reviewed journal articles. It was also restricted to a ten year period and English language sources. Thus, it is possible that relevant studies may have been missed. Given what was noted previously about the internally-focused nature of some assessment work, reviewing publications may have also limited what could be learned about the quantity, methods, and quality of assessments being conducted.

Conclusion

Eradicating white supremacy must be an urgent priority in social work practice. As such, developing the knowledge, values, and skills necessary for antiracism practice must be a priority for social work education. This systematic review sought to explore literature focused on assessing antiracism as a learning outcome, yielding a paucity of literature on the topic. More attention to assessing antiracism, evaluating and developing assessment methods, and disseminating best practices in social work education is necessary.

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Author note: Address correspondence to Phillipe Copeland, PhD, School of Social Work, Boston University, Boston, MA. Email: copelanp@bu.edu