

The Woke Disrupter: A Call to Action

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Abstract: *This article examines one of the most dangerous personifications of white supremacy, the Woke Vigilante - the “liberal do-gooder” and the social work profession’s role in their creation. White supremacy is frequently named to identify overt racism and discrimination by hate groups, ultra conservatives and increasingly throughout the government. There is another breed of white supremacy which lies beneath the surface and believes itself to be an ally, this is the Woke Vigilante. Unexamined social work education provides the right ingredients with the moral authority to turn white social workers into Woke Vigilantes. This conceptual article highlights the ways in which social work education currently addresses competencies of diversity and difference, as well as social justice. The authors then present a persuasive argument for white academic social workers to alter course and promote teaching and practice skills which incorporate social justice skills at all levels of practice, in other words social justice meta-practice skills. The danger of white supremacy when it is disguised as the Woke Vigilante may be best captured by Malcolm X when he spoke of the white liberals who disguise themselves as friends to the Black man only as a means to benefit their own self-interest without genuinely asking or listening to that which the Black community actually wants (X, 1963). Social work is all too familiar with the white liberal and must consider this a call to action, as well as a forewarning against further perpetuation of white hegemonic societal structures giving license to white do-gooders eager to go into Black communities and effect change. Authors present a resolve for white social workers to adopt the role of the Woke Disrupter.*

Keywords: *Dismantling racism, anti-racism, White supremacy, institutional racism*

The term white social worker will be used regularly throughout this manuscript. The reader should recognize that statements of generalization regarding white social workers do not indicate there are no exceptions. However, particularly relevant to the nature of this manuscript, the authors chose not to make an ongoing statement of exception for those white social workers to which this conceptual piece might not apply. The perspective of the authors is that making any acknowledgement beyond this note continues to center Whiteness as the sacrifice of all those who are marginalized.

As the authors of this conceptual paper, we intend to offer transparency from our first sentence through to our final words. As a manuscript selected for inclusion in a special issue called “Dismantling White Supremacy in Social Work Education,” we believe it is not only beneficial, but crucial for us to share aspects of our identities which have shaped our lives, as well as our perspectives of the future, both personal and professional. We are cisgender female, gender non-conforming, queer, and heterosexual. We are a white mother of biracial and multiethnic children, a Black single mother of a Black boy, and a biracial

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Black and Samoan wife and mother. Professionally, we have an MBA focused in Leadership and Organizational Behavior, a PhD, MSW, BSW, and a BA in Political Science while also seeking completion of an MSW at the time of writing this piece. There are intentionally coded examples and language used throughout our narrative. If you find yourself thinking “that sounds awfully white” you might be right and it is likely intentional that we want you thinking and feeling that way. In addition to situating ourselves as authors, there are societal and professional contexts relevant to the writing of this manuscript. White supremacy, racism and anti-Blackness have plagued *our* United States of America (U.S.) since its birth under the exploitative, barbaric, and inhuman enforcement of colonists. Lastly, as the authors of this manuscript we have included firsthand narrative examples which we have experienced throughout our careers. We have intentionally referenced these narratives as “author’s experience.”

Recently, the U.S. has experienced a resurgence of Civil Rights activism and protest after yet another killing of a Black man by police: George Floyd (Nuyen & Slotkin, 2020). Not only did the world bear witness to myriad protests, the world participated at levels unseen since the height of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s (Cave et al., 2020). As Sherrilyn Ifill (President and Director-Counsel of the Legal Defense Fund National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [NAACP]) stated in a *60 Minutes* interview, Mr. Floyd’s death provoked a different and more powerful response, likely in part due to the length of the video captured by witnesses (Whitaker, 2020). In the following weeks and months protests stood strong, occupying city streets throughout the country and throughout the world, all echoing one central message: Black Lives Matter (#BLM). And yet, in the midst of worldwide protests, white supremacy took no pause, demonstrating its insidious and relentless nature, making way for a white man to openly murder two men, and walk freely, *maybe* to one day face consequences (Mihalopoulos, 2020) while Breonna Taylor, a Black woman, was gunned down and killed by police officers in her own home (BBC, 2020). Not surprisingly, this global attention to #BLM has spurred new and renewed interest in race relations from nearly every corner of U.S. society, including from within the social work profession.

As such, the social work profession, in efforts to reconcile its own history and role in upholding white supremacy and anti-Black racism, has created additional space for conversations (Singer, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; SWCAREs, 2020) such as the one presented here. It must be acknowledged, as a predominantly white female profession (Salsberg et al., 2017, pp. 15-18), social work struggles with interconnected issues of patriarchy and misogyny. However, it is white supremacy that garners our attention at this time. Please understand this manuscript is intended to ignite critical thought by offering perspectives on social work education and proffering the enormous responsibility to prevent Woke Vigilantes being sent out into society proudly displaying their credentials as professionally trained social workers. This. Is. A. Call. To. Action. AND a Forewarning.

While history cannot be changed, we are obligated to purposefully and thoroughly extract the stronghold white supremacy has maintained, in part, through *our* professional education. Social workers must review and revisit the pedagogy, texts, policies, licensing, practice arenas, and importantly our values and ethics; turning them inside out and unearthing the white supremacist roots. In no uncertain terms do the authors advocate for

an erasure of the white supremacist historical knowledge foundations of social work. In fact, it is the commitment of current social work educators to hold these racist roots out in the light of day that will lead to long term erasure of the influence and corruption inhibiting meaningful realization of the full potential for social work social justice values. Any profession which does not examine its oppressive and racist tendencies is indeed creating harm to society; this is not negotiable. Social work is a practice profession with immense responsibility to actively engage social justice at all levels. Advocacy and activism are explicitly identified as central to the profession and as necessary skills to become a social worker (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015). Recognizing the power which lies in the invisibility of white hegemony, this manuscript aims to bring clarity to the subtle and powerful ways social work education can go awry by creating the Woke Vigilante. AND how it can reclaim its professional value of *Integrity* and embrace a position as a Woke Disrupter, utilizing social justice meta-practice skills for anti-racist professional practice.

A final note of introduction: racism, tribalism, ethnocentrism, and colorism exist and perpetually marginalize individuals who identify or who are perceived as being Black, Indigenous or a Person of Color (BIPOC). While all of the methods, forms and systems in which white supremacy are upheld require dismantling, as stated previously, it is anti-Blackness which has awakened protests throughout the world. Colorism, of which anti-Blackness is the ultimate embodiment, underscores the negative consequences and privileges of passing as one moves in proximity to Blackness and Whiteness respectively (Telles, 2014). This does not invalidate or discount racism experienced by persons who are lighter skinned. Rather, this is to acknowledge the universality of anti-Blackness. Additionally, region and history strongly influence the multitude of ways in which anti-Blackness takes shape. It is for this reason that our manuscript remains focused on a U.S. context.

Background

The U.S. has a long and sordid history of race relations. One need not look very far to find confirmation that the U.S. was founded upon genocide (Miller & Garran, 2017), enslavement of Africans (Jones, 2019), white supremacy and anti-Black racism (Patterson, 1998), systematic oppression of Black/African Americans, and discrimination (Alexander, 2012; Miller & Garran, 2017). It should not then be surprising that the institutions established to uphold and maintain American society and culture are also rooted in these same principles of white supremacy and oppression (Bell, 2018; Miller & Garran, 2017). Scholars provide clear evidence of these social institutions that perpetuate historical and ongoing discrimination, abuse and violence against Black people in America: education (Morris, 2016), criminal justice (Alexander, 2012), health care (Roberts, 1997), mental health care (Walker, 2020), finance/banking (Baradaran, 2017), and housing (Rothstein, 2018) to name a few.

It is also very clearly established that these social institutions are operating as a collective to uphold white supremacy. The web of institutional racism is brilliant in design in that it is self-sustaining, invisible to enemies, and just like a web it is strong and

withstanding (Bell, 2018; Miller & Garran, 2017). This *is* the function of a web, and as such, the web of institutional racism is performing and carrying out its full intended functions. Social work is present throughout all of these institutions, be it politics, child welfare, criminal justice, education, health care, mental health, environmental stewardship, and countless others. And so, the question becomes: if social work is not an institution yet maintains a professional presence in all institutions, where do we start? Although still bound by institutional structures, there is one space in which social work can assert its influence and shape its future: social work education.

Uprooting, uncovering, and dismantling social work's role in maintaining white supremacy culture and, therefore, anti-Blackness is urgent and crucial. However, it must be made explicit that there have always been anti-racist social workers, all along, fighting this fight; for example, Dominelli (1998), Jagers (2003), and Lasch-Quinn (1993). While these few are acknowledged and published, it is important to recognize that the same circumstances by which this manuscript is made necessary have simultaneously created spaces in which many voices of resistance have gone ignored and unacknowledged. After all, this is the nature of the beast of white supremacy in education. The professional embrace of addressing white supremacy and anti-Black racism need not pat itself on the back for finally getting the message.

Becoming

Social workers in the field, as well as those in academia, can all too readily identify the most common reason a student states for having entered the profession... "to help people." This statement is spoken hundreds, if not thousands, of times each year by new majors and echoed throughout careers by seasoned professionals. This initial discovery and draw to social work is not the seed, but rather the sprout of a seed sewn by a white hegemonic societal structure. That seed is the toxic messaging that to be white is to be better (hooks, 2000, p. 116). This messaging, in its most *noble* form, encourages a humble acceptance of superiority in which one must "help" and "do good" for those less fortunate; the less fortunate being those who are Black, Immigrant, and poor and living in the margins. Never mind the fact that they were forced into the margins as a result of the racialization of early American society in an effort to protect the wealth and assets (Buck, 2013) of the already well-established White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) (Stalvey, 1970). Make no mistake; there are poor whites; however, their position is somewhat less dire because, after all, there is hope, for at least their skin color opens the door of opportunity. "Race privilege has consistently offered poor whites the chance of living a better life in the midst of poverty than their black counterparts" (hooks, 2000, p. 116).

This is where it begins. Before new social work majors sign up, society has already filtered through, sending those "helpers" on their rightful path as future social workers. Let us be clear, it is not that all white social workers come from well-to-do families without difficulties—and truly, we as authors struggle with even feeling the need to explicate this. Nevertheless our goal is to reach a broad audience. It is to say that even when class, education, gender identity, and sexual orientation are marginalized, Whiteness will still place white social workers ahead of their Black peers and better off than their Black clients.

And when the degree is done and a college education is added to that Whiteness, the privilege is compounded and then upheld by the web of institutional racism (Miller & Garran, 2017).

Not unlike other professions, there is bias and privilege in the very people who find their way to a certain career or field. The difference for social work is that because the profession holds itself up as a beacon for diversity and social justice, we must do better. In discussing the danger of the Woke Vigilante, please know the authors maintain the position that social work education has consistently failed to maintain the professional value of *Integrity* by excluding its white supremacist and anti-Black racist foundation; the actions and attitudes of earlier social work pioneers; as well as, the subsequent centering of Whiteness throughout the profession's development. Similarly, there has been a failure to uphold *Social Justice* by sustaining practices of centering Whiteness and thus maintaining white supremacy.

Day One

So here they are; a new class of social workers, all of them on *day one*! Changing in demographics, yet still a statistical majority of white cisgender females (Salsberg et al., 2017). Academic social workers' responsibility to educate students in what it means to be a social worker begins here. Curricula are required to "Engage Diversity and Difference in Practice" according to the CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS, CSWE, 2015, p. 7). However, all too often diversity becomes a problematic lecture, riddled with language such as cultural competence only to be followed up with multiple slides on Native Americans, African Americans, Latinx Americans, Asian Americans and maybe White Ethnic groups. And then done. To be clear there is rarely malicious intent. Cultural competence and diversity when carried out in this manner fall into a broad range and focus on appreciating difference across and within various groups of a pluralistic society (Adams & Zúñiga, 2018).

Often, this display of "difference" is followed with unsettling lectures on "Human Rights, Social, Economic, and Environmental Justice" (CSWE, 2015, p. 8). Educators address and share the realities of modern society as it relates to disproportionate wealth, structural racism, gender gaps, marginalization of immigrant communities, and many more important and relevant social issues demonstrating inequity and injustices throughout our societies.

Commonly, all of this is to be presented and understood within a systems or ecosystems theoretical perspective. These theoretical approaches, while explanatory in nature do little to provide direction or action for change (Rogers, 2019). And so, the unexamined message is to accept the system and learn to adapt and work within the system (Finn & Jacobson, 2003). This approach at best maintains a system of white supremacy and oppression. At worst, for now, it promotes an erroneous self-assurance that one has *achieved competence* in diversity.

Now Do

It is not new to social workers that practice courses heavily lean into micro and maybe mezzo level skills. Building upon the introduction of diversity and difference and social justice, students are taught a variety of engagement, assessment, intervention, and termination skills. At every step, students are reminded to be cognizant of diversity and engage their awareness of cultural competence. Consider this author's experience:

I sense a shift in my social work program compared to just one year ago. The conversations around systemic change are becoming more explicit and action-oriented. This may be due to the ever-evolving political climate and upcoming presidential election or the fact that I am now in macro classes with other macro students. When I was in foundation classes, I felt a resistance from other students to fully question the systems that we will one day work within. The overwhelming majority of my classmates in the first year of the program were clinical students which is the norm for most social work programs. I fully appreciate the need for clinical/micro social work, but I wish the conversations around systemic change and social justice had gone deeper in those foundation courses. If we don't delve too deeply into those conversations in the classroom, what will we do in the real world? The conversations are uncomfortable, to be sure, but they feel necessary when we call ourselves "agents of change."

My assumption, from a student's perspective, is that teaching social justice tools is more abstract than clinical skills. It may be easier to teach objective facts about the history and theories of clinical social work skills. The difficulty notwithstanding, new and experienced social workers suffer from not knowing exactly what to do when presented with the overwhelming knowledge of systemic oppression in every institution. The majority of social work students will go on to be clinicians and the curriculum reflects that. The tools that most students are given to deal with systemic problems are micro-level tools. Of course, helping individuals through acute difficulties is important and life-saving for some, but if the social work education ends at that then what happens to the institutions that employ us? If we are solely focused on helping the individual in front of us, what do we do when we look up and see how agencies who employ us continuously oppress us and our clients?

I understand my viewpoint is limited in this regard. I am a career changer with minimal experience in social service organizations and I am only in my second year of an MSW program. However, I have jumped headfirst into my commitment to racial equity and justice and the resistance from experienced social workers is disappointing. I have read comments from white social workers on social media who espouse "all lives matter" or "blue lives matter" in response to posts about Black Lives Matter. In a few months, those same white social workers will be my colleagues, or even my superiors.

Social work curriculum does an amazing job of making students aware of social injustice and oppression. It does not do a great job of giving us tools and

opportunities to dismantle that injustice. The constraints of a two-year professional program are acutely felt as I sit at the beginning of my second year. I understand that not everything can be touched on or taught in this limited time frame. I argue that social justice advocacy and activism should be a part of the foundational curriculum for all social work students. The dump of knowledge on social work students about social injustices leaves us feeling overwhelmed and powerless. Our foundational education should prepare us to affect systemic change and dismantle systemic injustice at all levels.

This student experience is not an isolated incident, nor is this program a terrible program. However, the process of introducing such powerful stories of social justice without any real examination, ongoing dialogue or interrogation abandons students of color, especially Black students. Without calling attention to anti-Blackness, white academic social workers leave a void that gets filled with a sense of neutrality, permitting the perpetuation of a “not-racist” pedagogy (Kendi, 2019, p. 9). The invisibility of Whiteness fills all voids with a normalization of white supremacist culture. The power of nothingness, avoidance, and omission has been known throughout time as evidenced in the words of Desmond Tutu, “In a situation of injustice and oppression such as we have in South Africa, not to choose to oppose, is in fact to have chosen to side with the powerful, with the exploiters, with the...oppressor” (as cited in Leonard, 2013, p.1581). Skills such as cultural humility (Gallardo, 2014) are insufficient to meet social workers’ mandate to be the social justice worker (Finn & Jacobson, 2003) they had envisioned upon pursuing a social work degree.

Additionally, the challenges presented by this student capture a related and ongoing hurdle of social work education which is bridging macro concepts such as social justice to micro course work and consequently incorporating social justice work for the macro student into the foundational micro focused courses. Androff and McPherson (2014) wrote of utilizing a human rights framework to bridge this gap and particularly as it relates to maintaining the mission of social justice in social work education.

Recall, social work demographics continue to reflect predominately white women who enter into the profession to “help” people. White women who have now come to recognize diversity, cultural “competence” and oppression of all people, including themselves, marginalized by patriarchy. While on the surface this may appear “nice” and “good,” beneath this sentiment remains the corrosiveness of Whiteness, including complexities of othering, saviorism, classism, and racism. Captured so simply, yet so profoundly by professor Chey Davis, who states “You came to SW [social work] to ‘help people,’ I came to free myself and my people. We are not the same” (Davis, 2020). The “you” Davis refers to are white social workers, whereas “myself and my people” refer to Chey Davis as a member of the Black and African American community. White social workers must be made to understand the difference and accept the role anti-Blackness plays in conceptualizing shared privileges and disadvantages.

Terms such as *social justice warriors* have been used to describe the passion driven white women who have crusaded through history shouting chants of social justice, feminism, and equality. The result: decades and generations of social workers who believed

and felt themselves allied with their colleagues, clients, and communities of color but who have not done the hard work of true introspection.

Home Grown

Professional social work set the target and the arrow has landed precisely in the bullseye. Generations of white social workers giving quite literally everything they have to a profession they love; the attachment to their social work identity so salient that discussions of serious concerns within the profession feels like a threat to their personhood. This brings up the question of responsibility: is the white student responsible for asking about the social work history they were not educated about? How does one begin to know? Arguments can be made for social workers' responsibility to continue their education and think critically about the structures in which they engage daily. There is hypocrisy hidden within though. Social workers recognize that clients are shaped, nurtured and grown with context, environment, values, beliefs, etc. (Rogers, 2019). And so, the same is true for white women who become social workers. Why and how white people come to social work is a larger socialization discussion, referenced earlier, but outside of the scope of this paper. This is where it begins and ends though: the professional education and experiences shape, inform, and nurture professional beliefs and values.

These values and norms are too similar to the larger white hegemonic structure and as such social work maintains and perpetuates white supremacy in house, but with a special twist. The white supremacy maintained in social work is tied to "cultural competency" and "social justice" education and training. Not to mention a white-washing of all oppression, giving white women license to embrace their gendered oppression in sameness with the anti-Blackness experienced by the Black community. Recall, this is not a comparison of oppressions (Lourde, 1983), and even without hierarchical comparison anti-Blackness can still be recognized with the severity, persistence, and inescapability which is profoundly distinct from gender oppression experienced by white women. When luck is in the favor of professional social work, things are "fine" and no new harm is committed, similarly no new progress towards a truly anti-racist and just society. Let's call this your standard social worker unintentionally and possibly unknowingly perpetuating systemic racism. When that luck runs out, social work is responsible for birthing Woke Vigilantes. Merriam-Webster broadly defines a vigilante as "a self-appointed doer of justice" (n.d.-a, Definition 2). Likewise, woke is defined in the context of U.S. slang as "aware of and actively attentive to important facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice)" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-b, Definition 1). A woke vigilante in social work is someone who has done the baseline work of becoming a social worker, and either due to the comfort in such a safe space or due to lack of awareness, has moved forward without interrogating the basis of that education and the subsequent implications for themselves, their colleagues and their future clients.

The potential for a social worker, from this all too familiar educational path, to practice in the world and be "harmless" is a possibility and is not what the authors identify as the Woke Vigilante. However, it is clear that being harmless is not sufficient in a society and world that requires active seekers of justice.

Woke Vigilante

Somewhere in between non-racist and an antiracist modern society a new docile breed of Woke Vigilantes has found a home. These are the social workers who retweet the hashtag #ALLLIVESMATTER, because after all, the social work profession values every human being as having dignity and worth. After all, the profession urges a respect of all diversity and human rights, social justice for everyone. Consider this author's experience:

In the summer of 2020, I and other social work graduate students formed a group to demand racial equity and police reform on our campus in response to the murder of George Floyd and subsequent protests. An article about our efforts was shared on a social workers' social media page to raise awareness and to highlight our work. The backlash to that article was unexpected. Many commenters respectfully disagreed with our position, but nevertheless showed support for our activism. However, others were more vitriolic in their disagreement and they unfortunately drowned out the rest. The two most vocal opponents were two white women. One explained that if we didn't agree with the police, we were free to join the local police department. The other expressed the same idea while also offering that she and members of her family were members of law enforcement implying a certain authority on the matter. These women commented "all lives matter" on other posts because they had experience working with all kinds of people and they could never exclude anyone by saying "Black lives matter." (It is possible that these women were not actually social workers as this group is open to anyone. However, previous and subsequent posts from them lead me to believe that they are practicing social workers.) As a social worker-in-training, I was taken aback by their negativity and crudeness. To see this sentiment on a page for professional social workers was a wakeup call. I went into my social work program with high hopes of being surrounded by like-minded people who recognize inequality and inequity and stamp it out at every opportunity. My hope is that the current crises will force the CSWE, social work academic programs and social work organizations to review their standards and eradicate any semblance of racism or prejudice within our profession. Speaking frankly about race in relatively safe classroom settings should be standard for all social work programs across the country.

Beyond the perspective of students, social work occurs in many places and spaces. Social workers have a professional responsibility not only to their clients, but also their colleagues (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2020). Consider this author's unchecked behaviors as a Woke Vigilante:

Remembering my attendance at a social work conference. Excited and eager to meet new colleagues and network, a group of social workers met out at café, after sessions had ended for the day. I was one of two individuals who would be perceived as white (I don't actually think the other individual identified as white). As we wrapped up we called an Uber to take us back to the hotel, we needed an XL to accommodate all of us. Our driver, a non-Black man of color, arrived and brought us to the hotel safely. Upon pulling up to the hotel a police car was

blocking the curbside drop-off, so our driver pulled around and over safely in front of the police car. As we exited the vehicle the police officer came over and started to give our driver a hard time, that he shouldn't have pulled over there, blah blah blah-truly because it was BS. We had all exited and the driver could have easily pulled away if the officer felt it was an issue (which I guarantee it would not have been if I had been driving). The driver apologized and was happy to move on his way, but the officer kept on lecturing. I, the white woman, feeling frustrated by what I clearly saw as a racist encounter, felt empowered to step in. I verbally went after the officer. The officer warned me to stop talking, and as I physically moved closer he warned me to step back and stay on the curb. Still, I didn't back down, I thought I was doing the right thing, defending this helpless (insert saviorism) Uber driver being targeted by a racist cop. After some additional back and forth, and some words from my colleagues of color I snapped into awareness. I stopped. I realized that the Uber driver appeared concerned with my engagement with the officer, as did some of my colleagues of color. The officer ticketed the Uber driver and thankfully that is where the police encounter ended. It is possible that I pushed that officer to give a ticket and that without my Woke Vigilantism the driver may have gotten away with a warning. My anger, frustration and sloppy display of privilege clearly escalated the police officer. Had I not snapped to, only by the continued efforts of my colleagues of color standing by my sides, would I have caused a more harmful situation to occur, it is absolutely possible. I am grateful I did not contribute to a more dangerous police encounter and embarrassed by not having recognized the danger of my provocation prior to this encounter. I did the only thing I could do at that moment; I left a hefty tip for the Uber driver to hopefully cover the ticket and I committed to continuing to examine the space I occupy as a white woman and my presumptive actions as an "ally."

The true fear, and yes fear, is the fully engaged and willing to fly Woke Vigilante. Recall, this social worker is white, is culturally competent, has skills to engage and practice with the most vulnerable communities (due to their forced marginalization), and has a sense of morality to back them up: professional values and ethics. This is the child protective services social worker we see reporting a mother's use of marijuana, traumatizing and disrupting an entire family unit, to only then go home and unwind with a bottle *or two* of wine while caring for her own children. Imagine the white social worker, now the Woke Vigilante, working in Black neighborhoods. One night they find themselves feeling uneasy (read as *there is an adult Black man walking his dog at night*), feeling confident in their diversity cultural competency, they do not pause and evaluate, and instead believe firmly to be acting out of safety, calling the police on a Black man at night for scaring a white person. This is not a far-fetched story. The white people who call the police repeatedly on Black people are not all racist and in-fact it appears that some of them were those very liberal do-gooders. Social work cannot be complacent, forgetting the forewarnings of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and many others as to the danger of the liberal white (wo)man. Social work must be explicit to distinguish themselves beyond the basicness of (white) liberal and good.

In the same way that scholars throughout race relations and diversity studies recognize that white people are harmed by racism, this acknowledgement of the Woke Vigilante is a recognition that white social workers are similarly harmed by white supremacist structures being upheld in their professional education and training. White social workers do not want or consciously desire to maintain oppressive and racist structures. White social workers, particularly upon entering the profession, are idealist and hopeful of a different world where equity exists and justice is accessible to everyone; they may not yet know the language of “anti-racist.” These hopeful white social workers are subsequently harmed by trusting a professional education system that hasn’t done its homework.

Getting it Right

Social work *diversity* education need not stop with friendly lectures of “Diversity and Difference.” *Competency 3: Advance Human Rights and Social, Economic, and Environmental Justice* completes a curricular focus on *Diversity and Difference* (CSWE, 2015). It is precisely the active and dynamic combination of these two competencies in social work education that cracks open the earth, exposing the roots of white supremacy and racism. To be clear, *social justice* is the game changer. As conceptualized by Adams and Zúñiga, social justice is separate and different from diversity and difference in education (2018, p. 41). Social justice draws attention to “unequal social structures, supremacist ideologies, and oppressive politics and practices” and teaches us that it is through these mechanisms that “dominant social groups” perpetuate privilege and maintain the subordination and disadvantage of marginalized social groups (Adams & Zúñiga, 2018, p. 41). Without the anchoring of *Diversity and Difference TO Social Justice*, social work takes a chance in graduating the Woke Vigilante. To borrow Ashley Ford’s (2020) Tweet, “Empowered incompetence is so dangerous.”

Day One Do-Over

From the beginning academic social workers are modeling social work relationships and engaging in mutually symbiotic relationships with students, whether they intend to or not. Intentional, informed, and purposeful engagement with students is the first step for white academic social workers committed to uprooting white supremacy and racism within the profession. With this in mind, it is pertinent that white academic social workers consider their approach to the classroom, plan, and establish a means of reaching and engaging with students. If white academic social workers are to truly model a collaborative relationship, with foresight for students and clients, their approach to teaching needs to reflect as much. Adopting a teaching-learning philosophy provides the platform on which white academic social workers can acknowledge their position and simultaneously acknowledge the centering of the student experience (Grise-Owens et al., 2018). Drawing upon basic tenets of symbolic interaction theory, this can be viewed as demonstrative of the social worker and client relationship in recognizing that we each bring certain skills, resources, and expertise to the relationship (Rogers, 2019). Without one the other does not exist: without students there is no teacher. At this juncture it would be remiss to not acknowledge the discussions and concerns within social work regarding a need to

dismantle social work as we know it, so that the profession can be built anew. As a part of this reference discussion there is healthy critique and concern regarding how the oppressive systems in the U.S. maintain and produce a constant source of clients for social workers. This manuscript is not situated to address this larger discussion and recognizes the limitations of not doing so. Similarly, educators are situated within a larger social institution and must confront the challenges or limitations presented in fully engaging an anti-racist pedagogy for social work curricula.

The Day One conversations must include a reckoning of the terminology and socialization behind “helping” and encouragement to question and critique identification of values such as *Service* defined as helping (NASW, 2020). Programs must incorporate an unaltered and full spectrum display of history, founding figures, skills development and practice implications, theoretical approaches, acceptance, and understanding and application of research. Upholding the values, namely *Integrity*, of the profession, students must be entrusted to know the full story without rose-colored glasses. Students must know from day one the complexity in which this profession was born. There must be a foundation laid beginning with comprehensive history: actively identifying, naming, and decentralizing whiteness, thus modeling and flexing the social work values of *Integrity* in combination with *Social Justice*.

White educators need to be comfortable in acknowledging their identity and positionality of privilege as well as disadvantage in setting the stage to recognize and make visible whiteness, among other identities. Shame, embarrassment, or concern of being recognized as white and privileged is an exercise in futility; regardless of acknowledgement Black students, as well as others forced into the margins, see Whiteness. Recognition and awareness instead can serve to model and teach meaningful actions from a position of privilege, specifically that of becoming a social worker and committing to decentralizing privilege, in exchange for a move to the margins, expanding them in comparison to a center stage (Rogers, 2019).

Just Practice Framework

Remember, this is not new. Some 17 years ago Finn and Jacobson (2003) identified the need for a new social work paradigm, shifting away from previous theoretical perspectives and recognizing the need for a *Just Practice Framework* in which the authors identified the need for engaging and evaluating social work practice through five key themes: meaning, context, power, history, and possibility (Finn & Jacobson, 2003, pp. 69-73). Utilizing the just practice themes, social work practice moves away from an acceptance of the systems (oppressive) as they exist to an acknowledgment of the historical developments, exclusions, and influences that have shaped social work practice. In addition, the practice moves toward acknowledging the importance of shaping what social work can and will look like in each collaboration with a client system (Finn & Jacobson, 2003, pp. 69-73), be it to dismantle the child welfare system (Dettlaff et al. 2020), or to reinvent the role, responsibility, and engagement of social workers with police (Miller, 2020a).

As mentioned previously, authors Androff and McPherson (2014) offer a human rights framework as an approach to bringing together micro and macro practice arenas. The authors accurately recognize and acknowledge human rights are individual *and* universal, protecting the rights of every person *and* nations carrying out this responsibility (Androff & McPherson, 2014). This framework is complementary to the implementation of a Just Practice Framework.

Even with two monumental concepts, just practice and human rights, there must still be action, and social workers need specific skills to take action. Social work practice skills are often micro focused and like the narrative above illustrates, students are left feeling unsure of how those skills translate into social justice action.

Now Do Better

So how is it done? First, social work must recognize the uniqueness of our work and the implications of accepting a person-in-environment (PIE) perspective supported by ecological systems theories (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2018) – implications which require a shift in understanding practice arenas. If social work is to truly operate at the nexus of individuals, their environment, concentric and overlapping systems, then social work must teach skills which resonate in similar application. Social work must teach social justice meta-practice skills.

Social workers cannot back down from their commitment to *Integrity* and that requires an uncomfortable look at the allegiances, actions, and attitudes of white social workers. Using a Just Practice Framework, white social workers must re-envision the doing of social work (Finn & Jacobson, 2003). Social work is unique in that practice skills include those applicable to micro, mezzo and macro level practice. However, as stated in the aforementioned discussion, this approach is problematic in that all too often social work education is overly focused on micro level skills, without an explicit connection to social justice, leading to social work practice which perpetuates and maintains oppressive systems.

Within a just practice framework, we posit a reconceptualization of social justice as more than a value, perspective, concept, or macro level skill of advocacy. Social justice is a meta-level practice skill. Central to social work is empowerment, and critical to social justice is recognition of power structures and oppression. Meta-practice “emphasizes collaboration, connection and (w)holism, proposing an exposition of ‘power’ as primarily an exponential process (power with/within) rather than a linear/hierarchical” (Grise-Owens et al., 2014, p. 51). Meta-practice is beyond the micro, mezzo and macro delineations of practice and yet is an “inter-locking whole” all of these practice arenas. Meta-practice is so uniquely captured with the original words of the authors, “Relevant practice requires that social workers not merely understand micro-, macro- and mezzo-practice...the profession of social work can engage the ‘and’ that both connects and overarches our traditional understandings of practice” (Grise-Owens et al. 2014, p. 51).

Accepting social justice as a meta-practice skill that requires teaching, role playing, recording, critique, development, and enhancement over time positions all students

interested in all levels of social work to engage social justice in a purposeful and intentional practice. In this way, social work curricula reinforce skill development in a meaningful way, particularly related to competencies of diversity and difference and social justice (CSWE, 2015). It is of particular importance to recognize that while social justice is taught in accredited programs throughout the country, most often social justice equates to the activity of advocacy or activism on the macro level, an important and necessary role. It can be argued that those are the skills of social justice. This manuscript need not negate that position to affirm the position taken here of identifying social justice as a meta-practice skill. Anti-racist social justice skills in education recognize that no, not all students need the same lessons, and yet all graduates must be capable of the same skills. Social justice skills uphold the identities of all people, while simultaneously moving privilege into the margins by decentralizing Whiteness. Social justice skills include restructuring an intake form to remove boxes of race and ethnicity, encouraging clients to self-identify. Application of social justice skills is recognizing and saying out loud the privilege and power that you hold in a client collaboration, creating space for the client (system) to also speak freely to power and privilege in their journey with you. Social justice skills are advocating for the removal of “competence” in discussions of culture and diversity. Social justice skills are critiquing interventions and research with intention to move away from a binary lens of good and bad which inherently centralizes Whiteness. Social justice skills create space for clients to recognize their freedom and work towards claiming their freedom. Social justice skills are liberatory in meta-practice.

Beyond Careful

Social work has known for a long time that we need to do better; social work has known for decades the harm and the potential for harm that exists in the current structures of social systems of all sorts. It is not necessary to reinvent the wheel. In the aforementioned writings the social work value of integrity has been mentioned more than once. Again, this value of integrity is of the utmost importance for engaging social justice work. This will likely be difficult for many white social workers. White social workers cannot collapse into the state of white fragility feeling victimized, overwhelmed, and embarrassed for their history and role in maintaining anti-Black racism and oppressive systems (DiAngelo, 2018). Social workers know their uniqueness in being able to engage the most difficult work this world has to offer. Let us not stop with the work being our client collaborations and partnerships. As a white social worker, the most difficult work you have to engage in is ALSO your work to confront social injustice and move forward in ownership of your role, complacency and/or ignorance. Now, today, when you read this, you know better.

The desire to do good is no longer enough, nor should it have ever been. With social work projected to be one of the fastest growing professions, now is the time (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). Social workers must implement change and accept change! Yes, social work needs the radicals, the non-conformists, and those who simply want to reposition their privilege. Whether these are new students or the practitioners and academics with knowledge and wisdom of many years past, come out and show up to disrupt the trajectory of the social work Woke Vigilante.

Woke Disrupter

There is no shortage of terminology when identifying the role of white social workers in anti-racism work; ally, co-conspirator, saboteur, race traitor, accomplice and many more (Anderson & Hill, 2020). Social work will be faced with an absolute soul-shaking encounter and the subsequent ripping out of toxic anti-Black racist and white supremacist roots. It will be and must be uncomfortable. It is only through being pushed to the “learning edge” that comfort of the known can no longer protect us from learning that which is necessary (Miller & Garran, 2017, p. 8). Social workers have never shied away from a difficult job, the work has always been heavy. In a time when Black communities engaging with social workers have been so unjustly, unlawfully, and inhumanely traumatized, social workers have an obligation to commit to the hard work of removing themselves as contributors and maintainers of white supremacy. Social work must disrupt the profession from the inside out and from the outside back in. Social work must show a willingness to own and acknowledge the depth of harm and destruction social work has committed against Black clients, communities and colleagues, by a dismissal of the Whiteness within the profession. This. Is. Integrity.

Social workers must commit to the development of meta-level social justice practice skills and stop relegating social justice to the confines of macro practice. Social justice skills are meta-practice skills and must show up in all places where social work happens. Skills can be taught, practiced, learned, and expanded upon. Social justice is an ideal and it is achievable when we reconceptualize it as an action. After all, “[social] justice is a verb” (Miller, 2020b, 2020c).

In embracing social justice meta-practice skills, white social workers must also embrace their necessary role as Woke Disrupters. White social workers cannot stand on the backs of their Black colleagues, Black clients, and Black communities allowing them to carry the weight. Woke Disrupters must be willing to step forward and dismantle the profession, taking responsibility for the role and benefit white supremacy has afforded them. And in establishing a new paradigm for social justice work (Finn & Jacobson, 2003), Woke Disrupters must remain committed to hearing, supporting, and following the direction of Black social workers, students, clients, and communities.

Conclusion

Social workers have power – it is a collective power to transform the profession. White social workers must embrace the role of a Woke Disrupter. White social workers must own and sit in the discomfort, acknowledging their role in perpetuating white supremacy and anti-Black racism. Social workers must embrace social justice meta-practice skills outside of the macro arena, recognizing the arbitrary Eurocentric confines that have neatly organized boxes and delineated levels of practice. The time has come for the tables to turn. Black people have lived and died in discomfort and trepidation. No, every white social worker does not commit racist acts, and yet every white person is part of a racist system protecting their very skin. White social workers have a responsibility to examine and change those systems most accessible to them, certainly that includes the very profession

to which they belong. Woke Disrupters must apply gate-keeping skills like never before to address those white social workers or hopefuls who are unwilling to commit to anti-racist and social justice practice. After all, tolerance requires intolerance of that which may threaten tolerance (Popper, 1945; Rawls, 1971).

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