

You Have To Be Carefully Taught: An Analysis of Whiteness in Social Work Introductory Textbooks

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Abstract: *Social work as a profession stresses the importance of social justice, including racial justice. The Council on Social Work Education (2022) includes specific outcome requirements for student competency including integration of anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice. Five introductory social work texts were evaluated to understand how race was discussed as part of the history of the profession. Modeling Alemán's (2014) approach to analyzing race talk in communications curriculum, I applied the themes of normalization, individualism, negation and distorted racism to an analysis of the texts. Results indicate the presence of all four themes. If the profession aims to prepare students to engage in antiracist practices, it needs to utilize curriculum that includes accurate and inclusive historical accounting of the profession. This should include histories of the profession that use Critical Whiteness Studies to guide the deconstruction of White centered ideals.*

Keywords: *Whiteness, social work, race, textbooks, teaching*

Social work, a helping profession, aims to meet the needs of the most socially marginalized individuals while recognizing the importance of well-being within a social context and society at large (National Association of Social Workers, 2021). Social workers, through introductory textbooks, are provided a historical account of foundational principles of the profession. These histories often highlight the work of Jane Addams and Mary Richmond. This narrow view of history ignores important work done by social workers of color (BlackDeer & Gandarilla Ocampo, 2022; Burghardt, 2020). Social work texts neglect to recount how segregation and White supremacy are part of this history, seemingly assuming students have an implicit understanding of the roots of racism within the United States. While being segregated from many US institutions, Black Americans and Mexican American/Chicano people relied on mutual aid through their collective communities to ensure survival and mutual aid transformed into community action (Aranda, 2001; Bell, 2014; Carlton-LaNey, 1999; Dove, 2023). The first White settlement houses were established in 1890, and by 1920, African American women had created a variety of institutions, including homes for the elderly and for children settlement houses, and training centers to support their community (Carlton-LaNey, 1999; Jones & Haynes, 2023). Race talk is largely absent in these narratives. While virtually everyone named is White, Whiteness itself is unnamed.

By focusing on early social workers through a colorblind lens, unmarked Whiteness is reproduced and produces a myopic understanding of the field. In positioning these race as external in these narratives, rather than a key feature of the profession, social work scholars ignore that the profession was intentionally created and developed within White institutions (Gregory, 2020; Howard, 2017). In order to acknowledge the racist underpinnings of the social work profession, it is important to review how social work

textbook authors tell the origin story of the profession and to better understand how students in introductory classes come to learn about the profession and its history.

Social work history in introductory textbooks ignores the contributions of people of color, essentially erasing them from our history. While class inequality is often discussed in textbooks as part of social work history, these same texts fail to mention that racial segregation impacted accessibility to higher education, national coalition development and even the construction of public and private social services. These barriers directly impacted who could become a professional and practice in the field. Social work textbooks reinforce the Whitewashing of social work history by not discussing the exclusion of Black, Indigenous, Persons of Color (BIPOC) from White institutions or not discussing the parallel systems they created to meet the needs of their communities (Harty, 2023). These histories present racism as a relic of the past by ignoring ongoing racism, or only mentioning it if a White person was working as an ally. From the profession's founding, White supremacy has been a present feature of the workforce and racism is interwoven into institutional structures and policies (Whitaker, 2023). Social work textbooks do not account for the integration of social workers of color into previously exclusive institutions during the twentieth century. Through these exclusions and colorblindness, social work introductory texts present the history of the profession as unselfconsciously White. Thus, White hegemony is maintained.

In 2022, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) adopted specific requirements for student competency that included the integration of anti-racist and anti-oppressive social work practice at all levels. Students are meant to engage in these anti-oppressive practices through critical reflection, self-awareness, and regulation to understand differential levels of power, privilege and bias when working with clients. They should understand the pervasive impact of White supremacy and privilege (CSWE, 2022). Textbooks are the primary method of introducing subject matter to new students. Textbook selection is largely instructor and institution specific, however, social work scholars critique the profession for requiring anti-racist and anti-oppressive content while leaving the responsibility for ensuring culturally diverse and inclusive curricula to individual instructors (Feize & Gonzalez, 2018; Kohl et al., 2010; Lynch, 2022; Mora et al., 2022; Stevenson et al., 2022; Varghese, 2016). To contribute meaningfully to the 2022 CSWE competency changes, social work textbooks should reconcile the profession's historical relationship with White supremacy and colonialism before it can prepare students for truly anti-racist practice (Absolon, 2019; Brady et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2019; Dumbrell & Green, 2008; Gregory, 2021; Lerner, 2021; Tamburro, 2013).

Current research does not adequately address the presence of Whiteness in social work curriculum. Further, existing studies of social work introductory textbooks do not analyze the linguistic maneuvering predominantly done by White authors as they talk about race. The purpose of this study was to appraise how race is discussed as part of the history of the profession of social work in introductory textbooks. This study is important as it attempts to make sense of how introductory texts address race, including, particularly, through normalization, individualism, negation and distorted racism (Alemán, 2014). This was not an intersectional analysis, as the scope does not appraise other relevant areas of identity including class, gender, and sexuality that are similarly relevant to the construction of the

profession's history. Specifically, this study seeks to ask: how is race talked about as a part of the history of the profession in introductory social work texts?

Review of studies

Whiteness

Race is often referred to as a social construct that was developed specifically to exalt one subset of people while intentionally oppressing others (Aguilar & Counselman-Carpenter, 2021; BlackDeer & Gandarilla Ocampo, 2022; Bussey, 2020; Elkassem & Murray-Lichtman, 2022; Yee, 2016). It often results in dangerous or deadly consequences for those identified as racially undesirable (Lipsitz, 2018). Race based inequalities in the US are built upon White supremacy; this racialized system relies upon the logic that White people are the most racially desirable. This ideology is used to create and maintain hierarchical race-based systems that normalize White power and the oppression of those who are not identified as White (Leonardo, 2013). Whiteness is conceptualized in opposition to racial "others." With the marking of Whiteness as ideal and "normal" (Garner, 2007), it is the "the unmarked category against which difference is constructed, [w]hiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations" (Lipsitz, 2018). Unmarked Whiteness is a tool that creates and maintains systemic inequalities (Garner, 2007).

Whiteness scholars have worked to critique White supremacy and make Whiteness visible. Contemporary scholars argue that a third wave of CWS is emerging, emphasizing how Whiteness is constructed and normalized within a White supremacist society, and how identity classifications such as race reproduce inequity (Foste & Irwin, 2020; Matias, 2022). Further, critically evaluating Whiteness in scholarly research, experience, and curricular application requires researchers to directly confront their relationship to Whiteness and its impact on their scholarship (Foste & Irwin, 2020; Matias, 2022).

Textbooks, Whiteness and Professional Development

Content analysis of textbooks within the fields of sociology and social work is often focused on examining the presentation of gender and class in texts, with a limited number of studies examining race (Puentes & Gougherty, 2012; Strier et al., 2012; Wachholz & Mullaly, 2001). None of these studies specifically examines the presentation of social work history. Current literature highlights the importance of textbooks, particularly how they influence foundational knowledge for professionals and the role they play in reproduction of White hegemonic norms (Puentes & Gougherty, 2012; Strier et al., 2012; Wachholz & Mullaly, 2001). Additionally, each of these studies acknowledges the problems with existing textbooks and recommends that individual instructors provide correctives through supplemental readings that ensure students receive a diverse knowledge base.

To better understand how race is presented in a communications curriculum, Alemán (2014) analyzed the curriculum of 12 introductory and intermediate news writing courses and found that White racial identity remained unchallenged. Textbooks and instructors

often used language that deflected from conversations about race and White privilege. Collectively, new journalists were being trained to report the news through a White lens that allowed them to ignore their positionality and sincerely believe that they were reporting fair and unbiased news (Alemán, 2014). Through this ethnographic analysis, four primary themes of normalization, individualism, negation, and distorted racism were identified. This formulation of professional approaches and identity was also analyzed in nursing texts by Goodrick and Reay (2009). They found that through various rhetorical strategies, problematic past identities were not directly challenged in new identity formation, rather, the past was implied and through evolution of society, the new identity emerged.

A handful of studies have evaluated social work textbooks to understand how class dynamics are discussed or whether ideologies such as feminism, anti-racism and radical social work ideologies are presented (Strier et al., 2012; Wachholz & Mullaly, 2001). Tillotson et al., (2021) audited all syllabi within a social work department for BSW and MSW programs, creating a list of required texts used across the program. The sample consisted of 165 required texts with a total of 296 authors. This study found 84.62 percent of authors were White, 5.8% Latinx, 5.8% Black, 1.9% Asian American and 1.9% Native American. The primary gender of the authors was female at 55.8% and male at 44.2% (Tillotson et al., 2021). This study highlighted that most social work texts are authored by White authors and that the race of the author can impact the student's conceptualization of the content and the world around them (Tillotson et al., 2021). How social work introductory texts discuss gender differences also impacts the student in terms of positioning themselves within the profession. Giesler and Beadlescomb (2015) found textbooks either misrepresented history, by placing female historical figures in more prominent and influential roles, oversimplified by reducing instances in which men are mentioned, or omitted issues that men experienced related to sexism (Giesler & Beadlescomb, 2015). This study highlights that while the profession of social work is predominantly a field of women, the field may be seen as exclusionary based on the erasure of male social workers in introductory texts.

As presented above, current research on social work introductory texts is limited and does not specifically address how race is discussed in presentation of social work history in undergraduate or graduate curriculum. Specifically, social work research lacks a content analysis of race narratives within social work texts. Through the utilization of themes found in Critical Whiteness Studies, the current study aims to analyze how race, and specifically Whiteness are presented to students as a foundational part of the profession. Whiteness scholars provide a theoretical background of how White hegemony has influenced the construction of the US and has promise to reveal how Whiteness is endemic in the history of social work. Social work must come to terms with the hegemonic reinforcement of Whiteness within the higher education system and take measures to ameliorate the systemic inequality present to adequately prepare the next generation of social workers to enter the profession.

Method

When conducting research on Whiteness, scholars argue that research objectivity is difficult given the invasiveness of White supremacy within society and the overall normalization of White as the status quo (Matias, 2022). To avoid common pitfalls of colorblind racism, White researchers are required to engage in critical reflexivity to avoid semantic maneuvering when addressing the existence and unearned benefits of Whiteness. I am a White, cisgender, heterosexual, able bodied woman who was born in the United States. My education as a master-level social worker from an accredited university in the United States lacked the theoretical lens of Critical Whiteness Studies and contributed to my inadvertent oppression of peers and clients of color by my unexamined bias, microaggressions and individualistic ideals within my clinical practice. I would be remiss if I failed to mention that it is also my Whiteness that afforded me the privilege to speak about Whiteness within my educational pursuit. I recognize colleagues of color do not have the same ability to speak as freely about Whiteness.

The study uses qualitative content analysis to understand contextual nuances of race talk within textbooks (Puentes & Gougherty, 2012; Strier et al., 2012; Wachholz & Mullaly, 2001). I evaluated introduction to social work texts through deductive coding, utilizing a preexisting frame found within Alemán (2014), and definitions informed by the work of Bonilla-Silva (2021). This research used an etic approach, utilizing ideas and identified themes from the literature review to evaluating the data. This researcher used memoing to determine emergent ideas and utilize consultation to assess potential bias. Three rounds of coding were conducted to ensure the identification of relevant themes, the appropriate assignment of themes to quotations, and consultation with the author's capstone research committee to confirm accurate coding.

The sample was selected through a search of the most popular textbooks sold on Amazon in the United States, using the search phrase "introduction to social work," on the popular retail website. The top five introduction to social work textbooks were published between 2012 and 2022 from publishers Oxford, Springer, Routledge, Cengage, and Sage. Textbooks within the sample were as follows: *Introduction to Social Work* (Cox et al., 2021), *Empowerment Series: An Introduction to the Profession of Social Work*, 6th edition (Segal et al., 2019), *Empowerment Series: Introduction to Social Work and Social Welfare*, 12th edition (Zastrow & Hessemaier, 2016), *Social Work in the 21st Century* (Glick, 2010), *Empowerment Series: Introduction to Social Work and Social Welfare Critical Thinking Perspectives*, 5th edition (Kirst-Ashman, 2016). Selecting a sample of textbooks published within the past decade did not produce a significant enough sample, so the timeline was expanded to include more texts. The most recent edition of texts was used. This study followed a methodology previously used by Alemán (2016) in textbook content analysis within the profession of journalism and applied the ideas to the field of social work.

Texts were reviewed and coded using the four themes used in Alemán's (2014) review of communications textbooks, they were: normativity, individualism, negation and distorted racism. One limitation to utilizing preexisting themes is that the definitions may not fully capture the nuance of language within the text. Further, this researcher will note

when the evidence does not fit into the hypothesis and will report a negative analysis, providing a realistic assessment of the subject of study (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Results

In the five textbooks selected, there was a total of nine authors. Two books had three authors, and three books were written by a single author. Through examination of the authors' biographies found online, none of the authors specifically mentioned their race. While some authors provided a photo in their biography, there was not enough information for me to infer the race of all authors within the sample. All books selected varied in the number of times the texts were revised, with editions ranging from the 2nd edition to 15th.

Two of the five textbooks did not differentiate between the history of social work and the history of social welfare and instead included both in one chapter, without distinctions between the two histories. In these instances, I chose to include the entirety of the chapter in the sample. This decision was made to include the full chapters for these textbooks, as singling out some parts of the chapter as "social work" history as separate from "social welfare" history would require me to impose a distinction that the textbook authors did not make themselves.

Whiteness was not explicitly discussed in the five texts. No individuals were identified as White, and no mention was made of Whiteness as a central feature in the history of the country, profession, or populations served. When race was mentioned within the sections examined, it was done by identifying Black people as individuals and groups. Within the section of social work history, the use of race as identifier was used sparingly and often in relation to the population served, such as White involvement in racial justice movements or national coalition construction. This demonstrates that these texts implicitly suggest that White people have no race and that their Whiteness is not pertinent to the development of the profession. And that if race matters, only Blackness is relevant as a racial identity.

Normativity

Normativity is defined as the reaffirmation of the White identity as the norm and benchmark for human experience (Alemán, 2014). None of the texts explicitly identify White people as individuals or as a racial group. Instead, they only mark race as relevant when talking about Black people or by using racial code words like "urban" instead of race terms. This normativity is evident in the texts' reliance on the experiences of White social workers as the basis for conceptualization of the origins of the profession. While the texts focus on White social workers and services to White clients, this is not done with the awareness that they were White and that the history that is being told is from a White perspective. When discussing the development of Charity Organization Societies (COS), authors frequently present a narrative about workers and clients without mention of race:

The COS asked a family in need of relief to fill out an application, which was investigated to ensure a level of need. Then a friendly visitor, a volunteer committed to helping COS clients, was assigned to the family and asked to conduct regular home visits. Friendly visitors would attempt to address individual character

flaws and encourage clients to gain independence and live moral lives. Then a friendly visitor, a volunteer committed to helping COS clients, was assigned to the family and asked to conduct regular home visits. Friendly visitors would attempt to address individual character flaws and encourage clients to gain independence and live moral lives. (Cox et al., 2021, p. 43)

This example from Cox et al. demonstrates the normative assumption that both COS workers and clients were White, and that race is not pertinent to the story of the profession or the provision of services. Without knowledge of the historical context of systematic racism, the reader is led to believe that opportunities to provide and receive assistance were the same for all individuals.

The refusal to name Whiteness and the naturalization of a White perspective is also present when texts highlight individuals who are important to social work history. Only White founders are highlighted, and again, their contributions are not acknowledged as occurring in a multiracial society. The textbooks are not without some awareness of social identity, as some make clear mention of Jane Addams' class or religious privilege. In one example, Segal et al. engage in an overt discussion of class:

Jane Addams was born in 1860 to a middle-class family in Illinois. Her early life was one of economic and social comfort. Her father was a well-respected businessman who had served in the Illinois House and was a good friend of Abraham Lincoln. (Segal et al., 2019, p. 59)

Segal et al. find her class and familial class power of note but do not similarly see her race as pertinent to her position as a pioneer in the field. This omission could leave readers without a clear notion that Addams' work, and more broadly the development of the profession, is grounded in White privilege in addition to her other intersectional privileges.

Textbook authors discuss the origin of social work education in the United States without historical context related to race, segregation, and discrimination, and fail to mention the exclusive nature of who was served by social work pioneers. Instead, they suggest that social workers served all, particularly the oppressed, "[D]espite the different paths taken by the Settlement house and charity organization movements, social work pioneers were always dedicated to helping people victimized by the worst depths of poverty and oppression" (Kirst-Ashman, 2016, p. 209). This quote indicates that class impacted who was served and uses the multifaceted term "oppression" to suggest that social workers served other marginalized populations but does not explicitly say who was included in these oppressed groups. Without a clear articulation of who was served, this statement universalizes the reach of social workers' engagement. It also means that students are left to interpret this in multiple ways, projecting their own understandings of oppressed populations into this narrative. These texts do not explicitly address the reality of the profession's history as race impacted eligibility and delivery of services in many agencies as well as the training of professional social workers. The theme of White people as normative, and existing outside US racial logic, is articulated in different ways, yet is universal in these texts.

The vague reference to inequalities, commitments, and the equally imprecise delineation of who constituted social work leaders and teachers is an exercise in racial normativity. In the texts, unmarked individuals and groups are White, thus in this example, latently White social worker leaders and teachers are identified as concerned about social inequalities, allowing them the moral position without clear engagement with how they might engage in inequality-making. This faint engagement in social justice heroics is grounded in a rosy and normative retelling of professional history that does not clearly explain how racism works and ignores the centrality of Whiteness.

Normativity is demonstrated through colorblindness within the texts when founders of the profession are highlighted without reference to their race.

Included in the settlement movement were people who advocated for the rights of Black Americans, such as Lillian Wald, who addressed racial integration as director of the Henry Street Settlement in New York City, and Mary White Ovington, a settlement house worker. (Cox et al., 2021, p. 42)

The invisibility and normativity of Whiteness is clear in this text as the authors highlight the contributions of two White women as prominent leaders in racial equality, and do not mention that they are White. This example heralds the work of White women who are not identified as White, moreover this example also erases the work of Black activists. The naming of Whiteness in this passage is critical to the story being told, as it would spotlight the importance of White allyship and ideally illuminate the problem of normative story telling by not naming Black activists as central to Black liberation.

Individualism

Individualism highlights an individual's ability to overcome obstacles without acknowledging the existence or absence of systemic barriers that complicate life chances and through the abstract definition of individualism and utilizes a logic of personal moral failure to replace the logic of oppression (Alemán, 2014; Urquidez, 2022). The textbooks contained statements of individualism throughout, including discussions of the deserving and undeserving poor, the influence of Elizabethan poor laws on the early development of social work, and the services provided by the Hull House.

When conceptualizing the development of COS, Segal et. discussed the goals of the organizations to eliminate poverty and address the root of the social ill.

The first Charity Organization Society (COS) was established in Buffalo, New York, in 1877 as an organized effort to eliminate poverty (Erickson, 1987). Its goal was to discover what caused poverty among individuals, eliminate the causes, and thereby rid society of poverty. The focus of the COS was on the individual and reflected the belief that poverty was a character defect. By rehabilitating individuals, COS participants believed, poverty would be eliminated. These principles gave rise to the use of friendly visitors, at first volunteers and later paid professionals trained to guide people to change behaviors that contributed to poverty and to become productive, healthy adults. (Segal et al., 2019, p. 58).

The authors' description of the need to eradicate poverty, which is described as grounded in character flaws is consciously about individualism. This example demonstrates that the authors are aware of individualism as a foundational idea in the profession, however, in retelling this history, they do nothing to question the flawed logic of "character defects" as the source of poverty. If this example is meant to provide a critique of individualism, it is not clear in the text and might be lost on new social work majors with neoliberal worldviews. In this quote, workers are noted to engage in changing the behavior of clients to produce "productive, healthy adults" because the logic presumes that individualism could conquer all (Segal et al., 2019, p. 58). Moreover, the idea of productive, healthy adults was racialized, then as it is now, yet this is not explicitly named in the framing of COS's philosophy and service delivery in this text.

Textbook uncritical discussions of COS's individualism in the retelling of COS history is also present in Zastrow and Hessenauer's (2016) narrative:

Charity organizations conducted a detailed investigation of each applicant for services and financial help, maintained a central system of registration of clients to avoid duplication, and used volunteer "friendly visitors" to work with those in difficulty. The friendly visitors were primarily "doers of good works"; they generally gave sympathy rather than money and encouraged the poor to save and to seek employment. (p. 38)

The provision of sympathy, rather than tangible aid aligns with individualistic understandings of society, including the denial of structural inequalities like classism and White supremacy. Zastrow and Hessenauer's use of quotations around "friendly visitors" and "doers of good work" yet his intentions in using the quotes is unclear. While this might be meant to destabilize both of these ideas, this is not explicitly done in the surrounding text and so, this possible critique of individualism hinges on students' interpretation of these subtle grammatical marks.

Through the lens of individualism, Whiteness is evidenced by the removal of historical political and social context when presenting information about the work of the Hull House:

The Hull House community believed that poverty and the lack of opportunity bred the problems of the ghetto. Ignorance, disease, and crime were the result of economic desperation and not some moral flaw in the character of the new immigrants.

Jane Addams promoted the idea that if afforded a decent education, adequate living conditions, and reliable income, any person could overcome the obstacles of the ghetto; furthermore, if allowed to develop his skills, that person could not only make a better life for himself but contribute to the community as a whole. Access to opportunity was the key to successful participation in a democratic, self-governing society. The greatest challenge and achievement of the settlement was to help people help themselves. (Glicken, 2010, p. 30)

With this limited description of the work of Jane Addams and the Hull House, the authors correctly identify the need for access and structural changes for economic opportunities. Yet Glicken concludes this section by placing the responsibility for change on individuals,

arguing that “people helping themselves” was the intended solution rather than systemic changes. This focus on individualism is repeated when Glicken focuses on an individual’s skills to better the community instead of the removal of systemic obstacles that directly impact individual choice and agency. The viewpoint presented by Glicken is both individualistic and meritocratic, designed to limit the capacity to engage in meaningful interrogation of the ways these liberalistic ideals are impacted by larger social and systemic issues. The omission of the macro-level interventions provided by settlement homes presents a limited scope of social work foundation and reinforces the individualistic ideals of the author. This focus on individualism is also seen when Glicken focuses on an individual’s skills to better help themselves instead of an examination of systemic obstacles that directly impact individual choice and agency and challenge structural inequalities such as classism and White supremacy.

Negation

In relation to Whiteness, negation is described as a minimization of historical legacies of racialization, discrimination and overall, the denial of structural racism was also present in the sample (Alemán, 2014; Bonilla-Silva, 2021). Some texts within the sample do not differentiate between social work and social policy history, so policies and events that pre-date the beginnings of the profession are included without clear distinction. This blending of social work and social policy history allows for an expansive and ahistorical notion of the profession’s engagement starts far before its founding in the late nineteenth century. In these books, social work is presented as ever-present in US history. While racial inequalities, White supremacy, and justice work were happening during the Progressive era, the texts tend to position racial inequality as occurring earlier in the nation’s history. Much of these vignettes occur during the colonial and early Republic periods, casting racial inequality in the vast historical past and inferring that these advocacy efforts are somehow connected to the yet-to-be-founded profession:

Advocacy measures did not often apply to enslaved people. In 1808, under the terms of the Constitution, the importation of enslaved people to the United States ended. However, what emerged was a domestic trading industry of enslaved people built on the sale of children and kidnapping of free Black people. (Cox et al., 2021, p. 42)

Cox et al. note that advocacy measures did not often apply to “enslaved people”, however failed to provide clarification that these enslaved people were Black or that the bulk of enslavers and slave traders were White. This section discusses slavery without talking about the centrality of Blackness to American slavery, and only mentions race with the modifier “free” in relation to “Black people”. Cox et al.’s retelling of Black enslavement in the US without a discussion of race, including Blackness, Whiteness, and White supremacy produces a distorted history.

This negation is repeated when Cox et al. do not mention race in their description of slavery, instead explaining the financial necessities of the institution:

Slavery in colonial America was integrally linked to profit. Specifically, tobacco required physical labor to plant a harvest, and using enslaved people as both planters and harvesters of tobacco translated to high profit yields at low costs. Colonists cultivated their land with minimal cost and high profits. Extending beyond the plantation system, the slave trade grew rapidly due to the demand for cheap labor. (Cox et al., 2021, p. 42)

Cox et al. do not acknowledge the social and historical patterns of inequity based on racial social group membership. Discussion of cheap labor suggests that workers received some level of compensation. Similarly, this hurried discussion of enslavement hints at the physical demands of the job but does not problematize why this work was done by enslaved Blacks, reifying old White supremacist ideas about the biological inferiority of Blacks and that include faulty beliefs in the essential biological aptitude of Blacks for labor. By attaching slave labor to profit, the author not only reinforces the meritocratic principles that normalize White supremacy, but also minimizes racialized discrimination by relying on an economic justification of slavery while ignoring that Black people were systematically enslaved because of their Blackness and that White people were the enslavers. Cox et al. avoid the term White, and instead, use “Colonist”. The erasure extends, as they ignore the labor of enslaved Black people in a section on enslaved labor, stating that “Colonists cultivated their land with minimal cost and high profits”. This colorblind re-telling of slavery ignores that Whites primarily benefitted from enslaving Black people and that Blacks cultivated the land and Whites profited. Moreover, this solely economic argument, without reference to race, does not articulate that the benefits for Whites were not limited to wealth attainment, but also social and political status rooted in the oppression of Black people.

Negation is also done in the authors’ retelling of Reconstruction and the second half of the nineteenth century:

In the half-century after the Civil War, economic depressions, racism, and drastic increases in immigration from southern and eastern Europe prompted an awareness of the need for social programs and helping organizations to assist millions of people who were experiencing economic and social displacement. The recognition of serious social problems following the Civil War led to what was then called “scientific charity”, an attempt to use concepts common to business and industry to cope with larger social problems... This distinction between large-scale efforts to resolve social problems and a more individualized approach set the stage for the earliest notions of the helping process in social work. (Glicksen, 2010, p. 29)

This example references racism and social need but does not articulate the shapes that racism took during the period for different racial groups (i.e., who did the racism and who was impacted by it). It also fails to explain that racism, was the direct result of oppression fostered primarily by Whites. This example of historical amnesia, of privileging White versions of history, negates the experience of Black people post-Civil War and demonstrates the historical depiction of race within the United States as binary with no mention of other people of color during the period. By grouping every person experiencing economic and social displacement together, the author adds racism as a temporal ill along

with immigration and economic depression. Without a discussion of power that includes race, Reconstruction, the Gilded Age, and the Progressive Era are poorly reproduced in the narrative.

Distorted Racism

Distorted racism conflates racism with prejudice and colorblindness, where racism is considered “a relic of the past” and racist acts are now individual overt actions without connection to systemic manifestation (Alemán, 2014; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). Because the sample focuses on the history of the profession, it is expected that race will be discussed as a historical fact. Yet, in the texts, authors tend to position their discussions of race in the 19th, but not the 20th and 21st centuries. Similarly, the three texts that highlight social work history specifically do not provide a date or the presence of racism, instead mentioning civil rights and highlighting dates for policy development and how they correspond to poverty or class, indicating that throughout all textbooks within the sample, racism is a relic of the past and does not exist within the 20th or 21st century.

Colorblindness is expressed in some of the texts. For instance, Glicken discusses the policies and adversities faced by President Obama with no mention to race:

Just as Franklin Roosevelt came to power in the midst of the Great Depression, Barack Obama came to the presidency in the midst of serious economic difficulties including a housing bubble that burst causing massive numbers of foreclosures and a banking system on the verge of collapse. Because of the crisis in the American economy, Obama has had to deal with a variety of very unpopular rescues of the banking and financial system that have greatly increased an already huge deficit left from the Bush presidency... To Mr. Obama’s credit, he has taken these challenges in stride and continues to advocate for a number of progressive social policies and programs to help poor and middle-class citizens in the coming years. (Glicken, 2010, p. 36)

The presentation of challenges, without the overt mention of President Obama being the first Black president, fails to fully contextualize his political opposition. Additionally, throughout the text, Glicken refers to previous presidents, in their first mention as “President”, however in reference to President Obama, references him as “Obama” or “Mr. Obama”.

The term “racism” is used sparingly within the texts and often as a description of the social justice focus of the profession or discussed as a historical artifact, with no present indication of its existence. Further, when racism is mentioned, it is not fully explained. Cox et al. states “More sympathetic to Black Americans and their causes, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt helped facilitate Marian Anderson’s performance at the Lincoln Memorial after the singer was denied the right to perform at Constitution Hall because of her race” (Cox et al., 2021, p. 46). In this example, the author accounts for the history of segregation through a White lens, by not naming the policies and politics that create and maintained anti-Black segregation in the Nation’s capital. The author assumes that readers have a sufficient background in understanding the structural problem of White supremacy.

Moreover, this retelling positions Eleanor Roosevelt as the hero of this story. By focusing on the individualistic act of inclusion of Eleanor Roosevelt, a White woman is centered as a champion, and it allows for the erasure of White individuals and institutions that created the racial exclusion by glossing over the facts of segregation and its actors.

Discussion

It is through the construction of our past that shared history and ideals are reinforced and an understanding of ourselves can begin (Loewen, 2018). Social work textbooks discuss the origin story of the profession and in doing so create a roadmap to understanding the profession at present. However, textbook authors reinforce a history that is shrouded in unacknowledged Whiteness and as a result does not provide an accurate account of the profession's history (Loewen, 2018; Yacovone, 2022). Loewen (2018) echoes this point in talking about the role of history textbooks, noting that "Textbooks stifle meaning by suppressing causation" (p. 7). Introductory to social work texts do much of the same, presenting the profession in a favorable light, studded with a selection of luminaries of the profession. This consequentially fails to facilitate critique of the structures on which social work is founded. Without addressing the larger sociopolitical and racial dynamics that caused the construction of social work, social work textbooks remove a vital piece of the history that is foundational to the profession. The textbooks in this sample evaded an overt discussion of Whiteness and racism within the construction of the social work profession, yet doing so did not obscure Whiteness but instead reinscribed it as the norm (Carlton-Laney & Carlton Alexander, 2001; Gary & Gary, 1994; Gillani et al., 2023; Harty, 2023; Wright et al., 2021).

In excluding discussion of racial segregation or people of color in the foundation of social service, the textbooks normalize the work of wealthy White, educated women providing social services during the progressive era (Champagne & Fisher, 2023). The idea that people are autonomous individuals who are not constrained by systemic and race-based challenges is frequently noted throughout social work textbooks. Authors noted that individualism was a foundational idea of the profession but do little to challenge the individualist belief that individuals and character flaws are a source of social problems. Through individualism, there is an absolution of the role of the social work profession in reinforcing systemic oppression and continues group based racial discrimination under the guise of policy (Bonilla-Silva, 2021).

Omitting social workers of color in the retelling of the profession's history creates a distorted racism that erases the contributions of people of color and minimizes the presence of racism within the field. When we omit this history from our textbooks, it leaves students without a clear picture of the profession's history. This lacuna could suggest that people of color are newcomers to the field and that there is not a long tradition of mutual aid within communities that were barred from White private charities or state and federal programs. Moreover, it ignores that the post-civil rights era, which brought more access for people of color to White institutions. The profession's history did not end in the Progressive era. The last sixty years are a vital part of social work history, and they were not a racial utopia. When people of color won legal access to social work education, practice, and services,

their experiences were not free from racism. Yet, this story of race and the profession was ignored by the textbooks in this sample.

Limitations

Limitations to this study include the sample size of textbooks and how they were selected. This researcher chose five most popular textbooks, purchased and available on Amazon within the United States. It is uncertain how many social work institutions or classes teaching introduction to social work currently use the textbooks selected. With no information on what all accredited universities within the United States are utilizing for this course, this study cannot be seen as a representative sample.

Conclusion

Racism is not biological in nature but instead is a social construction that has to be carefully taught. Social work as a profession upholds the ideals of empowering marginalized communities while advancing social justice efforts to address and alleviate systemic issues such as poverty and inequality. . However, social work textbooks have a long way to go in terms of reconciling the relationship with the profession's history in upholding White supremacy ideals and concepts through themes such as normativity, individualism, negation, and distorted racism. For a profession committed to anti-racist practice, social work textbooks must identify the inherent Whiteness within the historical retelling and cannot take a colorblind positionality, rather, naming and critiquing it. Faculty rely on introductory textbooks to provide a theoretical framework for new students; this is a moment when students begin to construct their personal professional identity. Individual professors should not bear the sole responsibility of providing students with a racially aware history of the profession. This is something that should be integrated into introductory textbooks. For the profession to evolve, social work textbooks must name White people as having a race and understand how Whiteness was central to the creation of a profession that intentionally excluded people of color. This history is important, as we need to wrestle with our own roles in perpetuating racism to truly prepare students for anti-racist practice.

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