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If Not Now, When? A Call to End Social Work's Tolerance of White Supremacy in the Academy

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Abstract

Despite ethical responsibilities to dismantle systems of oppression, White supremacy ideologies and practices are still inundated in social work academe to the detriment of Black, Indigenous, Latino, and Persons of Color (BILPOC) communities and faculty dedicated to teaching the next generation of critical scholars, activists, and clinicians. Four themes are introduced to exemplify how the academy remains overpowered by the need to sustain the status quo of White power. In the first theme, social work's long-standing history of omitting BILPOC experiences in curricula is discussed. The second theme characterizes social work's legacy of omission via inaction to address unjust governmental practices at the U.S. Southern border, thereby perpetuating the cycle of White power. Cementing these positions, we shift the discussion to the inherent pressures within the academy that prizes productivity above all else, perpetuating the culture of White supremacy. In turn, spaces to engage in creative thinking and teaching to dismantle systems of oppressions are limited. Lastly, we discuss the increasing pressure to produce "euro-centric" rigorous scientific knowledge takes precedence at a time when we must place equity and fairness on equal footing. For each of these four themes, we offer suggestions for how to create spaces for racial reconciliation, healing, and equality.

Keywords: institutional racism, oppression, white supremacy, social work research, education

At a perilous time, when our society acknowledges we are facing multiple, inter-related pandemics – COVID-19, systemic and structural racism across multiple institutions, and police brutality and criminal injustice toward Black, Indigenous, Latino, and Persons of Color (BILPOC) populations -- we must call into question our norms for “conducting business as usual” in academia. Without question, 2020 has reminded us that despite decades of calls by social work scholars and advocates to expose and eradicate social injustice, structural racism remains “built within, by and on a White supremacist culture, which has the effect of assisting White citizens achieve success, while making it more difficult for Black citizens to do the same” (Taffe & Gilpin, 2021). In many ways, our profession has not lived up to its mission – social work has contributed to perpetuating discrimination and oppression of our clients and colleagues of color. Amid chaos and uprising, social work professors and leaders need to ensure that actions in practice, research, and teaching within the walls of the ivory tower are guided by our ethical responsibilities and the needs of the BILPOC community.

As social work faculty, we provide examples of how the social work profession has yet to actualize and uphold our ethical duty to

promote the general welfare of society, from local to global levels, and the development of people, their communities, and their environments. Social workers should advocate for living conditions conducive to the fulfillment of basic human needs and should promote social, economic, political, and cultural values and institutions that are compatible with the realization of social justice (Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers, Ethical code 6.01 (2018, p. 29)

While social welfare academe is not immune to abandoning the ethical code, the academy remains overpowered by the need to sustain the status quo of White power/supremacy, to the detriment of (1) BILPOC communities, and (2) social work faculty who grapple with the institutional incapacity and inadequate support to educate and train students to advocate for equal rights and opportunities for BILPOC populations.

As an initial attempt to evoke dialogue and meaningful exchange that moves from a place of inaction to action, we center the discussion across four themes that exemplify White supremacy ideologies and practices in the academy. For each theme, we humbly offer suggestions for how to create spaces for racial reconciliation, healing, and equality. The first theme elucidates social work’s long-standing history of othering and omitting BILPOC experiences in curricula and classroom content, thereby failing future generations of social workers and isolating students of color. The second theme describes social work’s legacy of omission via inaction to elucidate and address unjust, unethical, and illegal governmental practices at the U.S. Southern border. Social work leaders and educators have yet to label child separation as child maltreatment of an ethnic minority group, thereby perpetuating the cycle of “Whiteness” and unjust treatment toward Latino populations. Our collective lack of leadership exemplifying complacency fails to offer students and future generations of social workers with a “roadmap” to speak out and eradicate not only against mistreatment at the Southern border, but any form of unjust treatment that runs contrary to our ethical code. Cementing these positions, we then shift the discussion to the inherent pressures within the academy that prizes productivity above all else, perpetuating the culture of White supremacy. In turn, spaces to engage in creative

thinking and teaching to dismantle systems of oppressions are limited (Theme 3). Not only is productivity valued above all else, but the last theme also exemplifies how certain types of knowledge, teaching, and curricula are favored. The increasing pressure to produce “Eurocentric” rigorous scientific knowledge takes precedence at a time when we must place equity and fairness on equal footing. With the expectation to favor positivism over subjectivism or interpretivism and RCTs over qualitative studies, social work researchers are inherently pressured to prioritize content that reflects Eurocentric priorities. These are challenging issues and we do not propose to solve all of them in this paper. Rather, by sharing our observations and experiences as social work faculty, we hope to encourage critical reflection and dialogue that progresses toward an accountable engagement of the complexities of actualizing our mission to ensure social justice collides across multiple contexts, classrooms, and institutions.

Theme 1: Whiteness in Social Work History

The historical recounting of the social work profession used in introductory social work courses is often limited to the achievements and advocacy of White social workers. Social workers like Jane Addams are celebrated but equally accomplished Black activists like Ida B. Wells are seldom mentioned. The profession names challenging social injustice based on culture and ethnic diversity as a core principle, but there is little expectation of educating students on racial equity in historical and introductory focused course content. In absence of discussing the anti-racist shortfalls of the profession, as well as the lack of celebration for BILPOC social workers and activists, we isolate students of color from the beginning of their social work education.

Adult higher education settings are often seen as maintaining institutionalized racism to the extent that higher education administrators consistently do not recognize White privilege among faculty and students (Harper, 2012). In a systematic analysis of peer-reviewed journals centered on higher education, Harper’s (2012) review of journal articles ($N = 225$) found that Black students and faculty were consistently described as needing intervention due to “disadvantaged backgrounds” instead of addressing White supremacy on college campuses. Despite the Council on Social Work Education’s (CSWE) expectation that social work graduates will understand differences in social identity and privilege, social work curricula often focuses on the study of colorblindness, outdated concepts of cultural competence, and the White-centered history of liberal arts (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Davis, 2019). Specifically, historical social work education has been critiqued for “lumping together all minorities of color as persons with special needs...and focusing upon African American life and history as beginning after the Civil War” (Johnson, 1991, p. 2-3).

By othering and ignoring BILPOC experiences, social work historical pedagogy is likely failing future generations of social workers and isolating students of color (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Davis, 2019; Johnson, 1991; Reisch, 1988; Wachholz & Mullaly, 2001). The study of colorblindness, or the denial of racial dynamics and unawareness of racism, has shown an association between anxiety and fear of racial minorities with awareness of White privilege and colorblindness (Neville et al., 2000; Spanierman & Heppner, 2004). It is also worth noting that CSWE did not play a role in antidiscrimination advocacy or promote antiracist curriculum until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s (Trolander, 1997). Even today, social work courses focusing on multiculturalism social work or anti-racist practice are offered as electives instead of required courses (Davis, 2019).

If anti-racist content were built from the beginning of social work curricula, one would expect positive outcomes not limited to social work students but also for those across other disciplines who take social work electives. Undergraduate introductory courses that focus on social work history are often accessible to non-social work majors and may be one of the only exposure undergraduates have to understanding oppression and racial inequality (Wachholz & Mullaly, 2001). It is likely that increasing social work introductory course educators' anti-racism knowledge is a starting point for improved student experiences. In a study of educators in healthcare and helping professions, instructors showed significant difference in personal commitment to addressing racism in education after attending a workshop on racism and inequity (White-Davis et al., 2018). Similarly, students have been shown to benefit from anti-racism curriculum (Davis, 2019; Ford, 2012). Students with more historical perspective on racism report fewer color-blind beliefs (Davis, 2019) and growth after taking anti-racist courses as one student states; "I now not only understand what it means to be white but also have a better idea of the significance of identities different than my own" (Ford, 2012, p. 145). Further, 94% of surveyed MSW students (N=305) reported wanting more content on the Civil Rights Movement in their courses. Students have been shown to benefit from anti-racism curriculum (Ford, 2012). Given the positive outcomes associated with understanding privilege and racial attitudes, history centered courses in social work have a responsibility to guide students in conversation of race and racism (Davis, 2019). Further, future social workers exposed to these ideas early in their education may be more likely to integrate race and ethnocultural issues in treatment and case plans if they hold such beliefs (Davis, 2019; Neville et al., 2006).

Theme 2: The US Border Response as Unreported Child Maltreatment

The implications of "calls to action" and offering students "tools in their toolbox" to speak out against and dismantle racism and injustice are only the firsts step and not a sufficient response to promote social justice, as exemplified in this next theme. The forced family separation at the U.S. Southern border is one of many situations that demonstrate what happens when social work leaders and educators do not take sufficient action to address injustices that would not be tolerated among groups with power and privilege.

During the Trump Administration, drastic immigration policy changes initiated in 2018 resulted in massive family separations among those migrating to and seeking asylum in the US (Office of Inspector General, 2018). Parents detained at the Mexican-US border were sent to federal jails and their children were driven to child detention centers. These institutions received stark criticisms by outside observers because the conditions children experienced in the centers were described as inhumane (Mendoza & Burke, 2019; Peeler et al., 2020; Sherman, Mendoza, & Burke, 2019). Further, the US Department of Human Service's inconsistent record keeping resulted in the inability to reunite many families after the policy had ended (Baylis, 2022). Indeed, the southern US Border situation is complex and multifaceted. Whether understood as an immigration matter or humanitarian concern, families are fleeing their home countries in hopes of improving their livelihoods and securing safety. Many families were escaping gangs, poverty, violence, and other life-threatening circumstances (Obinna, 2021). Yet, once they arrived in the US, these families continued to suffer as they were torn apart with no information about where their other family members were sent (Baylis, 2022).

According to the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), child maltreatment is defined as "any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caregiver that results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse, or exploitation, or an act or failure to act that presents an imminent risk of serious harm" (P.L. 11-320). States can further specify this law by classifying minimum thresholds of acts and behaviors that meet this definition (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). Conditions reported at the child and youth detention centers are consistent with the child maltreatment definition because they include emotional harm resulting from family separation and practices that forbid children from being allowed to have physical contact with siblings (Peerler et al., 2020), medical neglect resulting from children's medication confiscation during processing (Halevy-Mizrahi & Harwayne-Gidansky), and in extreme cases, even death (Baker & Timm, 2020). Yet, despite the calls to action, tool kits, and open letters from national social work professional organizations and academic institutions to address the border crisis, neither have overtly and intentionally named forced family separation practices as child maltreatment. While child maltreatment is often considered in a family context, institutions can also be perpetrators. A recent news report in 2021 uncovered widespread child maltreatment that included neglect, and physical and sexual abuse occurring in a foster home managed by a national foster care corporation (Rappleye, Kingkade, & Salzman, 2021). The consequences of this widespread maltreatment resulted in the closure of several facilities.

Using a critical lens, we need to understand how the presence of racism and xenophobia within social work institutions and organizations influenced the insufficient response to the forced separation of families seeking refuge, asylum, or better opportunities in a nation renowned for its wealth and resources. Specifically, we must ask how the lenses of White supremacy and ethnocentrism have framed this issue as an immigration issue rather than child maltreatment. Using a "racial parallax" approach, described by Blanche Bong Cook as changing the race, or in this case, ethnicity, of the actors involved, we must question if the outcome would have been the same if the victims did not belong to a historically oppressed group (Price, Lollar, & Cook, 2020). If the children detained at the US Border were White, non-Hispanic/Latinx, would family separations have occurred? Moreover, if the separations would have still happened, would the response from social work leaders and educators have been different? Indeed, social work has a history of complying with policies that have not been in the children's best interest, such as "friendly visitors" that targeted impoverished families (Calvo & Bradley, 2021, p. 920). Still, the profession strives to improve itself, and we are now at a precipice in which identifying the oppressive and racist systems within the profession could prevent the emotional and psychological harm for thousands of children in policies that intentionally remove children for parents due to immigration reasons.

While the Zero Tolerance Policy was revoked several months after its initiation, it serves as an event from which social work can learn. Social work leaders and academic institutions must move beyond calls to action and name the practice of forced family separations and child detentions as child maltreatment rather than poor immigration policy or social injustice. Naming these policies and practices as such reaches farther than a call to action because it requires that such practices warrant legal action. Lastly, social work educators should guide students to critically assess child maltreatment beyond family contexts. Curriculum efforts should critically challenge and teach students to question the structural role of power and bias in reporting, or not reporting, child maltreatment. Educational institutions can also add professional continuing

education seminars to specifically address practices of separating children and families at the US borders as abusive because they meet the federal definition of child maltreatment.

Theme 3: Productivity Push

As our pursuit of actualizing a more just and fair social work academy is impeded as exemplified in theme two, professors also face an uphill battle to engage in more inclusive teaching and research, as White supremacy is still embedded with the walls of the “ivory tower”. White supremacy shows up in our everyday lives in a multitude of ways: employers’ preference for ‘White sounding’ names versus ‘Black sounding’ names, higher incarceration rates and lengthier sentences for Black men, beauty standards from a Eurocentric lens, professionalism from a White-centered perspective, colorism, and many others. White supremacy culture has been defined as:

the idea (ideology) that white people and the ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions of white people are superior to People of Colour and their ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions. White supremacy expresses itself interpersonally as well as structurally (through our governments, education systems, food systems, etc.) (The Center for Community Organizations, n.d., p. 7).

Just as we must name and question the taken-for-granted ways that White supremacy presents itself in our daily lives, we must also name and question the characteristics of White supremacy culture that present themselves in our social work institutions, including the social work academy. Certain features of academia (e.g., the high-pressure, publish-or-perish atmosphere) point to a White supremacy culture, namely the characteristics of progress defined as bigger/more, quantity over quality, and sense of urgency (Dismantling Racism, 2016). With all of our efforts in schools of social work to dismantle racism and adopt anti-racist practices with our students, there is a need to interrogate oppressive aspects of culture among the professoriate.

As social workers, we know that our social service systems and structures are not immune to the norms and standards that prioritize whiteness. However, the various ways that White supremacy shows up in our expectations and criteria for social work faculty have not adequately been examined. To be certain, some authors have started to question the status quo of a high-pressure environment for junior faculty and doctoral students (Berg & Seeber, 2017; Lightfoot, 2019). However, social work academic institutions have widely bought into White supremacy culture’s preferences in how to evaluate and gauge the success of tenured and tenure seeking faculty, administrators, and even doctoral students (Lightfoot, 2019). When evaluating faculty, “things that can be measured are more highly valued than things that cannot” (Dismantling Racism, 2016, p. 30; quantity over quality) -- number of publications, grant dollars received, number of proposals submitted. The quantity over quality push can be viewed as a form of academic capitalism (Gonzales, Martinez, & Ordu, 2014; Slaughter and Leslie, 1997). We’ve monetized new knowledge and creative thinking; students are now “consumers”. The numbers game relates to the “sense of urgency,” another characteristic of White supremacy culture that presents itself in academia. With the increasingly competitive job market for new PhDs, students wanting to work in academia need to leave with upwards of 10 publications to even be considered by research-intensive universities. Publishing on top of coursework, completing a dissertation, and having some semblance of a personal life does not leave much

room for curiosity, innovative thinking, and exploration. The productivity push runs counter to deep work and deep thinking (Newport, 2016) that accompanies creative insights and thought work necessary for moving the science of our profession forward.

Unchecked growth to programs (e.g., more students, more money) is not without a cost. In many universities, student populations are becoming more diverse at faster pace than faculty and staff. For faculty of color, they frequently take on invisible labor (e.g., mentoring underrepresented students) in addition to their ‘official’ job tasks that include tenure requirements that are oftentimes more intense than their predecessors. Yet White supremacy culture among the social work professoriate harms everyone, not just faculty of color. Burnout among faculty and staff and compromised quality in our education and research are just a few of the consequences for these unexamined norms. During 2020 and the COVID-19 epidemic, the pressures for faculty and staff intensified as the boundary lines between work and home all but disappeared. In many ways, expectation for teaching loads, student engagement, grant dollars, and publications did not change, despite the additional burdens that accompanied surviving a global pandemic (e.g., home-schooling kids, navigating job loss, physically distancing from supportive others, etc.). Balancing demands with rigor, and critical reflection with humility is challenging at best.

While we acknowledge that we as faculty are continuing to struggle with the “balancing act” ourselves, we offer recommendations with humility, hoping that they spark continued discussion and eventual resolution towards restorative justice for the professoriate (and in turn, for our students who will face similar challenges unless we instill balance). First, administrators and positional leaders must model productivity that does not threaten our livelihood. Moving a research or teaching infrastructure forward in its mission cannot come at the expense of our emotional and physical well-being. Professional goals and evaluation of both pre-tenured and tenured faculty can incorporate feasible work plans and realistic time frames. Research and scholarly endeavors often take longer than anyone expects, so where possible – deans and directors can account for the flexibility inherent in doing research and advancing scholarship. Leadership and administration can embrace complexity around what makes a successful faculty member - rejecting either/ or thinking. As much as possible, leadership can attend to individual strengths and skills of their faculty to guide and mentor people to develop their own unique path as an academic, while also considering college/ department-level needs.

As faculty, we need to find supportive others, like-minded people who share similar values of what work-life balance might look like. Our collegial support system can serve as a reality check for us when we feel ourselves sacrificing sanity, personal well-being, and our ability to attend to our loved ones on behalf of productivity. Further, because being immersed in a culture means it can be hard to have perspective, we may need to find others outside our college/ program/ department; our sounding board may need to have some physical and emotional distance from our organization. Likewise, we need to allow ourselves space and time to engage in thoughtful decision making, particularly when it comes to saying ‘yes’ to new projects and assuming additional responsibilities without discarding others. The culture of our organizations may be one of “urgency” (Dismantling Racism, 2016, p. 29) and junior faculty can sometimes feel hesitant to turn down offers to collaborate, for fear these opportunities will not come around again. We can give ourselves permission not only to say no, but to take some time

to make decisions when it comes to how we may spend our time pursuing teaching, research, mentoring, and service opportunities.

Theme 4: The Misguided Divide between Scientific “Rigor” and Social Justice

Our last theme addresses how much and in what ways social work professors are expected to allocate time to centering (or decentering) the construction and dissemination of certain types of knowledge that reflect the voices and experiences of BILPOC communities. Students, scholars, instructors, and social work practitioners alike often cringe and convey implicit or explicit messages of distaste when they hear “evidence-based practice” (EBP). Embedded in those messages are preconceived notions of what the evidence-based practice process entails – and even what counts as evidence. Besides perceptions of EBPs as overly rigid, costly, and diminishing social worker expertise, there is a resounding notion that the EBP process devalues race, equity, and fairness. At this perilous moment in our history, our actions must be guided and informed by applicable evidence. Indeed, it is our ethical responsibility, as stipulated in the Code of Ethics (Section 5.02), to 1) monitor and evaluate policies, the implementation of programs, and practice interventions; 2) promote and facilitate evaluation and research to contribute to the development of knowledge; and 3) critically examine and keep current with emerging knowledge relevant to social work and fully use evaluation and research evidence in their professional practice. These ethical responsibilities, by their very inception, are intended to hold us to account – to make sure that what we deliver is effective for diverse populations. How we uphold these ethics and “critically examine” our practice, research, and teaching tend to vary, however, depending upon our role and the institutions we are immersed in. In academia, for example, reaching for “gold” standards to achieve “empirical rigor” is arguably prioritized, often over and above what students, practicing social workers, or even clients may value. To be clear, both rigor and client values are considered, albeit we argue that the increasing pressure to produce “euro-centric” rigorous scientific knowledge takes precedence at a time when we must place equity and fairness on equal footing. In these spaces, with the expectation to favor positivism over subjectivism or interpretivism and RCTs over qualitative studies, social work professors may feel pressured to prioritize content that reflects Eurocentrism. We must ask the critical question - Are we striving for Eurocentric rigor, but sacrificing justice-oriented approaches and perspectives in research, teaching, and practice, thereby unknowingly perpetuating the culture of White supremacy?

The pressure to teach methodological approaches that align with positivist or post-positivist epistemologies is unquestionable. The disproportionate number of quantitative versus qualitative courses that are required by social work graduate students to enroll in exemplifies this reality. Perhaps the pressure is driven by external entities that send messages that RCTs are favored. Take for example the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) passed by Congress in 2018, has compelled states to expand their priorities to implement evidence-based mental health services, substance use treatment, and in-home parenting skills training to prevent foster care placement. As part of the states FFPSA plan, they need to either include EBPs already approved by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), or commission an independent technical review for the EBP they would prefer to implement as part of their FFPSA plan. As explained by Garcia and colleagues (2021), study designs that assess effectiveness (i.e., impact on safety, permanency, and or child well-being) of the EBP in question must use quantitative methods and utilize an appropriate control. Eligible study designs include randomized controlled

trials (RCT), quasi-experimental designs (QED), and other non-experimental designs that use an appropriate control. Knowing these types of expectations forces social work professors to prime students to adhere to these “gold standard” expectations. What if qualitative or pilot studies, however, are the only studies that capture the experiences of BILPOC communities who have faced years of oppression and mistreatment by the very institutions we are training social workers to work for? Are we restricting scholars, practitioners, and students to think within a limited toolbox?

Another example, The California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse (CEBC), spells out more precisely what counts as “evidence”. According to the CEBC (2006-20), an intervention does not receive a “well-supported by research evidence” rating unless it meets the following criteria: 1) at least two rigorous randomized controlled trials (RCTs) with nonoverlapping analytic samples that were carried out in usual care or practice settings have found the program to be superior to an appropriate comparison program on outcomes specified in the criteria for that particular topic area; 2) at least one of these RCTs, the program has shown to have a sustained effect at least one year beyond the end of treatment, when compared to a control group; and 3) The RCTs have been reported in published, peer-reviewed literature.

While the CEBC definition arguably discounts the value of clinical expertise, and client expectations and values (Wike, Bledsoe, Manuel, Despard, Johnson, Bellamy, & Killian-Farrell, 2014), the National Association of Social Work defines EBP as a process “in which the practitioner combines well-researched interventions with clinical experience, ethics, client preferences, and culture to guide and inform the delivery of treatments and services” (NASW, 2022). In essence, higher ratings by clearinghouses like the CEBC are reserved for those studies that adhered to Eurocentric epistemologies and quantitative methods. The next logical question then is: to what extent are client voices and experiences captured in RCT and quasi-experimental studies? To begin to unpack this question, Garcia and colleagues (2019) identified four evidence-based parenting interventions from the CEBC that are categorized as “well-supported” by at least one of these rigorous designs and achieved a diversity threshold in which at least 40% of the study samples included children and families of color. They include Parent-Child Interaction Therapy, Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Level 4 TripleP (Pathways Positive Parenting Program), and Multi-Systemic Therapy. During semi-structured interviews, scholars and agency leaders who implemented these interventions and/or evaluated them reported that while they are indeed effective for diverse populations, these groups are more likely to experience inequities in access to EBPs, and barriers to actively engaging in them (Garcia et al., 2019). Their work underscores 1) that there are indeed a limited number of interventions to select from, if you are seeking evidence-based parenting interventions that incorporate the voices and experiences of BILPOC families and children, and 2) we must challenge the very notion of what should be valued in practice and taught in classrooms. Students must be taught how to identify and dismantle structural and systemic barriers that prevent accessibly to applicable EBPs, and racial healing for BILPOC communities.

When reflecting upon our teaching, we must also consider how the selection of content (and how it is delivered and by whom) is influenced by external pressures to conform to Eurocentric or White ideologies, despite the challenges BILPOC populations face in how they are “researched” and represented, if at all in RCTs. There are promising studies and initiatives that pave a path towards balancing rigor and racial justice on equal footing in social work

academia. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) Interdisciplinary Research Leaders (IRL) supports teams inclusive of scholars and community practice experts as they work to design and conduct rigorous research to explore critical issues of concern, and then apply the findings in real time to advance health and equity (RWJF, <https://interdisciplinaryresearch-leaders.org/>). Now supporting their fifth cohort of IRL scholars, RWJF is a stellar example of building the support, capacity, and infrastructure to dismantle systems of oppression while also advancing science that will instill meaningful and impactful change in traditionally underserved and marginalized communities. The community practice partners hold the academic scholars to account, making sure the research is timely, relevant, and pragmatic while the scholars ensure that the science advances relevant and applicable knowledge. These types of exchanges undoubtedly shift or further enrich pedagogical approaches. In essence, “non-traditional” research agendas supported by RWJF transcend to “non-traditional” teaching that embraces more inclusive and relevant curricula.

Like RWJF, there are several research projects that balance rigor and equity. Garcia and colleagues’ Promoting and Empowering Positive Perceptions of Evidence-Based Parenting (PEP2) child welfare study (2019, 2020a, 2020b) relied on parent and provider perspectives to inform the development of implementation science frameworks. In doing so, they captured the stories, narratives, and experiences of BILPOC parents who engaged in TripleP, and the challenges providers had to overcome to deliver the program to them.

The Indigenous Wellness Research Institute at the University of Washington (see Duran, Walters, & Evans-Campbell, Indigenous Wellness Research Institute [iwri.org, n.d.]) is another exemplary model of how to engage in community grounded, culturally applicable translational science. IRWI’s mission is to “support the inherent rights of Indigenous peoples to achieve full and complete health and wellness by collaborating in decolonizing research and knowledge building and sharing.”

PEP2 and IRWI offer relevant and timely opportunities to exchange findings, stories, or case studies from diverse communities with students in the classroom. Those same stories could then be used to evoke inter-group dialogue in classes and offer students rare opportunities to engage in reflexive and critical thinking. In these rare moments, as illustrated by RWJF, PEP2, and IRWI, social justice collides across multiple contexts. The notion of “scientific rigor” is transformed to reflect and center BILPOC experiences— and the relevant knowledge is then used or translated in meaningful ways to enhance practice and pedagogy.

If social work education is to encourage an epistemological and methodological approach to research as critical emancipatory, we must teach that it is a tool, venue, and set of processes that examine power and elevate the voices of those most impacted by inequities. Research is then utilized to shed light on disparities and gaps of the human experiences and focus on the struggles. Research is used to harness knowledge and information to better improve the human condition, dismantle oppressive forces, alleviate trauma and pain, and facilitate empowerment and healing. Mixed methods are often used throughout the research process with intentionality of building capacity with the people and/or community, embracing community-based research.

Trinidad’ (2018; 2016; 2014) work in teaching and mentoring social work undergraduate and graduate students focuses on strategies to enhance their engagement in community based,

critical emancipatory research and to apply critical Indigenous pedagogy of place. Power analysis and the identification of the gaps and disparities in diverse communities are core elements of the curriculum. Stories of how programs and services have been shaped through time, space, and place, and policy implications on multiple levels are integral. This includes stories of how programs and services have been shaped through time, space, and place, and policy implications on multiple levels. Research must integrate decolonizing and indigenizing processes, including having authentic dialogue on how data justice/sovereignty is promoted. Collaboration and participation are key to building capacity among the people involved in the research process and/or knowledge production and dissemination. Schools of social work may face challenges to build infrastructure and authentic partnerships with communities, especially BILPOCs who have felt neglected and face systemic mistrust. Developing connections from the ground up is necessary however, to foster community-based research. At this current moment, we who are part of the professoriate have the ultimate sense of accountability and ethical obligation to break the walls of elitism and encourage shared knowledge building.

In summary, while COVID-19 has disrupted how we engage with students, colleagues, and community stakeholders in virtual spaces, it is impossible to ignore the how the pandemic has illuminated the challenges facing BILPOC communities through structural racism in multiple forms (e.g., police violence, wealth disparities, housing segregation, health/mental health care inequities). As described in this paper, we see four themes that illustrate the visible and unseen workings within the social work profession that serve to further subjugate BILPOC populations. These are challenging issues and we do not propose to solve all of them in this paper. But, by sharing our observations and experiences as social work faculty at various levels (tenured and tenure-seeking; administrators and regular faculty, etc.), we do hope to encourage reflection and dialogue toward an accountable engagement in teaching, research, and practice that engages in racial healing and upholds our code of ethics.

Contribution to Social Work Policy, Practice, and Knowledge.

The themes we focused on shed light on questions that should compel all of us to contemplate and reflect upon: 1) what and who gets covered in social work curricula and what steps are needed to ensure BILPOC lived experiences are equally represented? 2) under what circumstances do social work advocates and educators leave systems and institutions unchecked for sustaining White supremacy, albeit it be within or across U.S. borders? 3) how might the demands of the social work professoriate need to change to embrace creativity, reflexivity, and critical thinking to dismantle systems and institutions of oppression and White supremacist ideologies? and 4) what knowledge is represented, valued, and depicted in research and teaching spaces, and how can social work programs institutionalize and reward placing rigor and social justice on equal footing? While we do not have concrete answers, we tentatively offered suggestions to consider. We also acknowledge that responses to these complex questions may vary, depending upon individual, collective, and institutional priorities and structures, and values (Valderama-Wallace & Apesoa-Varano, 2019a, 2019b, as cited in Valderama-Wallace and Apesoa-Varana, 2020). As scholars, we recently turned to Valderama-Wallace and Apesoa-Varana (2020) model, who illustrate the relationships between nursing faculty conceptualizations of social justice and their pedagogical orientations and practices. Teaching approaches that embody social justice principles (e.g., facilitating reflection and dialogue, mentoring, calling out social injustice by challenging racialized and gendered norms, and incorporating context and

lived experience) pose risks to career advancement and personal well-being. While these risks include negative course evaluations from students who are resistant to these pedagogical approaches, and the time, stress, and emotional labor involved in implementing them, they can support transformative learning and tangible tools to rely upon in practice contexts (Walsh et al., 2020). On the other end of the continuum, Valderama-Wallace and Apesoa-Varana purport that faculty sustain White supremacy and colonialism by placing blame and onus on the individual, rather than considering the broader context by which structural racism and oppression permeates. In these circumstances, racism and other forms of isms go unchecked as faculty believe students must be vocal (rather than reflective and relational). What lies between actualizing social justice and maintaining the status quo is some degree of “awareness”. The authors assert that while awareness does not necessarily exemplify social justice teaching, it can be viewed as a critical step in that direction. In the classroom, professors who are keen to “awareness” often encourage and welcome questioning, include racial diversity in lectures slides, conflate culture with race, and situate culture with non-White, non-Christian, and immigrant persons (Valderama-Wallace & Apesoa-Varana, 2020, p. 9).

Perhaps then a critical first step is to reflect upon where we as social work faculty sit on the continuum proposed by Valderama-Wallace and Apesoa-Varana (2020). In doing so, we must acknowledge organizational priorities and values within social work programs and the broader context of the universities and colleges that either embrace social justice or maintain the status quo of “whiteness”. To expect social work professors to reflect upon and potentially modify their pedagogical orientations and methods to equip students to grapple with structural racism that likely exists in the very institutions they will work for without the support of higher education institution sets us all up to fail. At the end of the day, we must consider whether to 1) add curricula that reflects BILPOC experiences in foundational course work, 2) challenge pedagogical norms by delivering curriculum that encourages students to call out and name injustice when we see it happen (e.g., family separations at the Southern border), 3) confront and hold our institutional leaders to account to carve spaces for us to engage in deep and critical reflection to live up to our code of ethics, and 4) engage in research that places rigor and social justice on equal footing, thereby informing and guiding what content is delivered in classroom spaces. At this juncture, social work needs to take its rightful place in combating structural racism and other forms of inequities that continue to inundate our country’s narrative. As we have demonstrated, COVID-19 has served to shine a light on the injustices that social work academe must continue to eradicate. It is our moral and ethical call to end social work’s tolerance of White supremacy in academe.

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