

The Obligation of White Women: Dismantling White Supremacy Culture in Social Work Education

**Sara Plummer
Jandel Crutchfield
Desiree Stepteau-Watson**

Abstract: *On Memorial Day 2020, a white woman, Amy Cooper, was walking her unleashed dog in New York City. After being apprised of the leash law in that state by a man bird watching, Ms. Cooper proceeded to call the police stating an “African American man” was “threatening her life and that of her dog” (Ransom, 2020). While this event may seem unconnected to the field of social work, it is a modern example of the way white women, including those in social work, use emotionality, bureaucracy, and the law to control Black bodies. Social work has been and continues to be, responsible for policies and practices that maintain white supremacy culture and criminalize Black people.*

Keywords: *White supremacy, social work education, white women, racism, dominant culture*

Historically, social workers have been the foot soldiers, and at times commanders, of racist policies that propelled oppressive and violent actions against Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). This paper will offer an exploration of how White women, the demographic dominant in the field of social work, have aided, abetted, and led racist policies and laws. Social workers’ coordination and management of such activities as the eugenics movement (Kennedy, 2008), and of Virginia’s Racial Integrity Act (RIA) (McRae, 2018) are just two examples of how White women in the field of social work worked to uphold white supremacy culture.

The field of social work has long stated its values and ethics as an example of an anti-oppressive and social justice mission and goals. But just as Ms. Cooper’s response to the NYC event included “I’m not a racist” (Aguilera, 2020, para. 18), the field of social work and in particular white women social workers and educators relied on their own definition of racism and oppression. The self-reflection in the field of social work has been and continues to be superficial and, with any self-run assessment, inadequate. It is far time for the field of social work and in particular, the White women, who make up the majority of the field, to reckon with their complicity and leadership in racist activities that have maintained and propelled white supremacy culture in social service institutions and the structures that support them.

Background

On Memorial Day 2020, a white woman, Amy Cooper, walked her unleashed dog in Central Park. Mr. Cooper, a Black man, who was bird watching in the same area apprised

Sara Plummer, PhD, MSW, Assistant Director, BASW Program and Assistant Professor of Teaching, Rutgers School of Social Work, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ. Jandel Crutchfield, PhD, LCSW, Assistant Professor, School of Social Work, The University of Texas at Arlington, Arlington, TX. Desiree Stepteau-Watson, PhD, LCSW, Associate Professor & MSW Program Director, Department of Social Work, School of Applied Sciences, University of Mississippi, Southaven, MS.

Copyright © 2021 Authors, Vol. 21 No. 2/3 (Summer 2021), 1006-1019, DOI: 10.18060/24467



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

of her the leash law in New York. Ms. Cooper's response was to call the police on an "African-American man" who was "threatening her life and that of her dog" (Ransom, 2020). Ms. Cooper's reaction and falsehood is a modern-day example of how Carolyn Bryant in 1955 used her privilege as a white woman to lie and cause the murder of Emmett Till (Perez-Peña, 2017). White women have used emotionality, bureaucracy, and the police to control and threaten Black, Indigenous, and Latinx people, and they continue to do so today. While these past and present events may seem unconnected to the practice of social work, it is time to identify and examine how white women in general, and white female social workers specifically, have been at the forefront of actions that maintain white supremacy culture and further the criminalization of Black and Brown people. As a field that is majority white (68.8%) and female (83%; Salzburg et al., 2017), it is necessary to analyze how white supremacy culture appears in social work.

Social work has long proclaimed its values and ethics as an example of its anti-oppressive and social justice platform. But just as Ms. Cooper's response to the NYC event included a defensive retort of "I am not racist" (Ransom, 2020), the field of social work, and, in particular, white women social workers, have hid behind the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2008) to convey a facade of "cultural competence" and "inclusion" while its practices contradict those assertions. The social work profession has relied on its own definitions of racism and oppression (CSWE, 2015), and in turn ignored and erased the concerns of BIPOC individuals (faculty, students, and clients; Dominelli, 1989; Maylea, 2020). Furthermore, the field's propensity for self-righteous attacks and finger pointing externally has stifled significant internal reflection that is so greatly needed. White women and white social workers have and continue to be the foot soldiers, and at times leaders, of racist policies that have propelled oppressive and violent acts against Black people. Therefore, the profession must come to a reckoning with its legacy of racism and white supremacy culture before it can move forward. The authors will offer an exploration of how white women, the demographic dominant in the field of social work, have aided, abetted, and led racist policies and laws. The authors will provide suggestions on how the profession can address these inherent issues.

What Is White Supremacy Culture?

Perceived white supremacy has roots in the very founding of the United States, when Indigenous persons were slaughtered and killed. Those who survived were forcibly removed from their land and relocated to reservations (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). White supremacy was codified when Africans were captured and enslaved so that their unpaid labor could be used as the economic foundation for building the United States. Instilling the notion of a superior white race was necessary so that persons of European descent could continue their colonization efforts (Kendi, 2016). In the United States and the rest of the Americas, the notion of a superior white race was necessary to control the millions of enslaved Africans. Nogueira (2013) has said, "these hierarchical, unequal and inhuman relations between colonizers and colonized, which are based on race, mainly contributed to the foundation of global capitalism and all the modern Western society" (p. 24) Freire (2000) posits that dehumanization occurs when a people are oppressed that impacts both

the oppressed and the oppressor. In this form, when the oppressor experiences dehumanization it allows for further oppression to occur and sets the stage for perceptions of superiority to be embedded in both the oppressor and the oppressed. According to Freire (2000), in his seminal work, the oppressed must emancipate themselves in order to become more fully human, and when the oppressed become more fully human then so do the oppressors. The modern day BlackLivesMatter movement is seeking to emancipate black people from threats to their humanity, but in so doing, the oppressors will also benefit because they can become more fully human in the process.

In the 18th century pseudo scientists propagated a “race theory” that suggested whites were genetically superior (Billings, 2016), while people of color and especially people of African descent were said to lack intelligence, beauty, morality and humanness. The idea of a superior white race has become normalized and institutionalized (Billings, 2016) such that, in general, those who consider themselves to be white accept all the unearned privilege without critically examining its origins (Nogueira, 2013).

Rooted in history and custom, whiteness remains the standard by which all groups, including people of color, are judged and evaluated (Sue, 2006). The vehement and violent pushback that Black Lives Matter advocates experience (Holloway, 2020) suggests that white superiority is so well entrenched in our society that the suggestion that black lives have merit is unfathomable. Although, clearly not rooted in reality, because whiteness is not in fact superior to other groups, it is the perception of superiority that continues to plague all aspects of society, including social work education and the provision of social work services. Despite the emphasis on equality, justice, and human rights, many white social workers enter and leave schools of social work without ever examining their internalized perceptions of superiority.

Even using the term white supremacy centers and empowers egregious whiteness while subliminally disempowering the agency, strength and truth of the power of black people (D. E. Tolliver, personal communication, July 16, 2020). Using this term implies the concept of power as if it were truth. In western worldview, dichotomous either/or thinking is embraced, and employing the use of the term white supremacy invokes its counterpart-non-white inferiority (D. E. Tolliver, personal communication, July 16, 2020). White supremacy has often been associated with pictures of the Klu Klux Klan, the confederate flag, or more recently as in Charlottesville, Virginia, white men with tiki torches (Murphy, 2017), all images that evoke deep hatred of people who are not white. This extreme version, while representative of white supremacy culture, also erases the everyday white supremacy that is threaded throughout our society. In fact, it often only spotlights the male involvement in these acts. White women have been long absent from conversations related to white supremacy even though their presence has been evident throughout time.

Defining “White Women”

Race is a social construct. While different cultures throughout time (for example the ancient Greeks) have always deemed themselves superior to others, skin color and the idea of race was not always used to define and categorize people (Biewen, 2017). Created by Prince Henry the Navigator from Portugal and his biographer Gomes de Zurar, *race* was

used to build a hierarchy by which to explain enslavement and maintain power (Kendi, 2019). Whiteness was created to uphold slavery and to withhold the voting rights of formerly enslaved black men. In a historical sense, whiteness helped to restrict the emerging political power of newly freed Blacks. Biological racists, such as Samuel Morton, continued to perpetuate the belief in inherent differences among humans by race, through the promotion of false statements around intelligence and ability based on such things as skull size (Biewen, 2017).

While it may be easy to place the blame on these racist theories and views on white men alone, it is necessary to point out that white women were just as invested in the economic and political benefits of enslavement and restricting freedom during reconstruction (Jones-Rogers, 2019). The dominant view of white women as being virtuous, vulnerable, and needing protection, particularly from Black men who would want to sexually assault them is epitomized in the 1915 film "Birth of a Nation," (McRae, 2018). As stated earlier the murder of Emmett Till, a black child, for supposedly whistling at a white woman store owner, further exemplifies both the power of white women and their perceived helplessness. Despite popular views of white women being helpless, they have and continue to yield significant influence within society, including the promotion of white supremacy culture. Indeed, history reveals that "white women have both shaped and sustained white supremacy politics" (McRae, 2018, p. 3).

The Historical Protection of White Women

Throughout time, white women have actively worked to maintain their privilege and status by promoting white supremacy (McRae, 2018). White women have always expressed their superiority in society and have used every tool possible to maintain a hierarchy of presence and power (Jones-Rogers, 2019). Further, they have historically chosen their whiteness over their femaleness and over the rights of others (McRae, 2018). Just as white female enslavers did during antebellum times, white women today work tirelessly to maintain power and control and challenge those who try to interfere with that goal (Jones-Rogers, 2019). This could not be better exemplified than by the results of the 2016 election, with half of white women voting for Donald Trump, a man who based his platform on racism and misogyny (Pew Research, 2018). Jaffe (2018) provides some insights into the white women's vote for Trump in 2016. White women who voted for him de-emphasized any sexist statements, indicating it was a characteristic they were willing to ignore or look past (as they have for centuries). Additionally, the desire to maintain their wealth, rather than be potentially impacted by raised taxes pushed financially well-off women to choose Trump. Finally, xenophobia and outright racism sparked their vote for Trump out of fear of increased immigration to the United States and an overwhelming and historical (and unproven) belief that there is a need to defend "white women's purity" (Jaffe, 2018, p. 21). Therefore, as we examine the field of social work and its ties to white supremacy, it is essential to examine how white women have historically used their position to maintain their place of power through violence, policy, and the creation of false narratives about Black men and women, evoking stereotypes that remain today. The majority of history has been crafted and written by white people, hence the term "whitewashed." White women have crafted a historical narrative that frames their space in

the world as fragile, deserving, well-intentioned, and oppressed (Glymph, 2008). Additionally, white women have largely been absent from discussions surrounding the United States' history of slavery, racism, and violence done to Black and Indigenous people. The protections white women have received in telling their history are unequal to any other group in our society, yet they are as culpable of the harm done to marginalized people as their white male counterparts. Historical literature suggests white women were oppressed and subject to cruel patriarchy, and in turn innocent to the creation and perpetuation of slavery, yet white women found power and control in roles such as "plantation mistress." True history suggests white women were not only as brutal as white men, but at times even more cruel and violent (Glymph, 2008; Jones-Rogers, 2019). After reconstruction, white women across the nation used their power and privilege to maintain Jim Crow rules and led the resistance to racial equality (McRae, 2018). From California to Texas to Massachusetts, white women led the call for such racist acts like forced eugenics and gathering support to end social security and income tax (McRae, 2018).

The Violence of White Women

The assumption that white women were innocent bystanders in the genocide of Native Americans and enslavement of Africans due to their own subordination as women is false and misguided. Many white women were the direct recipients of power and wealth that arose from owning human beings (Glymph, 2008). White women based their power and prestige through the promotion of the image of a well-kept and well-run home. Black women, responsible for the majority of tasks necessary to maintain this image, were the primary recipients of their violence. Violence by white women towards Black women was used as a form of control to promote an air of perfection, a characteristic of white supremacy culture (Jones & Okun, 2001). Further, white women justified their violence by blaming the enslaved individuals on their refusal to become "better girls" (Glymph, 2008, p. 6), a clear desire to advance assimilation. If an enslaved woman did not live up to the expectations placed on them daily, they were deemed lazy, uncooperative, unlady like, and intentionally trying to sabotage the white woman's place in society (Glymph, 2008).

Once enslaved individuals were emancipated, white women continued to work to maintain domination and control over Black people. With this newfound freedom, white women lost the ability to provide acts of "benevolence." The changed landscape threatened the white woman's place as a helper, a kind person meant to relieve the pains of the day (ignoring that this pain came from slavery itself; Glymph, 2008). Both men and women enslavers needed to see themselves as "honorable, just, and loved by their slaves" while simultaneously oppressing and abusing them (Glymph, 2008, p. 29). These very women became future educators and social workers bringing with them their prejudices and racist beliefs.

White Women in Social Work

According to the Council for Social Work Education's 2018 survey of social work education in the United States, the majority of all students in part time or full time undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral programs are white (non-Hispanic) and female.

CSWE (2018) also reported that part-time programs tended to have more underrepresented groups than did full time programs. This trend was also born out in the social work faculty educating these students but is even more skewed to white women at the faculty level. According to the survey (CSWE, 2018) faculty members from underrepresented groups only made up 33.1% of full-time faculty members. Similarly, those students that graduate from social work programs with bachelors, masters, and doctoral degrees are mostly white non-Hispanic women.

Similar to the student demographic make-up in social work, the majority of currently practicing social workers are white women. Salzburg et al.'s (2017) report to CSWE also provided a snapshot of the demographics of the social work workforce. Twenty-six percent of active social workers at that time were African American at the bachelor's level, while 19% of active social workers at the master's level were African American. For Hispanic and Latino social workers, 15% were practicing at the BSW level while just 10% were practicing at the master's level. The majority, more than 75% of master's level social workers are white and majority female and nearly 65% at the bachelor's level.

White Savior Complex and the Draw to Social Work

Literature documents how popular culture of the white savior is popularized in the media, socializing a diverse group of viewers to the concept that white women are often the saviors of downtrodden Black, brown, and other peoples of color (Hughey, 2011). White savior movies reinforce white supremacy culture in fields like education, health, and social work in that white women are the sole individuals who can lift someone out of their despair. White Savior movies demonstrate the unique kindness of a white person taking care or coming to the aid and rescue of a poor person of color. Movies such as *The Blind Side*, *The Help*, *Green Book*, *The Greatest Showman*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and others reimagine history to promote white supremacy and perpetuate stereotypes of the weak and unintelligent Black person who needs saving (Singer, 2020).

Beyond general media, social work historical narratives have also portrayed the settlement house movement started by Jane Addams as the major initiator of social work. This similarly, recreates the white savior model, while simultaneously skimming over the efforts of early Black and brown social workers that also served their communities. Early settlement houses and Charity Organizations were staffed by college educated white women from middle to upper class homes looking to obtain "personal fulfillment, self-realization, and accomplishment beyond home" (Iglehart & Becerra, 1995, p. 112). Their entrance into the field of social work was born from a desire to break free from the societal restraints placed on women at that time. Further, they sought to gain a sense of self and accomplishment through the role of nurturer and "social mothering" (Iglehart & Becerra, 1995, p. 112). Much of this caretaking was premised on making immigrants "Americanized" based on Christian values, subsidized by major corporations such as Ford Motor Company (Iglehart & Becerra, 1995; Martin & Martin, 1995). Therefore, it is essential that white women must reflect on why they entered the field of social work. Whether it is due to the socialization from early viewing of films and movies or a genuine desire to want to help, white women should problematize any narrative that simply offers

a “wanting to help” motive that doesn’t acknowledge how this is influenced by white supremacy of them being the ones identified as saviors. In one particular op-ed by Audrey Batterham (2020) pushing back against the wrong of saving “we are just trying to save them from a moment in time or failure from sobriety, etc.” (para. 8) the portrayal of white women as do-gooders is upheld as just simply that. The author encourages other white social workers to acknowledge that they do want to “save” clients instead of feeling guilty about the savior complex. This speaks to the larger culture of white saviors in the profession, indeed this is who her op-ed is targeting as an audience.

Historical Comparison to White Women Social Workers

Comparing the historical behaviors of white women regarding race and racism to those today in social work, it is easy to identify some similarities. Historically, white feminism is rooted in biases including racism, albinism, and anti-Semitism that further marginalize Black people (Kendall, 2020). This history cannot and must not be swept aside, as understanding and learning from the past is necessary to change the process and structure of our world. As Kendall (2020) stated, “When white feminism ignores history, it ignores that the tears of white women have the power to get Black people killed” (p. 4), nothing is solved, and in fact conditions for marginalized people can be made worse.

Whitewashing the Narrative

The history of social work and its narrators have provided a whitewashing of history that has skewed and misrepresented the true social work narrative. The education of social work students has promoted a white/Euro-centric narrative by focusing its content primarily on white women and men leaders in social work. Black social work pioneers have historically been erased in the discussions of social work and social justice history (Carlton-LaNey & Carlton Alexander, 2001). This exclusion can be considered a conspiracy of silence that not only disregards the work in the field of people who are not white, but negatively impacts the very people the field seeks to serve (Carlton-LaNey & Carlton Alexander, 2001). This silence is evident in the textbooks that are adopted for each course and the majority of white male and female authors that are writing these books. Individuals such as Jansson (policy), Hutchison (human behavior), Rubin and Babbie (research), and Ellen Netting and Mary K. O’Connor (organizational practice) have all been identified as canons in social work education and are all white. While perhaps unintentional, the use of content curated and explained by mostly white people, places the power in their hands to define and explain the social work profession. This focus on white voices in the profession’s assumed canons erases the contributions of Black scholars who tend to be relegated to special journal issues or supplementary readings. Books such as *African American Leadership* and *Social Work in the Black Experience* provide content not addressed in typical texts used in courses such as Introduction to Social Work. For example, individuals such as George Haynes and E. Franklin Frazier, two of the first Black professional social workers, and Sarah Collins Fernandis (a settlement house pioneer and promoter of the *family support approach* to social work) are missing from the standard social work text (Carlton-LaNey & Carlton Alexander, 2001; Martin & Martin, 1995).

A clear review of the profession's history is necessary to see how the foundation of our work was created and how it maintains a grip hold on current approaches (Iglehart & Becerra, 1995). Racism within the field of social work can be exemplified in many different ways and social work has taken on white supremacy culture in many forms, including how white women interact with their clients who are overwhelming Black and Brown. Our foremothers, Jane Addams and Mary Richmond have both been examined in the literature as having promoted anti-Black approaches by upholding explanations for lynching, refusing to provide services to Black migrants traveling from the oppressive south, and an assimilationist approach meant to rid Black and Indigenous people of their culture and pushing white culture as the preferred behaviors and values (Iglehart & Becerra, 1995). Nowhere is this racism exemplified more clearly than in the child welfare system. Views of African American and Black women as mother figures have been falsely attacked and provided a negative and damaging narrative that harkens back to the antebellum period. Enslavers would declare African women as emotionally unattached to their children to justify separating families (Jones-Rogers, 2019). Male and female enslavers used this narrative to explain how taking babies from their mothers was not hurtful as African women are "cheerful beings" unable to process pain and when showing any form of grief were pathological and termed it "the sulks" (Jones-Rogers, 2019, p. 121). Today, Black children are disproportionately represented in referrals and opened cases across the United States. Thirty-three percent of children in foster care are African American yet only make up 15% of the child population (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2020).

Saving Face and Saving Power

Today's white women social workers demonstrate similar tools used by white enslavers to manage the expectations of their role and the optics connected to that role. Black enslaved women were blamed for the violence they experienced at the hands of white women due to being "uncooperative" and "misbehaved" (Glymph, 2008). Refusal to follow the enslavers' rules or any perceived missteps around plantation procedures was viewed as a lack of ability to build and maintain an ideal domestic home. Punishment (in the form of violent acts), was deemed justified and viewed necessary to improve the behavior of enslaved women (Glymph, 2008). This idea of white women domesticating the "uncivilized" Black woman on a plantation doesn't fall far from the social work intent to establish Euro-centric forms of childcare, mothering, and housekeeping espoused by the majority white women profession (Iglehart & Becerra, 1995; Martin & Martin, 1995). Social workers enter the field wishing for a "better life" for their clients, without considering how that life is defined and by whom. Clients are deemed resistant and non-compliant when they do not follow the goals and objectives deemed necessary by the social worker. Clients then experience victim blaming when they do not conform to the social worker's expectations. Clients are then penalized for perceived misbehavior or misdeeds as outlined by rules born from white supremacy culture (Iglehart & Becerra, 1995; Martin & Martin, 1995).

White women enslavers expressed a sense of anger and loss when emancipation was passed. Formerly enslaved individuals' new position in society was viewed as the

withdrawal of the mistresses' ability to exert superiority and power through demonstrations of kindness and good will towards enslaved individuals (Glymph, 2008). White women social workers experience loss of power and control threatens their place in the world as saviors when their clients disagree with them or choose to terminate services. White social workers want to maintain their appearance of perfection and a white supremacy culture characteristic (Jones & Okun, 2001), and when a client does not advance in their assimilation minded ways - they see this as a personal attack on their ability as a professional and individual. White women social workers today perpetuate the characteristic of perfection and blame their clients for putting that in jeopardy.

Individual Pathology Versus Environmental Impacts

Just as there was no consideration on how the institution of slavery (a brutal, violent, barbaric act) itself would impact the women and men enslaved (Glymph, 2008) social work can perpetuate an individual pathology perspective rather than using an environmental lens. By blaming those who were enslaved for the violence they received, we see the seeds of the creation of personal character flaws and victim blaming to explain behaviors rather than an assessment of the environmental impact. This hypocrisy, so prevalent in white culture, is evident in the social work education and profession. While the profession promotes the use of Person-in-Environment (PIE) perspective and the Ecological model, much discussion around historical and social context is either over-simplified or missing (Iglehart & Becerra, 1995).

As social work touts the use of PIE, a perspective that proposes that clients' concerns are a result of the lack of resources and support in the community, the profession continues to primarily address clients' needs on the micro/individual level. When clients refuse to comply, follow the rules, and change based on rules and policy that come from institutions that uphold and maintain white supremacy culture, one can compare social workers' behavior to the "blind lashings" used by white women enslavers. This form of violence was a random form of punishment with the violence viewed as its own reward (Glymph, 2008). Inconsistent actions and constant vacillating between support and punishment (when clients are identified as resistant or non-compliant) can create a certain kind of violence and pain that further harms individuals' psyches. A client is expected to trust their social worker, also knowing at any time the rules may be used against them to punish whatever perceived wrongdoing they were sent to services for in the first place.

Suggestions for Moving Forward

In the framing of social work, social workers are often identified as white women who have been cast as merely cogs in a wheel in which they try their hardest to help people while working in a system they may or may not agree with. Poor social workers, paid so little, yet working countless hours to help their clients ' is the story that is often told. They are selfless, placing clients' well-being above their own, with little to no recognition and compensation. But in reality, social workers must recognize and admit they have helped enact policies and procedures that can be described as violent - be it emotional, financial, psychological, and verbal - towards BIPOC. Those who may not agree completely with

agency or organizational rules surrounding the treatment of their clients are still culpable for the threats and actions they dole out. The field needs to address the racism baked into social work and begin taking steps to change if they truly want to be the profession of equality, empowerment, and anti-racism.

Critically Review and Learn From History

The field of social work must reckon with its past actions and policies addressing Black people and use that history to examine the damage that was done. History shares with us the understanding of our past errors and also sheds light on how those approaches inform our current work (Iglehart & Becerra, 1995). Just as we complete full assessments of our clients, now is the time to assess how past racist approaches remain in place today. As Iglehart and Becerra (1995) state, “An understanding of social work’s responses today is predicated on an understanding of responses during its formative years” (p. 16). This includes the actions in practice and the education chosen to be shared by largely white individuals in the field.

The social work profession needs to recognize and amend its complicity with the erasure of Black leaders in the field of social work and social justice. Martin and Martin (1995) posit that early on, social work ignored the tools already used by Black migrants to aid them in the daily existence in slavery. By only using a white lens, the authors suggest social workers lost the opportunity to learn and use the cultural and historical experiences of Black people (Martin & Martin, 1995). The predominant social work model taught is based on Western norms based in white supremacy culture adopted from European and Calvinist values. This one size fits all approach has denied the voices of local cultures and assumes a superior model of existence. Martin and Martin (1995) used their platform over two decades ago to call out the social work profession and its missed opportunity to incorporate what they described as “salient elements of the black helping experience into social work practice (p. 3). Rather, the authors suggest, Black social workers bent to the dominant framework which perpetuated racial stereotypes and harmful forms of intervention. Instead, the authors suggest, in order to make true positive change for Black Americans, what is needed is the incorporation of Black culture and heritage (Martin & Martin, 1995). “Most significant, social workers still have not figured out how to make effective use of black history, black culture, and the overall black experience for the maximum development and well-being of black people” (Martin & Martin, 1995, p. 10).

Social work cannot be a field that fully embraces social justice without understanding and incorporating Black feminism and Black liberation content. But this has been largely missing from the curriculum. Curriculum committees that make recommendations on textbook adoptions must begin to engage in decision-making processes that incorporate an anti-racist lens. Incorporating questions about whether white supremacy ideology is being upheld in prospective texts is an important starting point. Broadening the pool of authors to include black authors is also recommended as a necessary aspect of decolonizing the social work curriculum.

Deal With its White Fragility

The field of social work must reckon with its own white supremacy culture and how it has over time aided in the oppression of the very people they claim to want to empower. Past concerns around racist views and actions in the field white women in social work education demonstrate what the author DiAngelo (2018) coined “fragility”. The idea of a social worker or social work educator who is white, having any form of bias or racist thoughts and behaviors is believed to be beyond the pale. The profession itself seems to have created a false sense of “wokeness” and immunity from examination of bias. The historical narrative suggests a profession that is focused on oppressive environments and free from any racist bias (Iglehart & Becerra, 1995). This warm blanket of protection can no longer be used to hide from an assessment of the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of social work education and practice on its white supremacy historical foundations and current practices. Social work cannot and should not “be exempt from systematic scrutiny of its philosophies, practices, and popular myths” (Iglehart & Becerra, 1995, p. 88). Suggestions for the profession to address the concerns outlined above include enhancing and increasing the focus on gatekeeping.

Increase and Adjust Gatekeeping

White women should not pursue social work unless they self-reflect and clearly understand why they are interested in working in this field. Unless racist views that uphold white supremacy culture are thoroughly examined, white women may perpetuate acts of violence towards their clients. White women who want to be social workers need to self-reflect on why it is they want to be involved in this field. Have they thoroughly examined their own racist beliefs? Do they know about white saviorism and how they are going to counter that? The field needs to reconsider how it manages gatekeeping into the profession - which currently bends towards only those with high grade point averages (GPAs) and very good writing skills. Alternatively, schools can consider an alternative criteria in admissions to social work programs that includes a diversity statement. In order to protect future clients from potential harm, white women unable or unwilling to examine their biases potential should not be able to begin a program.

Conclusion

Social work is at an inflection point, in which all aspects of the profession and its educational foundation are being questioned. The historical treatment of marginalized individuals by the social work profession must be addressed proactively as opposed to retroactively. The assumption that the white dominant view is the only lens by which to address social problems is false and misguided. This is clearly stated by Rachel Cargle in the video *Social Work So White with Rachel Cargle*, “Your canon is not my canon” (SWCAREs, 13:38). The profession and its educators need to review how content is chosen, who teaches it, and who gets to do the work in our profession and greater representation of BIPOC in social work literature is also needed. Going beyond a review,

actionable steps to redress any white dominated content, pedagogy, and practice must be dismantled and replaced with a more inclusive, multicultural dominated perspective.

References

- Aguilera, J. (2020). White woman who called police on a Black man at Central Park apologizes, says 'I'm not a racist'. Time.com retrieved from <https://time.com/5842442/amy-cooper-dog-central-park/>
- Batterham, A. (2020, January 7). Do gooding white lady saviour complex [Blog]. Medium. <https://medium.com/@audrey.batterham/do-gooding-white-lady-saviour-complex-38a54e731ada>
- Biewen, J. (Producer). (2017). Seeing white (Nos. S2 E1-S2 E14) [Audio podcast]. In *Scene on the Radio*. <http://www.sceneonradio.org/seeing-white/>
- Billings, D. (2016). *Deep denial: The persistence of white supremacy in United States history and life*. Crandall, Dostie, & Douglass Books, Incorporated.
- Carlton-LaNey, I., & Carlton Alexander, S. (2001). Early African American social welfare pioneer women: Working to empower the race and the community. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Diversity in Social Work* 10(2), 67-84. https://doi.org/10.1300/j051v10n02_05
- Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2016). *Issue briefs: Racial disproportionality and disparity in child welfare*. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/issue-briefs/racial-disproportionality/>
- Council on Social Work Education [CSWE]. (2015). *2015 Educational policy and accreditation standards*. https://www.cswe.org/getattachment/Accreditation/Accreditation-Process/2015-EPAS/2015EPAS_Web_FINAL.pdf.aspx
- CSWE. (2018). *2017 Statistics on social work education in the United States*. <https://www.cswe.org/CMSPages/GetFile.aspx?guid=44f2c1de-65bc-41fb-be38-f05a5abae96d>
- DiAngelo, R. (2018). *White fragility: Why it's so hard for white people to talk about racism*. Beacon Press.
- Dominelli, L. (1989). An uncaring profession? An examination of racism in social work. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 15(3), 391-403. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.1989.9976127>
- Dunbar-Ortiz, R. (2014). *An Indigenous peoples' history of the United States*. Beacon Press.
- Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.
- Glymph, T. (2008). *Out of the house of bondage: The transformation of the plantation household*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0395264900007344>

- Holloway, K. (2020, September 8). The whitelash next time. *The Nation*.
<https://www.thenation.com/article/society/black-lives-matter-backlash/>
- Hughey, M. W. (2011). The white savior film and reviewers' reception. *Symbolic Interaction* 33(3), 475-496. <https://doi.org/10.1525/si.2010.33.3.475>
- Iglehart, A. P., & Beccera, R. M. (1995). *Social services and the ethnic community*. Waveland Press Inc.
- Jaffe, S. (2018). Why did a majority of white women vote for Trump? *New Labor Forum* 27(1), 18-26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1095796017744550>
- Jones, K., & Okum, T. (2001). Dismantling racism: A workbook for social change groups. <https://resourcegeneration.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/2016-dRworks-workbook.pdf>
- Jones-Rogers, S. E. (2019). *They were her property: White women as slave owners in the American south*. Yale University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvbmm3fz>
- Kendall, M. (2020). *Hood feminism: Notes from the women that a movement forgot*. Viking.
- Kendi, I. X. (2016). *Stamped from the beginning: The definitive history of racist ideas in America*. Nation Books.
- Kendi, I. X. (2019). *How to be an antiracist*. One World.
- Kennedy, A. C. (2008). Eugenics, "Degenerate Girls," and social workers during the progressive era. *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work*, 23(1), 22-37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109907310473>
- Martin, E. P., & Martin, J. M. (1995). *Social work and the black experience*. NASW Press.
- Maylea, C. (2020). The end of social work. *The British Journal of Social Work*, bcaa203, 1-18.
- McRae, E. (2018). *Mothers of massive resistance: White women and the politics of white supremacy*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/hzhz-2019-1435>
- Murphy, P. P. (2017). White nationalists use tiki torches to light up Charlottesville march. *CNN*. <https://www.cnn.com/2017/08/12/us/white-nationalists-tiki-torch-march-trnd/index.html>
- National Association of Social Workers. (2008). *Code of ethics*. <https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English>
- National Conference of State Legislatures. (2020, September 28). *Disproportionality and disparity in child welfare*. <https://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/disproportionality-and-disparity-in-child-welfare.aspx>

- Nogueira, S. G. (2013). Ideology of white racial supremacy: Colonization and decolonization processes. *Psicologia & Sociedade*, 25, 23-32.
<https://doi.org/10.1590/S0102-71822013000500004>
- Perez-Peña, R. (2017, January 27). Woman tinned to 1955 Emmett Till murder tells historian her claims were false. *New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/27/us/emmett-till-lynching-carolyn-bryant-donham.html>
- Pew Research Center. (2018, August 9). *An examination of the 2016 electorate, based on validated voters*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2018/08/09/an-examination-of-the-2016-electorate-based-on-validated-voters/>
- Ransom, J. (2020, July 6). Amy Cooper faces charges after calling police on Black bird-watcher. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/06/nyregion/amy-cooper-false-report-charge.html>
- Salzburg, Quigley, L., Mehfoud, N., Acquaviva, K., Wyche, K., & Sliva, S. (2017). *Profile of the social work workforce*. <https://www.cswe.org/Centers-Initiatives/Initiatives/National-Workforce-Initiative/SW-Workforce-Book-FINAL-11-08-2017.aspx>
- Singer, J. (2020, June 11). Don't watch the help....or these other white savior movies. *Glamour*. <https://www.glamour.com/story/the-help-white-savior-movies>
- SWCAREs (facilitator). (2020, June 30). Social work so white with Rachel Cargle [Webinar]. SWCAREs Webinar.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WA5ZwkfHLCA>
- Sue, D. W. (2006). *The invisible whiteness of being: Whiteness, White supremacy, White privilege, and racism*. In M. G. Constantine & D. W. Sue (Eds.), *Addressing racism: Facilitating cultural competence in mental health and educational settings* (p. 15-30). John Wiley & Sons Inc.
- Author note:** Address correspondence to Sara Plummer, Rutgers School of Social Work, Rutgers University, New Brunswick NJ, 08901. Email: splummer@ssw.rutger.edu