

## Awareness of Racism Among Social Work Students in a Challenging Era: An Application of Social Ecological Model

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**Abstract:** *This study focused on understanding individual (e.g., political identity and alignment of social work core values with the Black Lives Matter movement and the All Lives Matter argument) and social environmental correlates (e.g., social network composition) of awareness of racism among social work students. A convenience sample of social work students (n=98) recruited from a major Midwest land grant university completed an online anonymous survey with questions covering individual characteristics, social network information, and attitudes toward social phenomena. The Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale was used to assess overall awareness of racism, White privilege, institutional racism, and blatant racism. Regression models were conducted to identify correlates of these domains of racial attitudes separately. Liberal political view identification and alignment of Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement with social work core values were associated with better awareness of racism across all domains; aligning All Lives Matter with social work core values was associated with unawareness of overall racism, institutional racism, and blatant racism. Finally, discussion on racial issues with network members was associated with better awareness of overall racism, White privilege, and blatant racism. Social work programs should facilitate inter-group dialogues to build consensus on countering racism. Discussions on the mission and the context of BLM and its opposition efforts should also be incorporated in the curriculum. Finally, more emphasis on the impact of institutional racism should be included into course activities to further discussion on such topics within students' network.*

**Keyword:** *Awareness of racism; social work student; social work education; social network; color-blind racial attitudes*

The racial composition in the United States is increasingly diverse. The most recent Census data shows decline, albeit small, in the White population for the first time since 1790, and a significant increase in people identified as people of color (Brookings Institute, 2021; U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). However, such a demographic shift has triggered concerns regarding racial tension generally (Craig & Richeson, 2014, 2017). Recent social unrest across the United States surrounding racial injustice highlights racism as a critical social and public health crisis that needs to be addressed (American Public Health Association, 2021; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). As a profession centered on social justice, social work is poised to address racism and discrimination from

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multiple levels of practice. In fact, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) has recently updated the Code of Ethics to explicitly add confronting discrimination, oppression, racism, and inequality into one of the core values (Barsky, 2021). Guided by the NASW Code of Ethics, institutes of higher education need to equip students to engage in practice at all levels (e.g., clinical work, community organizing, and policy advocacy) from an anti-racist lens, as they are likely to work with racial minorities who may be disproportionately impacted by adverse social, economic, educational, and health and mental health outcomes (Boddie et al., 2019; Iceland, 2019; Paradies et al., 2015).

As part of this educational imperative, social work programs must ensure that students are engaged in coursework that moves them beyond understanding cultural competence within the classroom setting to incorporating these values and ethics within all settings. In fact, avoidance of difficult or perceived controversial topics is not an option for social work students who are required to assess implicit bias, address biases through reflection and supervision, and promote the knowledge that race significantly impacts a person's life experience. Guided by the newly revised NASW Code of Ethics, effective engagement and intervention with clients and communities can only be achieved with explicit discussion about race, acknowledgement of social determinants of race, and emphatic belief in and utilization of culturally competent skills in social work curriculum.

In order to foster students' capacity in assessing self-biases and countering racism and discrimination, social work educators need to have awareness about malleable factors associated with students' perceptions of racism to develop curriculum and design courses accordingly. Such understanding is especially critical in the current era, as students enter social work programs with increasingly divergent backgrounds that may shape their diverse view on race and racism. The social ecological model (SEM; Yarrow & Zaslow, 1981) posits that individuals' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors may be the products of their personal and social environmental properties, hence providing an appropriate theoretical model to understand awareness of racism among social work students. One's social relationships with others (i.e., social network) can be considered as their immediate social environment. The social networks in which individuals are embedded greatly impact their perceived norms and behaviors (Montgomery et al., 2020; Sijtsema & Lindenberg, 2018). In fact, the SEM has been used to explicate specifically the relationship between micro (i.e., intrapersonal) and meso (i.e., interpersonal) level correlates, including the influence of immediate and extended relationships on attitudes toward race and appreciation for diversity (Bowman, 2012; Ibrahim et al., 2020; Priest et al., 2014; Spencer, 2007).

Findings from previous literature on racial attitudes supports the SEM proposition in that individuals' personal characteristics and social network properties may critically influence their racial attitudes. At the individual level, multiple studies have identified individuals' age (e.g., being of an older generation; Davis & Proctor, 1984; Hunt, 2007; Weigel & Howes, 1985) and political affiliation (e.g., identifies as political conservative; Feldman & Huddy, 2005; Weigel & Howes, 1985) may be associated with less awareness of racism. Some studies (Craig et al., 2020; Grollman, 2018; Spanierman et al., 2012) also suggested that underrepresented group status may have impacts on the extent to which one recognizes and acknowledges racism and discrimination. Individuals who belong to marginalized groups are also more likely to be aware of racism and discrimination than

their peers who identify as belonging to heteronormative, cisgender groups (Flores, 2017). In some instances, students who identify as LGBTQ+ report higher levels of awareness and understanding of racism than their counterparts (Danforth et al., 2019). However, awareness does not always translate to positive experiences. Prior research demonstrates a complex interplay within minority status communities in which inequity and discrimination still exists (Ghabrial, 2017; Gray et al., 2015; Han, 2007).

From a “person in environment” perspective, studies also found the critical role individuals’ social network play in formulating and modifying their racial attitudes. For example, from a social norms lens, studies suggest that parents’ racial attitudes may have great implications on their children’s perceptions on race and racism (Aboud & Doyle, 1996; Pauker et al., 2018b), whereas peers may play a critical role in tolerance of racism among youth and young adults (Tan et al., 2010). From an exposure and interaction perspective, studies highlight the importance inter-racial exposure and interaction experiences may have, not only on White individuals’ awareness of racism (Pauker et al., 2018a), but also on racial minority individuals’ racial attitudes (Shelton & Richeson, 2006). Finally, from a communication perspective, being able to have difficult dialogues, about topics such as the impact and experience of racism, with network members was also found to be helpful in raising awareness of racism and more positive racial attitudes (Danforth et al., 2019; Lopez, 2004).

Although research focusing on racial attitudes and awareness of racism in higher education (e.g., college students) has been abundant (Lopez, 2004; Loyd & Gaither, 2018; Smith et al., 2017), studies focusing on such a topic targeting social work students specifically, remain relatively scarce or limited to a descriptive nature (Danforth et al., 2019; Loya, 2011). To our knowledge, only one study conducted by Danforth and colleagues (2019) investigated individual and social network level correlates of racial attitudes among White social work students. Consistent with previous literature, Danforth et al. (2019) suggested that individuals’ age, political views (i.e., liberal views as compared to conservative views), and awareness of an on-campus racial justice protest were associated with better awareness of racism. Adopting the SEM, Danforth et al. (2019) also pointed out that more discussion on racial justice with peers may help promote students’ awareness of blatant racism.

Although past research provides critical insights on racism awareness among social work students, it has largely only focused on White social work students rather than including racial minority students. Other studies have pointed out that racial or ethnic minorities may perceive racism in different ways and may have diverse racial attitudes toward other racial groups (Richeson et al., 2005; Smith et al., 2017). Therefore, expanding on past research through the assessment of the experiences and attitudes of students of color is imperative for social work programs to fully address racism, oppression, and discrimination with all students. This is especially relevant as social movements and advocacy efforts that significantly impact Black and Brown communities continue to push for substantial overhauls of the U.S. institutions and systems social work students learn about and navigate.

For instance, Danforth et al. (2019) utilized data collected in 2015, which may not capture the impacts of the recent prominent nationwide Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and the social tension surrounding it. It should be noted that although the BLM movement originally started in 2013 in response to the Trayvon Martin case, it gained further domestic and international attention and significant momentum in 2020 after the killing of George Floyd (Bell et al., 2021). In essence, the BLM movement is a challenge to the criminal justice system, and further expanded the call for action to address the injustice, racism, and discrimination faced by Black communities (Mayorga & Picower, 2018). Considering the widespread debates and clash between BLM and its opposition efforts (e.g., All Lives Matter; ALM), how social work students understand and perceive these debates may be critical in shaping their perceptions regarding racism. More importantly, with the NASW Code of Ethics and core values heavily emphasized in social work education as the ultimate guidance of social work practice, how social work students perceived the mission of BLM or its opposition in relation to social work core values may be critical in shaping or justifying their awareness and stance regarding racism within society. Previous research has illustrated perceived professional values on real world practices among helping professionals (Kaya & Boz, 2019; Pattison & Pill, 2020). Further understanding on this topic will have critical implications on social work course development in terms of whether and how to incorporate the BLM and its counter efforts in the curriculum.

### **Current Study**

Informed by the SEM (Yarrow & Zaslow, 1981) and expanding on previous literature (Danforth et al., 2019; Loya, 2011), the purpose of the study is to explore individual and social network level correlates of social work students' awareness of racism. Specifically, to address the current gap in literature identified above, we aim to (1) explore the malleable individual level factors (e.g., a student's perceived alignment of Black Lives Matter with social work values) associated with social work students' awareness of racism and (2) identify social network factors associated with social work students' awareness of racism. Findings of this study will provide critical insights to inform social work programs and educators on curriculum development to enhance students' competencies in countering racism.

## **Method**

### **Study Design**

The current study utilized a cross-sectional survey, which served as the baseline data from a pilot evaluation study conducted by a School of Social Work in a major Midwestern public university. This pilot evaluation study is part of the School's coordinated effort to understand and promote inclusion, diversity, and equity (IDE) within the social work program and the surrounding communities by facilitating student driven events and reviewing and modifying program policies. Specifically, the evaluation study aimed to adopt a longitudinal design to investigate the potential impact of such an effort in

promoting IDE among social work students over time, with the baseline data focused on exploring social work students' awareness of racism and its correlates at the individual and social environmental levels. Considering the sensitivity of the topics covered in the study, the baseline data were collected during 2020 via anonymous self-administered computer-assisted surveys. Students were not compensated for completing the survey. This study received approval for exemption from the IRB at the University.

### **Sampling and Data Collection**

The pilot evaluation study used convenience sampling to recruit students from the School of Social Work. With the evaluation nature of the study, all students enrolled in the BSW, MSW, and PhD programs during the Fall semester in 2020 were considered eligible for the study. Based on enrollment record, 342 students were eligible for the study. Recruitment emails briefly explaining the purpose of the evaluation study and a link to the anonymous online survey were sent out to social work students via internal listserv maintained by the School of Social Work. Since no identifiable information was collected, reminder emails were sent to all students multiple times via the same listserv as suggested by previous literature on non-face-to-face data collection (Crawford et al., 2001). Students who clicked the survey link were directed to a consent page detailing the study purpose and activities where they could choose to take the survey by clicking "Yes, I want to participate in the study." At the beginning of the survey, to ensure students' anonymity as well as avoid duplicates, a unique identification code for each participant was generated based on the following formula: first letter of mother's first name, number of older brothers (living and deceased), number of younger sisters (living and deceased), number representing the birth month, and first letter of the middle name. Among 342 individuals included in the social work student listserv, a total of 121 students agreed to participate in the study, and 98 completed the survey (response rate=28.7%).

The self-administered anonymous survey lasted no more than 15 minutes and involved two major components: personal level characteristics and social network properties. For the individual level components, information regarding demographics (e.g., age and gender identity), political identity, awareness of racism, and awareness and perceptions of the recent BLM movement were collected. This study adopted the egocentric social network approach (Campbell & Lee, 1991) to explore social work students' network composition. Specifically, students (i.e., ego) were asked to nominate 7 people (i.e., alters) with whom they had interacted within the past 3 months. Students were then asked for their relationships and interactions with the alters and their perceived alter characteristics (e.g., perceived alter race and perceived alter attitudes toward individuals with a different race than theirs).

## **Measurements**

### **Outcome**

The outcome of interest in the study is awareness of racism measured by the Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale (CoBRAs; Neville et al., 2000). CoBRAs is a 20-item 6-point

Likert scale including three sub-scales assessing individuals' unawareness of White privilege, institutional discrimination, and blatant racial issues. The unawareness of White privilege and the unawareness of institutional discrimination subscales both contain seven items (sample item: "Everyone who works hard, no matter what race they are, has an equal chance to become rich"; "It is important that people begin to think of themselves as American and not African American, Mexican American or Italian American, respectively"), and the unawareness of blatant racial issues includes 6 items (sample item: "Racism is a major problem in the U.S."). The response options range from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). With 10 items reverse coded (Neville et al., 2000), the sum scores for the overall CoBRAs scale (range between 20 to 120) and the three subscales (unawareness of White privilege, range between 7 to 42; institutional discrimination, range between 7 to 42; and blatant racial issues, range between 6 to 36) were calculated. The higher the scores, the higher an individual's unawareness of racism (i.e., "color-blindness of racial attitudes"; Neville et al., 2000) in general or in specific corresponding domains. It should be noted that the CoBRAs does not specify scoring thresholds as high or low colorblind racial attitudes; therefore, all outcomes of interest (i.e., general color-blindness of racial attitudes, unawareness of White privilege, institutional discrimination, and blatant racial issues) in the study are continuous variables.

### **Independent Variables**

Adopting the SEM and informed by previous literature, this study involved both individual and social network level independent variables. Individual level independent variables included in the study are rurality of residence, political identity, and awareness and perception of the BLM movement. Self-report rurality of residence was a dichotomous variable as living in a rural area coded as 1, and other (i.e., urban, and suburban areas) coded as 0. Political identity was also a dichotomous variable (1=self-identified political view as liberal; 0=all others, including conservative and moderate). Awareness of BLM is measured using a dichotomous variable with 1 representing "aware of recent events related to the BLM." Perceptions regarding BLM, as whether it aligns with social work core values, was captured by using two separate dichotomous variables, perceived BLM movement as aligning with social work values (coded as 1) and perceived ALM as aligning with social work values (coded as 1).

In addition, although not the focus of the study, since the School provided a book focusing on addressing racism as pre-semester recommended reading as part of the efforts to promote IDE, completion of the recommended reading or not was also included as an independent variable in the current study (dichotomous variable; 1=had completed the recommended reading).

Informed by previous literature (Danforth et al., 2019; Lopez, 2004; Pauker et al., 2018a; Tan et al., 2010), for social network level correlates, this study focused on three constructs: inter-racial exposure (e.g., social network diversity and homophily), subjective racial norms (e.g., perceived network racial attitudes), and communication (communication with network members on racial issues). Social network diversity was captured via two variables: ego-alter racial homophily and network member racial diversity. Ego-alter racial homophily is a continuous variable representing number of

nominated network members (the alters) who shared the same racial identity with the participant (the ego). Network member racial diversity is also a continuous variable depicting the number of different race and ethnic groups within an individual's network. Perceived network racial attitudes is a continuous variable representing the number of social network members whom respondent perceived as having negative attitudes toward individuals who have a different racial identity as theirs. Finally, communication with network members on racial issues is a continuous variable depicting the number of network members with whom a respondent had talked about racism or race related issues.

### **Demographic Controls**

In addition to independent variables of interest discussed above, this study also included demographic characteristics, including age, race and ethnicity, gender identification, and sexual orientation, as control variables. Considering the small sample size of the study ( $n=98$ ), and that over 87 percent of the participants identified as White, in this study race and ethnicity was treated as a dichotomous variable (1=racial minority, including Black, Latinx, Multiracial and Others; 0=White). Gender identity is a nominal variable including three categories: cisgender male, cisgender female, and gender minority (i.e., transgender male, transgender female, non-binary, and others). Sexual orientation is a dichotomous variable, with 1 representing sexual minority (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer or questioning, and others) and 0 as heterosexual.

### **Analysis**

Linear regression models were conducted to explore individual level and social network level correlates of social work students' awareness of overall racism, White privilege, institutional racism, and blatant racism, separately. Constrained by small sample size, to achieve parsimonious models, we first conducted bivariate linear regression analysis to identify independent variables to be included in the final models. Independent variables found to be significant in the bivariate analysis (i.e.,  $p<.05$ ) were included in the final multivariate linear regression model of the corresponding outcome. However, demographic controls were entered in all final models regardless of their significance in the bivariate analysis.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics of Social Work Students (n=98)*

	n (%) / Mean (SD)
<b>Demographic Controls</b>	
<i>Age (years)</i>	28.7 (8.94)
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	
White	86 (87.8%)
Black	5 (5.1%)
Latinx	1 (1%)
Multiracial or others	6 (6.1%)
<i>Gender</i>	
Female	84 (85.7%)
Male	12 (12.2%)
Gender minority	2 (2%)
<i>Sexual Orientation</i>	
Sexual minority	25 (25.5%)
Heterosexual	73 (74.5%)
<b>Independent Variables</b>	
<i>Rurality of residence</i>	
Rural	23 (23.5%)
Urban or suburban	75 (76.5%)
<i>Political Identity</i>	
Liberal	58 (59.2%)
Non-liberal	40 (40.8%)
<i>Black Lives Matter (BLM)</i>	
Awareness of BLM	94 (95.9%)
Align BLM with SW <sup>1</sup> core values	75 (76.5%)
Align All Lives Matter with SW core values	23 (23.5%)
Have read designated reading on racism	22 (22.5%)
<b>Outcomes of Interest</b>	
<i>Color-blindness of racial attitudes...</i>	
Overall	38.3 (18.88)
Unawareness of White privilege	15 (8.27)
Unawareness of institutional racism	13.9 (7.12)
Unawareness of blatant racism	9.4 (4.67)
<b>Social Network Composition</b>	
# different racial groups within the network	1.8 (0.93)
# NM <sup>2</sup> sharing same racial identity as SW student	5.6 (1.97)
# NM with negative views toward those w/different race	1.5 (1.61)
# NM with whom SW student talks about racial issues	5.4 (2.05)

<sup>1</sup>SW=Social work; <sup>2</sup>NM= network member(s)

## Results

Table 1 illustrates the descriptive analysis results of the study. Social work students in this study had relatively high awareness of racism across the different domains. Specifically, for unawareness of White privilege, our participants averaged 14.9 ( $SD=8.3$ ; the original CoBras' unawareness of White privilege sub-scale range is 7 to 42 with higher scores indicating higher unawareness of racial issues); for unawareness of institutional

discrimination, the average was 13.9 ( $SD=7.1$ ; the original CoBras' unawareness of institutional discrimination sub-scale range is 7 to 42); and finally, for unawareness of blatant racial issues, the average among our participants was 9.4 ( $SD=4.7$ ; the original CoBRAs' unawareness of blatant racial issues sub-scale range is 6 to 36). Students who participated in the study were predominantly White (88%), cisgender female (86%), and resided in urban or suburban areas. One fourth of the respondents identified as sexual minority. Most respondents (96%) were aware of the BLM movement, and 76% aligned BLM with social work core values. However, 24% aligned ALM with social work core values. It should be noted that these two variables are not mutually exclusive. In fact, a further investigation suggested that 25% of students aligned both BLM and ALM with social work core values. In terms of social network properties, the respondents' network racial composition is fairly homogenous ( $M=1.8$ ;  $SD=0.9$ ) and are likely to share the same racial identity with the ego (number of network member sharing the same racial identity with the student:  $M=5.6$ ;  $SD=2.0$ ). Negative attitudes towards people with a different race were not prevalent among students' networks ( $M=1.5$ ;  $SD=1.6$ ). Finally, students on average talked about race-related issues with 5.4 of their network peers ( $SD=2.1$ ).

Table 2 demonstrates the final multivariate regression analysis results. F-tests comparing final multi-variate models with intercept only models (i.e., models without independent variables) suggested all our multi-variate models perform significantly better than the intercept only models (overall color-blind racial attitudes:  $F=12.81$ ; unawareness of White privilege:  $F=14.59$ ; unawareness of institutional racism:  $F=8.83$ ; unawareness of blatant racism:  $F=9.26$ ) Liberal political view identification and alignment of BLM movement with social work core values were associated with lower unawareness of racism across different domains, including overall unawareness of racism ( $\beta = -11.2$ ; 95% CI = -18.5, -3.9;  $\beta = -16.3$ ; 95% CI = -24.7, -7.8; respectively), unawareness of White privilege ( $\beta = -4.3$ ; 95% CI = -7.3, -1.2;  $\beta = -8.8$ ; 95% CI = -12.3, -5.2; respectively), unawareness of institutional racism ( $\beta = -4.1$ ; 95% CI = -7.3, -1.0;  $\beta = -3.6$ ; 95% CI = -7.1, -0.1; respectively), and unawareness of blatant racism ( $\beta = -2.5$ ; 95% CI = -4.5, -0.5;  $\beta = -3.5$ ; 95% CI = -5.8, -1.2; respectively). Alignment of ALM was, however, positively associated with unawareness of overall racism ( $\beta = 11.5$ ; 95% CI = 4.1, 18.9), institutional racism ( $\beta = 6.3$ ; 95% CI = 3.1, 9.4), and blatant racism ( $\beta = 2.6$ ; 95% CI = 0.6, 4.6). As for social network correlates, only having more network members with whom students talked about racial issues was associated with lower awareness of overall racism ( $\beta = -1.6$ ; 95% CI = -3.1, -0.1), White privilege ( $\beta = -0.8$ ; 95% CI = -1.3, -0.2), and blatant racism ( $\beta = -0.6$ ; 95% CI = -1.0, -0.2).

Table 2. *Linear Regression Analysis of Color-Blindness of Racial Attitudes*

	<i>Color-blindness of racial attitudes...</i>							
	Overall ( <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> =64.7)		Unawareness of White Privilege ( <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> =66.2)		Unawareness of Institutional Discrimination ( <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> =53.9)		Unawareness of Blatant Racial Issues ( <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> =54.5)	
	$\beta$	95% CI	$\beta$	95% CI	$\beta$	95% CI	$\beta$	95% CI
<b>Demographics</b>								
Age	-0.04	-0.37, 0.28	-0.01	-0.14, 0.14	0.01	-0.14, 0.14	-0.03	-0.12, 0.06
Race/Ethnicity								
Racial/Ethnic minority	-3.16	-11.08, 4.76	-3.28	-6.64, 0.07	0.03	-3.37, 3.44	0.40	-1.78, 2.59
Gender (ref: Male)								
Female	0.55	-8.19, 9.28	2.47	-1.02, 5.95	-1.20	-4.83, 2.44	-0.35	-2.55, 1.86
Gender minority	0.74	-20.54, 22.02	2.09	-6.80, 10.98	-0.49	-9.62, 8.63	-0.64	-6.42, 5.15
Sexual Orientation								
Sexual minority	-1.48	-8.58, 5.61	-0.40	-3.32, 2.52	-0.99	-4.04, -2.05	0.42	-1.46, 2.30
Rurality of residence								
Rural	5.82	-1.21, 12.85	2.47	-0.48, 5.42	1.66	-1.33, 4.66	1.67	-0.24, 3.58
Political Identity								
Liberal	-11.23**	-18.52, -3.94	-4.27**	-7.34, -1.20	-4.12*	-7.26, -0.99	-2.45*	-4.45, -4.45
Black Lives Matter (BLM)								
Align BLM with SW Core Values	-16.26***	-24.70, -7.82	-8.76***	-12.31, -5.21	-3.56*	-7.12, -0.01	-3.51*	-5.79, -1.24
Align ALM w/SW Core Values	11.49**	4.07, 18.92	2.62	-0.48, 5.72	6.25***	3.05, 9.44	2.60**	0.57, 4.62
Social Network Composition								
# of NM w/negative views toward those w/different race	-0.27	-2.29, 1.75	-0.42	-1.25, 0.41	0.04	-0.82, 0.91	0.05	-0.49, 0.59
# of NM w/whom SW student talks about racial issues	-1.63*	-3.12, -0.14	-0.76**	-1.33, -0.19	-0.44	-1.08, 0.19	-0.59**	-0.98, -0.21

Note. \**p*<.05; \*\**p*<.01; \*\*\**p*<.001

ALM= All Lives Matter; NM= network member(s); SW=Social work

## **Discussion and Implications on Social Work Education**

In this study, we sought to investigate individual and social network correlates with awareness of racism among social work students at a large Midwestern university. CoBRAs (Neville et al., 2000) does not specify scoring thresholds for an individual to be considered as high or low colorblind racial attitudes (i.e., unawareness of White privilege, unawareness of institutional discrimination, and unawareness of blatant racial issues), and direct comparison with other studies may not be feasible due to methodology differences, however, our findings indicate social work students in the current sample demonstrate better awareness of racism across domains as compared to the general population (Brigham, 1993; Lo et al., 2016). It is possible that students self-selected into the social work program because they were aware of potential injustices faced by disenfranchised populations, including racial minorities. It is also likely that social work programs, guided by NASW core values, emphasize competencies in identifying and addressing health, social, and economic disparities faced by vulnerable populations in course activities and field practices that facilitate students' awareness of racism. Nonetheless, multiple individual and social network correlates regarding awareness of racism among social work students were identified.

### **Individual Correlates**

Consistent with previous literature (Danforth et al., 2019; Feldman & Huddy, 2005; Weigel & Howes, 1985), our findings indicate social work students' political identity may be associated with their awareness of racism. Specifically, social work students who identified with liberal political views showed better awareness of White privilege, institutional discrimination, and blatant racial issues, compared to students who identified with moderate or conservative political views. It should be noted that conservative political values may not include acceptance of racism, and our findings do not suggest social work programs should focus on promoting liberal political views with the goal of raising awareness of racism. Rather, social work programs should be cognizant of the fact that students come from diverse backgrounds (Council on Social Work Education Center for Diversity and Social & Economic Justice, 2017), including political views, when fostering students' awareness of racism.

Previous literature highlights the experiences of alienation among conservative students in social work programs (Lerner, 2020). Such sense of alienation may detach students from the social work curriculum activities, and thus hinder the educators' efforts in fostering meaningful discussion on diversity and awareness of racism. Under the current polarized social and political atmosphere, engaging conservative social work students in constructive dialogue and interactions with students coming from the other side of the political spectrum through in-course and off-course activities may facilitate better perceptions and awareness of racism. Recent studies have suggested using inter-group dialogues builds consensus across diverse groups on hard topics to promote social justice (Dessel et al., 2006; Ruggiano et al., 2020). Such a strategy should be incorporated in social work courses to enhance understanding of various political views among social work

students and develop consensus on countering racism. Social work programs should also emphasize constant self-evaluation of personal beliefs and professional values among students, especially when working with vulnerable populations with whom students may not share the same racial and ethnic identity.

Contradicting previous literature, which suggests awareness of recent racial protests may be associated with more awareness of racism (Danforth et al., 2019), our study found that awareness of the BLM movement was not associated with colorblindness of overall racism, White privilege, institutional discrimination, and blatant racial issues. It is probable that almost all students in the study were aware of such a movement and racial protests across the United States given the high profile of George Floyd's murder at the time of data collection. However, the current study also found that students' perceptions of BLM and ALM aligning with social work core values may be associated with their awareness of racism. It should be noted that, in this study, it is not mutually exclusive for students to identify BLM over ALM or vice versa as aligning with social work core values. In fact, over 25 percent of the students identified both as aligning with social work values. Aligning both BLM and ALM with social work values may be that the rhetoric "All Lives Matter" could appear to align with several tenants of the NASW Code of Ethics, particularly the values "social justice" and "dignity and worth of the person," which require social workers to challenge social injustices and respect inherent dignity and worth of the person. Likewise, The BLM movement's alignment with the NASW Code of Ethics could be justified using those same tenants.

Although the current study did not investigate students' knowledge and familiarity with the mission and contexts of the BLM movement and ALM, considering ALM is a retort originated in response to the BLM movement, and that there is little information available on its cause, it could be the case that students are not fully aware of the mission and cause of BLM and the contexts of ALM to be able to distinguish the two, beyond their titles. As multiple studies have pointed out, ALM can be seen as a strategy to shift the discussion from "Do Black lives matter?" to "Which lives matter?" as an effort to maintain the status quo (Atkins, 2019; Kesier, 2021; West et al., 2021). Therefore, it is not surprising, without fully understanding the contexts of BLM and ALM, when controlling for all other attributes, students who considered the current BLM movement to align with social work core values showed better awareness of racism across the domains measured, while students who considered ALM to align with social work core values demonstrated lower awareness of racism in all domains measured, except for White privilege. Although cultural competency, discrimination, and racism are often discussed in social work classes, specific discussion and differentiation of BLM and ALM and how those may be associated with social work core values should be further covered. With the polarized reactions individuals may have in regards to racial protesting—BLM and ALM—it can be difficult to facilitate discussions on whether and how social work values may be reflected or not in these ideologies. Nonetheless, to advance social work students' understanding and awareness of racial issues in the society, social work programs and faculty must facilitate more discussions on such difficult topics both in class and out of class to ensure students fully understand the core values behind the social work profession and their applications in promoting racial awareness and justice in our current context.

### Social Network Correlates

Although previous literature suggests inter-racial interaction and exposure (Pauker et al., 2018a; Tan et al., 2010) may help facilitate positive racial attitudes and better understanding of racism, the study failed to identify significant associations between social work students' network compositions (i.e., racial homophily between social work students and racial diversity within their networks) and their awareness of racism across domains measured. Given we only asked students to nominate 7 network members, it is possible that our insignificant findings were because most students' "close networks" comprised members with whom they shared the same racial identity, and that their networks are homogenous in racial composition. Such close networks may also not capture students' social network members on social media or online forums, where virtual interaction, information dissemination and exchange on sensitive issues may be more vibrant (Amaya, 2017).

Future studies should aim to expand the number of network members nominated to capture both social work students' core and peripheral social network members with the goal to investigate whether social network racial composition may be associated with social work students' awareness of racism. This study also did not identify significant association between network normative influences (i.e., the prevalence of negative racial attitudes among network members) on social work students' awareness of racism. Limited in the number of social network members nominated, with on average only 1.4 out of 7 nominated network members ( $SD=1.6$ ) perceived to be holding negative views toward people with a different race, such lack of variance may contribute to our insignificant findings.

Finally, our study suggested that talking about race related issues with more social network members was associated with better awareness of racism in general and across all domains measured in the study, except for institutional racism. Such findings were consistent with previous literature (Danforth et al., 2019) in that more discussion on sensitive and difficult issues, including racial disparities and racism, may help promote positive racial attitudes and awareness. Based on this finding, social work programs should facilitate more discussions among students on race related topics to foster awareness of racism. Compared to White privilege and blatant racism, institutional discrimination or systemic racism may be more covert and less covered in the education system; therefore, it is possible that discussion topics between social work students and their network members may be limited to overt racism and recent prominent racial discrimination incidents, rather than institutional discrimination.

To facilitate understanding and discussion on institutional discrimination and systemic oppression among social work students, it is critical for students to understand not only the historical context of institutional discrimination, but also how such form of racism may be covert and embedded in the fabrics of the society that lead to adverse intergenerational social, ecological, educational, and health outcomes among racial minorities. Introducing critical race theory (CRT; Abrams & Moio, 2009; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Kolivoski et al., 2014; Rosen et al., 2017) along with diverse theories (e.g., feminist theory and system theory) already covered in social work curriculums may be crucial in fostering awareness

and discussion of institutional racism. Although considered controversial by some (Butcher, & Burke, 2021), CRT is not simply a paradigm through which individuals view historical inequities; it is a paradigm for addressing inequity and the social institutions that create and sustain such inequity (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Fisher-Borne et al., 2015). While originally composed to articulate and expose racial inequities within the judicial system, Delgado and Stefancic (2012) outline basic premises on which CRT is built: the assertion that the common nature of racism allows it to be overlooked; it is beneficial to subgroups of society, which warrants little social disruption to acknowledge it, let alone take action to lessen its severity; and, as race is socially constructed, so are its implications (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Applying CRT to social welfare and social work topics compels social work students and faculty to center their identity within larger society as well as challenge their viewpoint of institutions and the treatments vulnerable subgroups face.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

This study has some limitations. First of all, using data only collected at one timepoint, we are not able to establish the causal relationships between the identified correlates and the outcome, awareness of racism. The design of the study, self-administered anonymous online survey without compensation for participants' time and efforts, led to a low participation rate and small sample size, which limits our external validity and our capacity of conducting a more comprehensive analysis. With such a design, to reduce student burden, we are also not able to collect more detailed information (e.g., detailed understanding of BLM and ALM, comprehensive social network information) from students. Despite the limitations mentioned above, this study expands on previous limited understanding of correlates of social work students' awareness of racism and provides recommendations on strategies that can be incorporated in social work programs to facilitate and harness awareness of racism, a critical precursor to counter racism, among social work students. Furthermore, the current study provides a foundation for future research to expand upon in terms of exploring and examining social work students' racial attitudes and awareness of racism using a more comprehensive design.

### **Conclusion**

Anti-racism has been highlighted as a grand challenge in social work education, research, and practices, by major social work professional associations, including the Council on Social Work Education, the National Association of Social Workers, and the Society for Social Work and Research. Findings of this study suggest that social work programs should facilitate discussions on racism and racial discrimination among students across political ideologies. Social work programs should also include in depth discussions on alignment and application of social work values on prominent social movements (e.g., BLM) in a timely manner. Finally, creating and fostering a space among student networks to discuss the implications of overt and covert discrimination faced by people of color may be critical to facilitate awareness of racism among social work students.

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