

## **Back to the (not so) Basics of Anti-Racist Education and Practice: The Need for White Social Work Students to Learn How to Create Trust and Relationships**

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***Abstract:** This study sought to explore the skills white social work students need to develop in order to cultivate an embodied anti-racist practice. Forty-one social work students (approximately half white and half students of color) at a public university participated in semi-structured focus groups to discuss their experiences with anti-racist education and practice in their social work education. A predominant theme observed from these focus groups was the difficulty that white social work students have developing trust and relationships. Findings revealed that these students need guidance on how to build trust and develop relationships before they can engage in learning other anti-racist practice skills. The authors propose offering a future course that will help white social work students to develop these skills through pilot-testing a few embodied anti-racist competencies related to trust and relationship-building. These skills can contribute to the broader Social Work Grand Challenge to eliminate racism as well as the NASW Code of Ethics ethical principle of strengthening relationships as a vehicle for change.*

***Keywords:** Anti-racist practice, social work education, trust and relationships, racism, anti-racist competencies*

Trust is an essential element in any educational setting (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). White supremacy is abundant in social work and social work education, leading to social work curriculum, research, and practice embedded in a culture that values consumerism, rigor, independence, work ethic, and intelligence over balanced relationship-building, trust, communal sense of self, collaboration, and community engagement (Abramovitz & Zelnick, 2015; Calvo & Bradley, 2021; Riley et al., 2021). As these priorities are often overvalued in schools of social work, it is not surprising that white students are overrepresented in schools of social work (Bowie et al., 2018) and often serve clients with a different racial identity. For new MSWs in the profession (3 years or less experience) who identify as white, approximately two-thirds of their clients are below the poverty line, are Medicaid eligible, and experience mental health disorders (Salsberg et al., 2020). The large proportion of high-need clients highlights how important the skill of relationship-building is, particularly for white students. In order to understand how white supremacy continues to thrive in social work education and practice, we need to better understand the challenges white social work students face in building relationships.

Dr. Ibram X. Kendi (2019) defines an *anti-racist* as “one who is expressing the idea that racial groups are equal and none needs developing, and is supporting policy that reduces racial inequity” (p. 24). Social work education that prioritizes an anti-racist pedagogy focused on relationality and its potential accompanying discomfort (Tang Yan

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et al., 2021) is imperative for helping white students learn how to build relationships and to develop trust within themselves and among others. White students often perpetuate transactional relationships with others that are based on commodity and hierarchy rather than communal support and learning (Tang Yan et al., 2021). A shift in social work education from cultural competence, the idea that interpersonal relationships can be built to transcend cultural differences (Cross et al., 1989), to cultural humility, which prioritizes a lifelong process of self-reflection, self-critique, and learning with clients, organizations, and oneself (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998), can help reorient relationships from being transactional to more supportive and collaborative. Cultural competence focuses more on knowledge acquisition while cultural humility focuses on a need for accountability on an individual and structural level. Cultural humility can help social work educators ask difficult questions about organizational structure, curriculum content, and pedagogical practices (Fisher-Borne et al., 2015) that can teach white students how to build relationships and trust while also holding them accountable in institutions that have centered the experiences of white bodies, histories, cultures, and language (Calvo & Bradley, 2021) throughout their entire lives.

Schools of social work often struggle to build infrastructure and genuine partnerships with communities, particularly communities of color, due to historical neglect and systemic mistrust. White social work students may have difficulty building a cultural humility practice based on deep relationships and trust due to a lack of modeling on how to develop these connections from the ground up (Garcia et al., 2022). When white students lack the skills to build these genuine relationships, their future clients, many of whom may be historically marginalized, will suffer the consequences of this major skill deficit (Wingfield & Adams, 2019). In one study of licensed social workers, 65% of participants indicated that possessing an understanding of one's own racial and ethnic identity is critical to work with clients, particularly in building relationships and establishing rapport. Only white participants made up the remaining 35% of participants who did not believe race and ethnicity were important, indicating they believe that their own race has no relevance for their work with clients (Hall & Jones, 2019). All of the participants of color indicated that their own race was important in the clinical relationship. This lack of understanding of the connection between whiteness and building genuine relationships is a skill set deficit that schools of social work need to address before sending social work students into organizations as emerging professionals.

For example, if white therapists believe that race and ethnicity do not impact the therapeutic relationship, this belief can potentially invalidate the experiences of clients of color (Hunn et al., 2015). This type of microaggression (known as microinvalidation) can compromise the integrity of the therapeutic relationship and can cause harm to the client (Buser, 2009; Nadal et al., 2014). White social work students commonly and unwittingly perpetuate microaggressions in the social work classroom, particularly impacting students of color (SOC; Hollingsworth et al., 2018). Black students often report feeling that their white peers hold negative views of them, which show up in subtle verbal and nonverbal ways, thus negatively impacting their social work education (Masocha, 2015). When called out on these microaggressions, white students commonly will feel discomfort, guilt, shame, anger, and/or embarrassment (Smalling, 2022). These feelings inhibit their ability to build

relationships with others, thus creating more exhaustion and labor for SOC to have to work through the harm white students bring about in these interactions and to explain the impact these microaggressions have. If they do not learn how to work with their feelings and the impact these feelings have on relationship-building, then white students will continue to perpetuate these microaggressions in their agencies.

Since cultural humility and developing an expertise in interpersonal relationships, particularly handling conflict and difficult conversations, are core skills for social workers to embody in the profession, the absence of these skills in academia becomes problematic. The day-to-day interactions of social workers, their roles in the community, and their actions have a major impact on relationships with individuals, families, groups, communities, and organizations (Palmer, 2010). King-Jordan and Gil (2021) report that Black female faculty at social work programs across the U.S. have described their relationships with white colleagues as superficial, lacking depth, surface level, non-existent, and without genuine connection, commonly attributing these superficial relationships to a sense of white privilege rooted in racism. Black female faculty also report that collegial relationships with white faculty are inundated with microaggressions and racist behaviors. Even though these faculty of color report that white faculty likely have the skills and training to develop meaningful relationships, they often choose not to use these skills to develop these deeper relationships with their colleagues of color due to a lack of wanting to understand their own white privilege steeped in racism. These colleagues of color are often hesitant to engage because they perceive their white colleagues as resistant to change.

If white faculty are choosing not to build genuine relationships with these colleagues, it is not surprising that white students will have difficulty developing these types of relationships with their peers, since students often model what they learn from their instructors. If faculty have training but are choosing to not develop relationships, students will likely not develop relationships even with training. It is imperative, therefore, that white faculty develop genuine relationships with diverse faculty and students. White faculty can engage in self-study in order to develop their own anti-racist commitments and better understand the internal barriers to one's own thinking and beliefs that impact their practices around relationship building (Kenyon, 2022).

As with faculty of color, SOC are often distrustful of white instructors and educational institutions (Yeager et al., 2014). White instructors typically are also motivated by a social concern of not appearing prejudiced rather than the actual internal motivation of being anti-racist. This belief, known as Primarily External Race Motives (PERM), commonly undermines the ability of SOC to build trust and to feel a sense of classroom belonging, particularly with white instructors. The more that SOC judge their instructors' behavior as performative rather than internal and personal, the less likely they are to trust their instructors and feel welcomed in class. White students are often unaffected by their instructors' PERM while SOC must navigate this social identity challenge (Kunstman et al., 2022). Additionally, Murray-Lichtman and Elkasseem (2021) explain how academia often uses an academic gaze when addressing racism. This gaze commonly looks like an effort to extract the experiences and emotional labor of people of color while leaving out a call for systemic change and self-examination. This type of non-performativity of claiming

anti-racism without any sufficient action sustains the ambivalence of whiteness and dominance of white supremacy in academia. Since much of social work education is about role modeling skills and behaviors for students, white students likely reinforce PERM when interacting with students of color in the classroom; therefore, further isolating these students and sabotaging trust and relationship-building in the classroom.

Working through conflict is a common way to deepen trust and relationships. An avoidance of conflict, however, has become normalized in society. Race and ethnicity commonly influence how conflict is approached and managed (Parker, 2015). This normalization of conflict avoidance, particularly around race and ethnicity, often inhibits white social work students from learning how to restore and rebuild relationships when they need to be repaired. Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) posits that relationships are the principal component for understanding human development, and humans grow through and towards connection throughout the life span. Disconnection commonly results when relationships lack authenticity, empathy, and empowerment (Miller, 1986). Conflict can be helpful for restoring this type of connection, but an avoidance of conflict allows disconnection to permeate and for trust and relationships to disintegrate.

The current study arose from continual concerns from SOC at a school of social work about white students' lack of skill in developing an anti-racist practice. These students consistently reported to an instructor (one of the authors) that they would like instructors to teach white students how to engage with their whiteness and white supremacy so that SOC did not feel as exhausted and as though they constantly had to educate these students in all of their classes. The current study aimed to address the following research question: What specific knowledge, skills, and competencies related to anti-racism and white supremacy do white social work students require to become practitioners who will engage in actionable behaviors to address racism in their personal and professional roles and functions?

## **Methods**

### **Recruitment and Sampling**

In April and May 2022, students (undergraduate level, master level, and doctoral level) from a school of social work at a public university were recruited to participate in focus groups to better understand their experiences with anti-racism education within their social work education. An email was sent out to the entire student body with a Google Form sign up link during the last week in April 2022 asking them to participate in a 60-90 minute focus group. The students were offered a \$25 gift card redeemable at over 100 vendors for their participation in the study. From the initial email, 29 students signed up to participate. A week later, a follow-up email was sent out to the entire student body. Additionally, the principal investigator (PI) asked student leaders as well as staff and faculty advisors from several identity-based student groups to personally send the recruitment email and link to their group members. This additional outreach obtained 19 more who signed up for a total of 48 potential participants.

The PI followed up with all 48 students and attempted to sign them up for one of eleven virtual focus groups based on their availability. Students received several reminders about the focus group meeting they were signed up to attend as well as calendar invites to help them remember when their focus group was meeting. Some students did not show up to the focus group while others became sick or had conflicts the day of the meeting. The PI attempted to reschedule any participants who were not able to attend their initial focus group. After rescheduling, a total of 41 participants ended up participating in a focus group. Seven students either had too many conflicts or eventually stopped responding to the PI's follow-up communications.

### **Data Collection**

Eleven total focus groups consisting of approximately 3-5 students took place in May and June 2022. Five of the focus groups consisted of white students, one focus group was comprised of white students and white students who also identified as Biracial (these students requested to be placed in a focus group made up of white students), and five focus groups consisted of students of color. The groups were divided by race so that white students were less likely to perform in front of SOC and that SOC would feel more comfortable talking about their experiences with white students without having the pressure that they often feel in the classroom to monitor their language. The authors conducted all focus groups virtually over Zoom and were recorded with participants' permission. One author identifies as a 1.5 generation Korean immigrant, cisgender woman. The other author identifies as a white Jewish American, gay, cisgender man. Both authors have a long-standing relationship engaging in racial equity work together. The PI's Institutional Review Board (IRB) determined the study to be exempt, so participants were allowed to verbally consent to participating in the study at the beginning of the focus groups. The participants received a written consent form emailed to them ahead of time explaining the purpose and procedures for the study. The participants were also asked if they had any questions about the study at the beginning of each focus group.

The focus groups typically lasted about 75-90 minutes. The researchers used a semi-structured interview guide to explore students' life experiences around white privilege, white supremacy, and racism at the individual, family, and community levels. Students were asked about their emotional, psychological, and embodied reactions to interactions they have experienced around race, ethnicity, and whiteness. Students were asked to share their hopes, expectations, and concrete actions from their social work educational experience with regard to anti-racist knowledge and practice with a focus on desired outcomes vis-a-vis their specific educational program (BASW, MSW, PhD).

### **Data Analysis**

The transcripts of each focus group were downloaded and saved in MS Word files. The PI reviewed every transcript and edited each one for accuracy. When a part of the transcript was unclear as to the intended meaning of the participant, the PI would review the specific audio recording to ensure accuracy of the transcription. After the authors reviewed all the transcripts, they created notes and memos about the major themes that applied to the

majority of participants. The authors met to discuss the major themes and then began to create a codebook that encapsulated these major themes. After creating codes and the codebook, the transcripts and codes were imported into Dedoose version 9.0.62, a visual qualitative data management software. The authors each coded the first two transcripts and then compared the findings to ensure inter-rater reliability. The major themes documented included “classroom climate,” “practicum experience,” “white supremacy culture,” “school climate and culture,” “skills needed for white students,” “wellness/wellbeing,” “SOC student experience,” and “racist incidents.”

Through this process, the reviewers noticed some codes that were not being used so they were dropped. They also noted other themes that were not being captured with the original codes. These codes included “students’ anti-racism journey” and “trust and relationships.” After identifying these codes and dropping some other codes, the researchers proceeded to split up the eleven transcripts and code the transcripts using these updated codes and codebook. When the researchers came back together, they noticed three major themes throughout all eleven transcripts. These themes included 1) the disconnect between anti-racism knowledge and praxis for white students (Lerner & Kim, in press1), 2) how white students’ lack of skill with anti-racist practice negatively impacts wellness for SOC (Lerner & Kim, in press2), and 3) white students’ inability to create trust and relationships among themselves and with SOC. The first two themes have been or will be written about elsewhere. The third theme is the focus of the current study.

## Results

### Sample

The total sample consisted of 41 social work students enrolled in either the BASW, MSW, or PhD program. Slightly more than half of the participants (51.2%) self-reported as being a SOC or Biracial (n=21), while the remaining participants (48.8%) self-reported as white (n=20). In terms of ethnicity, about two-thirds of the white participants identified as white (65%), while the remaining third (35%) of the white participants identified as other ethnicities. Almost all SOC identified a unique ethnicity, except for two students self-identifying as Korean American and another two students identifying as Filipino American (see Table 1). The majority of SOC, however, identified as Asian. We, therefore, chose to use the term SOC rather than BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) in order to give voices to these students whose identities are often invisible. While Asian students make up only 15% of the student body, they comprised 29.3% of study participants. Students, however, commonly used the term BIPOC in the interviews in order to mirror the authors’ initial language. Therefore, the terms SOC and BIPOC reference the same groups when students use this term in the interviews.

Table 1. *Demographic Characteristics for Focus Group Participants (n = 41)*

Characteristic	n (%)
<b>Race</b>	
White	20 (48.8%)
Asian American	12 (29.3%)
Bi-racial	4 (9.8%)
Black	2 (4.9%)
Iranian American	1 (2.4%)
Latinx	1 (2.4%)
Afghani	1 (2.4%)
<b>Ethnicity</b>	
<i>White</i>	20 (48.8%)
White	13 (31.7%)
Ashkenazi Jewish	2 (4.9%)
Dutch	1 (2.4%)
Eastern European	1 (2.4%)
European American	1 (2.4%)
Italian & Irish	1 (2.4%)
Polish/Czech/Scandinavian	1 (2.4%)
<i>SOC</i>	21 (51.2%)
Korean American	2 (4.9%)
Filipino	2 (4.9%)
Bengali & Punjabi	1 (2.4%)
Japanese & Taiwanese American	1 (2.4%)
Japanese Bi-Racial American	1 (2.4%)
Japanese American & White	1 (2.4%)
Iranian American	1 (2.4%)
White Indigenous Bi-Racial	1 (2.4%)
Mexican American & White	1 (2.4%)
South Asian & European	1 (2.4%)
Multiethnic & Filipinx	1 (2.4%)
Ecuadorian	1 (2.4%)
Haitian	1 (2.4%)
Afghan Refugee	1 (2.4%)
Chinese Vietnamese	1 (2.4%)
Vietnamese American	1 (2.4%)
African American	1 (2.4%)
Indonesian	1 (2.4%)
Chinese Cambodian	1 (2.4%)
<b>Program</b>	
MSW Full Time	26 (63.4%)
MSW Evening and Weekend	8 (19.5%)
MSW Advanced Standing	4 (9.8%)
BASW	2 (4.9%)
PhD	1 (2.4%)
<b>Pronouns</b>	
She/her	23 (56.1%)
He/him	6 (14.6%)
They/them	5 (12.2%)
She/they	5 (12.2%)
He/they	2 (4.9%)

In terms of programs, almost all the participants (92.7%) were enrolled in one of three MSW programs, including full time, weekend and evening, and advanced standing ( $n=38$ ). Of those enrolled in the MSW program, 68.4% ( $n=26$ ) were enrolled in the full-time program, 21.1% ( $n=8$ ) were part of the evening and weekend cohort, and 9.8% ( $n=4$ ) comprised the advanced standing program. Only two students (4.9%) were enrolled in the BASW program. One student was enrolled in the PhD program (2.4%). A little more than half the sample (56.1%) used she/her pronouns ( $n=23$ ), more than an eighth of the sample (14.6%) used he/him pronouns ( $n=6$ ), approximately a quarter of students (24.4%) used they/them pronouns ( $n=5$ ) or she/they pronouns ( $n=5$ ), and two students used he/they pronouns (4.9%). These pronoun usages may indicate that almost a third of the sample (29.3%) likely identified outside of a gender binary ( $n=12$ ). No other demographic information was collected. See Table 1 for more details.

### Trust and Relationships

As described previously, one major theme we identified in the current project was the ability of white students to build trust and relationships among each other, with SOC, and among themselves. We identified several subthemes within this larger category.

### ***Performative Relationships***

SOC reflected on how white students' performative behavior (meaning white students are externally focused on appearing unbiased and "saying the right thing" rather than having a sense that understanding their relationship with race should be internally motivated and personal) makes developing trust and building genuine relationships with white students feel challenging. One SOC explained her experience getting to know white students in the program. She recounted:

*I think for me that shows up [building relationships with white students] in a very eager way of getting to know you [as a SOC]...I think I hold back from a lot of my white peers and connecting with them until I've kind of seen how they act and show up in the classroom...I think that there's a lot of tokenism that happens where there are a lot of white kids running around trying to collect as many BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, People of Color] friends from grad school...And so, for me, [that is a] really big red flag and something I'm not interested in... I would say that that's generally the experience that I have with a lot of white students in the program. Everything's really performative. (MSW full time program, 1st year)*

Another SOC expressed how difficult it had been for her to develop genuine relationships because white students were so focused on performing their behaviors that they could not take genuine feedback. She explained:

*Like the whole point of social work is advocacy...Social work should not be performative because that is the wrong field. So I think if there's any way, shape, or form that we can ingrain it into our fellow [white] peers, who have good intentions that accountability and conversations about impact is very crucial, I feel that would make it easier on BIPOC students to coexist when we're all learning about the same stuff...Because it's not that we're always going to be responsible for the cleanup of the damage...I've only interacted with 2 white students who sat there like honestly that truly sat there and I told them straight up that was not okay and they're like okay I won't do it anymore. (advanced standing program)*

Other SOCs similarly expressed how white students' defensiveness and lack of accountability highlighted the performativity of their behaviors around anti-racist practice. One SOC commented:

*White students tend to get really defensive. And they really lack in terms of holding themselves accountable...their sense of entitlement in how defensive they get...it's very performative...It's like this competition to who can say the most flowery academic jargon. And I think it's ironic because we talked about white supremacy and the tenants of it...It's almost amusing to just see it in action and to recognize the irony of talking about anti-racism yet dismissing BIPOC [students] and acting performative all for the Western academic...like seeking that external validation. (MSW full time program, 1<sup>st</sup> year)*



In addition to identifying what a lack of accountability looks like among white students, SOC highlighted how to identify when white students are performing. A SOC shared:

*Indicators in the classroom [for knowing when white people are performing] include things they agree with, the conversations that they have, where they're coming from, some of their responses, and how they interact with other BIPOC students... their self-awareness about themselves and just kind of how their actions and things that they say may impact other people, especially if they're not in the room. (MSW full time program, 1<sup>st</sup> year)*

White students also expressed a concern around developing performative relationships, particularly with other white students, as a hypervigilance for appearing woke and not saying “the wrong thing.” One white student explained the pressure of appearing “woke.” The student commented:

*When it's [building relationships] with other white people, it still feels like...I was just trying really hard to be the most woke. It's the word an instructor used. The phrase the 'woke Olympics.' And that's what it feels like sometimes...But my experience thus far is that people are trying overly hard. Not everyone. A lot of people are trying to over exaggerate how accepting they are. No one wants to say the wrong thing, myself included. (MSW full time program, 1<sup>st</sup> year)*

Another white student discussed how being hypervigilant creates difficulty in facilitating genuine relationships with others. The student explained:

*For me I feel it's been an attempt at hypervigilance not to say or do [anything racist]...But sometimes I feel it gets a little bit in the way of creating meaningful bonds because I'm sitting there like did I just say something that was wrong that could be perceived [that way]?...Making sure that I haven't hurt their emotional world or hurt them or offended them, people in the program. Sometimes in general I'm just hyper aware. [W]e're learning so much that's constantly in the forefront of our brains...But I guess that's a good challenge- difficulties integrating those meaningful relationships. (MSW full time program, 1<sup>st</sup> year)*

Both SOC and white students commented on how white students' hyperfocus on performativity creates distance in relationship building and trust building. Students commented on how the distance perpetuates even more performance so students do not build authentic relationships. These performative relationships can then lead to a lack of curiosity and self-awareness among white students.

### ***Curiosity and Self-Awareness of White Students***

Several SOC, however, discussed how when they did witness genuine curiosity and self-awareness among white students rather than performative behavior, they were more interested in building relationships with white students. One SOC explained:

*When it comes to white folks who don't share that experience with you... I guess maybe if it could lead to engaging in conversation that I feel comes from genuine curiosity and actually wanting to hear my story. But not from the sense of pity or*

*feeling their guilt...I mean wanting to learn my personal story as it relates to me as a person and as a human, but maybe yes my Asian identity is related to that and is a big part of my experiences, but it's not my whole experience. So like curiosity with the fact of you still just want to understand me as a human, but not exactly you want to understand because I am Asian. (MSW full time program, 1<sup>st</sup> year)*

Other SOC explained how white students' self-awareness helps create an interest in forming relationships with white students. A SOC explained:

*There are white students in the program that I really respect, and I really enjoy conversing with. It's because they know when not to speak up and they know when to just sit back. [T]hey know when to uplift BIPOC voices... In order for me to be vulnerable with others, I have to trust them. It goes down to just how self-aware they are [white students]. And beyond awareness, how much they're practicing that self-awareness. (MSW full time program, 1<sup>st</sup> year)*

SOC also commented on how co-creating space with white students in class is another way for white students to demonstrate curiosity and self-awareness that can lead to trust building. One SOC recounted:

*But I've had good experiences with other white folks in the course and that's when they're really committed to what it means to be anti-racist and giving space for folks too. And then also being open to ideas on how the class is navigated that BIPOC students bring up...So that's also been ways that we built relationships. Inner group dialogue...was a really good experience because I actually got to learn more from a couple white folks and actually have to relationship build and make sure- like this is a lot of trust. (MSW advanced standing program)*

White students attempted to reflect on examples of how they have attempted to develop their own curiosity and self-awareness when in the classroom. One white student gave an example when she was able to demonstrate her own self-awareness with other SOC when working on a group project. She recounted:

*I guess the one thing that I have done is recently I was put in a group [in one of my classes] with all Black people. I asked them [if they wanted to have an all Black group] because I know it's pretty rare to have all Black spaces in school. So I just said you know I don't need to be in this group. If it's okay with you all I'm sure it's pretty special and rare for you to have a space like this working on a project, not just a caucus... it was actually over text and one person said I would really appreciate having an all Black group. And then someone else said yeah that sounds pretty nice. So I said ok I'll coordinate it with the professor and hopped over...And so I switched over to another group, which happens to be all white. [F]or me it's just recognizing that I don't need to be in their space. (MSW full time program, 1<sup>st</sup> year)*

### **Conflict, Accountability, and Making Mistakes**

In addition to white students developing curiosity and self-awareness, many students discussed the importance of being able to work with conflict, accountability, and making

mistakes as a way to build trust and relationships. White students need to learn how to work with conflict in order to build trust and relationships. One SOC discussed the importance of setting up expectations in the classroom around working with conflict. The student explained:

*You know how during community guidelines [at the beginning of a course] they'll talk about our intention versus impact? [T]here's no actual practice of that because in so many moments when those things are happening, the confrontation of it is people freak out. I think there should be an expectation that's probably going to happen, especially white students are still learning. You know you're not going to be perfect. But in reality the learning part is the conversation that happens from [making a mistake]. But these white students are so timid. Or don't want confrontation about that stuff. How are they ever going to learn? (MSW advanced standing program)*

Other SOC talked about the importance of establishing strong relationships so that working with conflict can feel easier. One student recounted an experience in class in which an instructor helped set up a classroom space in which students could learn how to address conflict. The student recalled:

*I feel there's something about that relational piece as we think about possible conflict or we think about things that she [the instructor] even set up the course in a way, where she said at the beginning, like hey I'm human. If I say something that doesn't sit right with you I'd really appreciate it if you let me know one on one. That's how I learn best, and I'll let the class know what I learned from our conversation without naming who taught me where I messed up...And I thought that was a really interesting way to even set up knowing that conflict is an ongoing thing and that people are human and things are changing. And also creating a relational piece to it that when you know somebody, conflict looks different than when you don't know somebody. (MSW full time program, 2<sup>nd</sup> year)*

White students also talked about the importance of learning to express disagreement in class, which could potentially lead to conflict. One first year BASW white student commented, "Is it just going to be an echo chamber of what we think is best and what we think is the right course of action if we're working on something or just all in agreement with each other? This echo chamber really might be harmful." Another white student explained how practicing conflict in class with a small disagreement can help build skills to working with a larger conflict. The student discussed how in an intergroup dialogue course students felt more comfortable openly disagreeing with one another. The student explained:

*I'm in the community centered integrative practice concentration...there's maybe 25 to 30 of us, so it creates the opportunity to build more trust within our concentration... They're really good at disagreeing with you so then when bigger things come up, I feel like we already have practice. I have experienced people really openly disagreeing with me. I feel I can receive that better because we've disagreed about other things too. (MSW advanced standing program)*

Students also discussed how conflict can lead into accountability conversations that can help SOC want to maintain relationships with white students. A SOC discussed an experience building a relationship with a white student focused on accountability. The student explained:

*I literally only made one white friend out of the whole year...And they have said some fucked up shit to people...but the fact that I'm able to check them and then we talked about it and then move forward... and the accountability part [enables me] to keep that relationship...If y'all don't want to be accountable and waste my breath because [as] BIPOC students we are not responsible for everybody, so we have to pick and choose... (MSW advanced standing program)*

One white student reflected on how history and the legacy of whiteness impacts accountability and trustworthiness, particularly when engaging in a disagreement with faculty of color. The student explained:

*I'm currently grappling with how to contend with the legacy of whiteness...Any time I may present disagreement with a BIPOC faculty or instructor I'm like hey we have different opinions...There's a paper I just read, one of [an instructor at the school]. It was talking about this historical loss scale. And one of the historical pieces they were asking folks about was distrust of whites due to broken treaties. And it's not something that I personally enacted, but I am responsible for that legacy and history and being cognizant of it and how it would shape my interactions of disagreement potentially with a BIPOC professor [or a BIPOC student]. [It's] something that I'm trying to get better at. I don't think I'm good at being aware of what's carried with me as I present potentially in disagreement. (MSW full time program, 1<sup>st</sup> year)*

White saviorism was another issue related to accountability that SOC continuously discussed as something that interrupts building genuine relationships with white students. A SOC discussed how white students need to take accountability when their white saviorism is showing up so that they can build more genuine trusting relationships with SOC. One SOC described an experience that felt all too common in class. The student explained:

*[A]nother thing that could be done to build more authenticity is white students not speaking on others' experiences. It's so common. I feel in all my classes whenever we're discussing material or issues, especially related to BIPOC people, there's always so many ways [white] students say 'when I worked at a shelter' or 'when I worked with the Black family' or 'I worked with an Asian immigrant.' And then they use that experience to act as experts in that issue. And so many times I've had to call students in on certain problematic language they use. In their head they're being good allies by talking about racial issues when in reality they're making assumptions...[T]hey'll just hop on to something if they have an inkling of experience and by experience it's really just exposure and really just an example of them being a white savior... And there's just this refusal to acknowledge the work that needs to be done in the white community. (MSW full time program, 1<sup>st</sup> year)*

White people also talked about the importance of building relationships with other white people who are dedicated to discussions about anti-racism as a form of accountability. One white student recounted how she only built close friendships with other white people who wanted to have these conversations. She explained:

*I feel most of my close friendships are white people...But I would say one thing that might get in the way [of making relationships with other white students] is just that I definitely have friendships with my people where we talk about anti-racism or racism often. And talk about how our jobs or our future jobs, how that might look and what positionality we take within systems. I think if they are not willing to have those kinds of conversations, I'm not interested in being in relationship with them or a close relationship. (MSW full time program, 2<sup>nd</sup> year)*

In addition to conflict and accountability, making mistakes was another central theme around building relationships with other students, particularly for white students. One white student commented:

*It's hard to make new friends when you're an adult. I think the anxiety connecting with students [of color] also applies to connecting with white classmates. Like not wanting to say the wrong thing...I think I worry about saying the wrong thing in most situations. (MSW evening and weekend program, 1<sup>st</sup> year)*

Another white student discussed how a fear of making mistakes can lead to a fear of being cancelled in relationships. The student explained:

*[I'm afraid] of being cancelled...[A former classmate said something racially charged] seven months ago... I don't talk to her because that's in my head. I'm not going to forget what she said. It's there. And I don't think she was being malicious about it. I think she just didn't know better. Sure she didn't and I think she does now. But I don't want that to be people's experience of me. That I say something that's just really dumb or misunderstood or something that I don't realize is [problematic]. And then that's all they [other students] can hear when they talk to me. So I tiptoe. (MSW full time program, 1<sup>st</sup> year)*

A SOC talked about white students' lack of willingness to talk about mistakes they have made, which makes building relationships and trust with them feel challenging. The student recounted:

*[I]f we get into heavier conversations [such] as what's the last racist thing that you can remember doing, the majority of folks will be like I don't know I can't think of it...But when we're actually in the classroom and talking about examples, all of a sudden there's this blank...Because they're so worried about being looked at as a bigot or racist... [Y]ou can see folks just putting up a wall where they don't want to be vulnerable and it's also hard to be vulnerable when you know you're in an academic space... So I've heard that from a lot of folks where they're like yeah I don't say that it's wrong because I'm worried that oh I'm going to get a bad grade next time. (BASW, 1<sup>st</sup> year)*

### **White Fragility**

White fragility was another theme that created barriers for white students to work with conflict, accountability, and making mistakes. Several SOC commented on how these barriers inhibited the development of trusting relationships. One SOC explained:

*The beginning of my advanced standing year wasn't that great because the one white person who befriended me, I gave them my number, and then they started calling me about like decompressing everything so I got really upset.... So when they're [white students] on their journey of understanding their own white fragility, that is the hugest barrier for me in my opinion. (MSW advanced standing program)*

A white student described difficulty holding other white students accountable and talked about focusing on maintaining harmony between classmates, which is a way white students avoid conflict and reinforce white fragility. The student expressed:

*Our community at the school of social work is just... incredibly intelligent and, therefore, I'm so glad I'm here and a part of that. But also equally very intimidating. And so to make that jump of calling it out or saying something I have to be damn sure that I am 100% right... I am attempting to be conscious of the harmony within the group and then I don't want to be categorized like I'm trying to cancel you because you said something wrong. I want to be practicing that calling out or calling in and that's just hard with this group because everyone's so damn smart and very admirable in a lot of ways. (MSW full time program, 1<sup>st</sup> year)*

SOC commented on how white fragility became evident among white students when SOC express to white students that they may not be interested in having relationships with them. One SOC recounted the following story:

*For me the first person in our cohort who reached out to me in the summer was white. And that quickly became a little uncomfortable for me, because it kind of should have been a warning sign of what the rest of the cohort would be. But it was just a really weird kind of relationship where she was trying to prove herself. Like prove her proximity to Asian by telling me how she used to live in Asia. And it was just really strange. So from the first quarter from the first month I had to put up boundaries. Because I was also starting the quarter really overwhelmed by all the microaggressions. I was proud of myself for telling her look like right now I'm just kind of overwhelmed by the whiteness of the program and I'm trying to be more intentional about making connections. And she responded really defensively... But after that experience I was like ok I'm good with the white people... For my own protection and protecting my energy I just don't have capacity for liberal whites anymore. (MSW full time program, 1<sup>st</sup> year)*

One more common theme that SOC students talked about was the vulnerability of white students as an antidote to white fragility. One student discussed how important it feels for white students to take the first step in being vulnerable to build relationships with SOC. A SOC explained:

*I think it takes a lot of vulnerability again on the part of a white students to be able to see what a specific and situational needs or concerns might be. I think a lot of times I think there's a required first step on the part of white students to be able to*

*make that reach out or to show a level of vulnerability to then create a sense of trust that BIPOC people might be able to then turn towards white people again.*  
(MSW full time program, 1<sup>st</sup> year)

### **Implications for Social Work**

This current study sought to better understand how white students have difficulty creating trust and relationships among themselves and with SOC as part of their anti-racist education and practice. SOC and white students revealed many areas of white students' anti-racist education that needs attention in order to build solid relationships and more trust with white students. These skills include: 1) decreasing performative relationships; 2) increasing curiosity and self-awareness; 3) leaning into conflict; 4) building accountability; 5) learning how to embrace mistakes; and 6) decreasing white fragility. It is imperative for white students to build these skills so that SOC can feel safer in the classroom, less emotionally exhausted, and have more space to work with their own internalized racism.

One of the major Grand Challenges for Social Work is to eliminate racism. This grand challenge "proposes to develop a model for eliminating racism by identifying evidence and practice-based interventions that will end racism and ameliorate the negative outcomes of our history of racism" (Grand Challenges for Social Work, 2022, para. 1). This current study can contribute to this aspirational goal by pilot-testing potential operationalized anti-racist skills that can help white students learn to build trust and relationships. We plan to pilot a class for white social work students in which we can develop, operationalize, and test some competencies based on the results from the current study. This course will be open to all students, but we will encourage students who identify as SOC to enroll in another course specifically focused on SOC's needs. Our previous work has indicated that building these anti-racist competencies goes beyond knowledge acquisition (Lerner & Kim, in press1) but rather needs to be a living, breathing, and embodied anti-racist practice (Menakem, 2017). This class would complement the school's current required social justice and diversity class in addition to the school's attempt to continually infuse anti-racist content into each course and each level in all programs at the school.

Menakem (2017) provides many exercises for white bodies and bodies of culture (he uses this term as a way to reclaim power for people of color) to practice tempering and conditioning their bodies as they work with the charge of race. Rather than head knowledge, Menakem (2022) provides guidance on feeling the vibe, image, meaning making, behavior, affect, sensation, and imagination (VIMBASI) of how race manifests in the body. He also recommends "soul scribing," meaning writing out the VIMBASIs in a journal when working with the charge of race rather than writing out narrative from head knowledge. For example one author soul scribed, "I'm noticing a chill in my body, my shoulders are tightening, my breath is becoming shallow, a feeling of 'I'm not good enough is present,' I want to run and hide, my imagination is that I could learn to sit with other white bodies with the charge of race and not be terrified by it."

We also believe it is imperative for white students to learn how to work with their emotions as they are learning how race shows up in the body. Brackett's (2020) RULER method is an evidence-based approach to social and emotional learning that was developed

at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence that can help white students work with their emotions, particularly around race. RULER focuses on five key emotion skills of recognizing, understanding, labeling, expressing, and regulating emotions. Both embodied anti-racism work (Menakem, 2017, 2022) and RULER are two methods to help build operationalized anti-racist competencies for white students related to trust and relationship-building.

For example, utilizing embodied anti-racism and the RULER method will assist us in developing and assessing some of the following pilot items around emotions and body sensations related to race. We believe these items may provide insight as to how white students can practice building trust and relationship building:

- 1) I feel I am a bad person for racial harm I may have caused (shame);
- 2) I feel bad for racial harm caused by other white people (guilt);
- 3) I can identify when I am feeling defensive when discussing race;
- 4) I can identify when I feel fear in my body when discussing race;
- 5) In conversations about race, I tend to intellectualize issues and ignore emotions;
- 6) I notice when I am feeling anger stemming from my feelings of defensiveness in conversations about race;
- 7) I notice temperature shifts in my body when discussing race;
- 8) I notice when my body is feeling numb when discussing race;
- 9) I notice what is happening with my breath when discussing race;
- 10) I notice the “charge” of race in my body;
- 11) I notice when I need to move (e.g., shake, sway, rock) my body when discussing race.

In our experience, students often ask to learn anti-racism skills but commonly lack more foundational skills of anti-racist practice, such as initiating a conversation with someone you do not know or do not know well, taking responsibility for the community rather than the individual, asking someone how they are doing and then actually listening for their response, sharing your own feelings when asked “how are you doing?” beyond answers of “I’m doing well,” or “I’m great,” and focusing on the process of an experience together rather than the outcome. We imagine these foundational skills can emerge in many ways in the classroom.

Students can become proactive to get to know one another each week in class and not wait for the instructor to facilitate an activity. Instead of sitting in silence, scrolling on their phones, and avoiding eye contact with one another, they could actually learn to engage with one another before class starts (and to understand what a meaningful interaction feels like in their bodies), thus creating more relationship and trust with one another. When they notice that the room is not set up in a way that allows everyone to sit in a circle or communally, they can be proactive and take responsibility as a community for facilitating this arrangement. That way they create accountability as individuals to be attuned to the community’s needs.

White students can also practice pausing and not simply responding with an automatic response when asked how they are doing. They can check in with their body and potentially not even have to give a verbal response but invite each other to just practice being in



communal space together using some of the exercises Menakem (2017) suggests, such as humming, belly breathing, chanting, singing, dancing, or moving their bodies together. As part of the process of the class, they can focus on the here and now rather than the content. If something emerges in class through soul scribing (Menakem, 2022) or any other method, students can learn to allow the emergence rather than focusing on accomplishing the task at hand. We know that all of these suggestions may seem simple and foundational, but they are actually revolutionary in that they can provide a new and emerging way for white bodies to build a new anti-racist culture and way of being together communally.

### **Limitations**

Several limitations exist for our current study. Students who decided to participate may have had deep knowledge, interest, and experience with anti-racist practice, so students with this particular orientation may have self-selected into the study, thus not including students without this type of background. The study provided \$25 gift cards for any student who participated in a focus group, so some students may simply have joined a focus group for this incentive and limited their participation while in a focus group. MSW students overwhelmingly comprised the study, so the experiences of bachelor level and doctoral level students were not well represented in the study. Lastly, one of the PIs who served as the primary facilitator for the focus groups is also an instructor at the school and had previously been an instructor for several students who participated (but was not a current instructor of the study participants when the focus groups were conducted). The students may have signed up simply because they had a prior connection with the instructor, thus skewing who decided to participate in the study. Perhaps this limitation could be minimized in the future by conducting focus groups over the course of a year with different cohorts with separate discussions with PhD students and BASW students rather than during a two-month time period with students from all programs. Spreading out the time period could have also increased the sample size.

### **Conclusion**

Schools of social work continue to grapple with how to prepare students with an anti-racist education that will prepare them to meet the standards of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2022, para. 2) Code of Ethics, which charges social workers to “end discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other forms of social injustice.” The current study revealed that part of this anti-racist practice is teaching white students how to build trust and relationships in an embodied way. We plan to pilot a course specifically designed with white students as our commitment to the profession’s ethical principle from our Code of Ethics (NASW, 2022, para. 20) that states that:

Social workers understand that relationships between and among people are an important vehicle for change...Social workers seek to strengthen relationships among people in a purposeful effort to promote, restore, maintain, and enhance the well-being of individuals, families, social groups, organizations, and communities.

We deeply believe that in order for white social workers to help strengthen these relationships out in the community, they must first know how to build trust and relationships within and among themselves. We are excited to be a part of this revolution.

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