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TRANSFORMING SOCIAL WORK FIELD EDUCATION: NEW INSIGHTS FROM PRACTICE RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP
Edited by Julie L. Drolet, Grant Charles, Sheri M. McConnell, and Marion Bogo

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A Social Work Student in Search of an Anti-Racist Education: A Conversation with Myself

Zipporah Greenslade

Racism has, over the years, proven to be an almost insurmountable part of our lives. While we shy away from any suggestion that we may be racist, racism continues to affect everyday aspects of our lives. This has given rise to the concept of *racism without racists*, an avoidance that is reflected in the hesitancy to discuss race and racism for fear of arising tensions (Blake, 2014; Bonilla-Silva, 2013).

The year 2020 tested our humanity and our sense of community, as Canadians and as global citizens. As COVID-19 was spreading, another sinister element flared — racism. This was especially manifested in anti-Asian racism and in increased incidents of racially motivated harassment and attacks on visible minorities (Hango, 2020). George Floyd died on 25 May 2020 in the United States, with the arresting police officer's knee on his neck. In a video that was broadcast worldwide, the world watched in horror as Floyd's life ebbed away. This agonizing visual catapulted North America and Europe into racial justice movements — most notably, Black Lives Matter. Disturbing news of racial injustices grew by the day, and the unrest increased. A call to defund the police and invest in more social and mental health supports emerged.

While these sentiments originated in the United States, they were echoed in Canada. Social workers were called upon as leaders in anti-racism education and community mobilization. This is where I come in. In the summer of 2020, I was looking forward to the fourth and final year of my Master of Social Work (MSW) program. I was completing my final practicum, and I felt fairly grounded in my education and my potential as a social worker. As calls for racial justice and for social workers to step up were amplified, I found myself increasingly anxious about my readiness to practice. Soon I was reaching out to members of my cohort for support on how to engage in anti-racist conversations. Instead of answers, I found my angst echoed. Continued conversations with various groups of social work students, in and out of my university, emphasized this sense of unease. I began to notice a general sense of unpreparedness for anti-racist social work practice. While I was relieved to know that my apprehension was shared by other students, I began to question the role that social work education had played in preparing us for anti-racist social work. The need to understand the relationship between my sense of preparedness and my education became particularly salient as racial tensions intensified. Consequently, in November 2020, I embarked on an intentional anti-racist education research journey, both in the form of an autoethnography and an exploration of how transformative anti-racist education intersects with opportunities to engage.

While this chapter provides a review of literature focusing on anti-racist social work education, I highlight an ongoing gap in anti-racist education; I discuss critical race theory as a framework for engaging in race-based conversations; I locate myself as a researcher and I share a race-charged vignette from a practicum experience; then, I engage in a conversation with myself as I analyze the conflict that I encountered in an effort to move past my experience. In doing so, I bring forth the vital role of critical conversations in anti-racist education and the all-important role that social work field education plays in connecting theory to practice.

Anti-Racist Social Work Education

There is an assumption that social work students will automatically know how to engage in conversations about racism and how to provide support to racialized persons. This assumption can be linked to social work's

connection to social justice, in so far as discussing the latter is expected to result in an understanding of anti-racism. However, becoming anti-racist is an intentional process that needs to be actively addressed within the curriculum and scaffolded through discussions, activities, and critical self-reflection (Ladhani & Sitter, 2020; Yee & Dumbrill, 2016).

Thus far, this intentionality has been sorely lacking in social work curricula. An even greater dearth of information is apparent in research focusing on anti-racist field education. This is partly attributed to a shift from anti-racism to an anti-oppressive approach. Additionally, terms and concepts, such as multiculturalism, equity, equality, ethnicity, cultural competency, prejudice, discrimination, anti-discriminatory, cultural sensitivity, and cross-cultural have taken over the social work curriculum as safer ways to talk about differences (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Constance-Huggins, 2012; Coxshall, 2020; Ladhani & Sitter, 2020; Pulliam, 2017; Singh, 2019; Yee & Wagner, 2013). This shift is of particular concern as it has resulted in students lacking foundational knowledge about systemic racism, let alone being prepared to dismantle it.

To this end, there is a growing body of literature that recognizes a multitude of challenges faced by social work educational programs. These include a lack of faculty professional development opportunities focused on race and racism; a fear and hesitancy to discuss Whiteness, power, privilege, race, and racism; varying needs and experiences of White versus racialized instructors and White versus racialized students; a Black/White binary approach to race; and a lack of clear expectations focused on anti-racist pedagogy (Almeida et al., 2019; Bubar et al., 2016; Fultz & Kondrat, 2019; McGuire & Lay, 2020; Nakaoka & Ortiz, 2018; Ortiz & Jani, 2010; Phillips, 2010; Varghese, 2016). With these obstacles to negotiate in the classroom, it is little wonder that anti-racism is barely discussed in field education. Up until now, far too little attention has been paid to the gap in anti-racist field education for social work students. This is evident in the scarcity of research resources available.

As is often the case with conversations about racism, much of the research has been descriptive of anti-racist social work education as an area of study defined by fear (Cox et al., 2021; Giwa & Mihalicz, 2019; Singh, 2019). This has served a silencing purpose whereby social work programs leave conversations about racism to the discretion of educators. In a field

of study and a profession that is largely representative of White social work educators and practitioners, the silence in conversations regarding race, racism, and Whiteness brings into question the power structures within the profession and the educational setting.

Also of note is the sentiment that anti-racist education does not seem to be realistic or applicable because it does not outline specific proficiencies or acquisition of transferrable skills (Jeffery, 2005). Instead, students — and especially White students — continue to be torn between wanting to understand and dismantle systemic racism, while at the same time finding anti-racist education difficult to apply. In part, this is ascribed to the history of social work as a profession geared towards helping. To do that, we, as practitioners, feel the need to understand phenomena in ways that allow us to "wrestle them into submission" through "boxing them into solvable categories." Race and racism have continued to be a struggle for scholars, researchers, and practitioners. To assume that race and racism will be easy to understand or dismantle will presuppose a gross underestimation of these concepts' pervasiveness. To begin to grasp anti-racism, I propose adopting a critical race theory approach as an educational foundation.

A Critical Race Approach to Field Education

Critical race theory (CRT) is imperative as a theoretical framework in the context of anti-racist education, because it explicitly critiques race, racism, Whiteness, white supremacy, the construction of power, and the ways in which racism is sustained institutionally and systemically (Coxshall, 2020; Ortiz & Jani, 2010). The integration of CRT into anti-racist curriculum is essential in providing a framework to examine the social work profession and in analyzing power and oppression, with race at the epicentre. A stance in which race is central to the discussion is vital in all anti-racism efforts. To do otherwise would make a mockery of the enduring oppression borne out of racism.

One of the ways in which racism is sustained is by not being spoken about, which may be caused by the fear of not understanding, the fear of tensions that arise from its discussion, or the fear of saying the wrong thing. Yet, even as the silence persists, so too do incidents of racism and white supremacy in continuing to permeate all aspects of social work practice settings. This is evidenced by documented discrimination of

racialized persons within health settings, education institutions, justice systems, housing and homelessness, employment opportunities, salary gaps, interactions with police, experiences of poverty, child and youth welfare systems, immigration and refugeeness, infant and adult mortality, and it is demonstrated in every social determinant of health (Fultz & Kondrat, 2019; Giwa & Mihalicz, 2019; Kolivoski et al., 2014; Weinberg & Fine, 2020). Given the prevalence of racism, it is safe to assume that social workers in any field of practice, knowingly or unknowingly, encounter persons affected by racism.

How, then, can social work graduates be prepared to identify and dismantle systemic racism? How can they be prepared to be anti-racist? To answer these questions, CRT as a theoretical framework becomes a foundational grounding for engaging in anti-racist social work education. CRT has its origins in law and was developed in the 1980s by law students and civil rights activists to challenge elite institutions that maintained notions of race neutrality (otherwise known as colour blindness) while engaging in exclusionary practices that ensured a status quo of racial power dynamics (Crenshaw, 2011). CRT was developed to directly address the ways in which racism was deeply rooted in the social fabric and to examine structural inequalities. Since then, the theory has been adopted by a variety of disciplines, including social work. Although various authors discuss between five and nine tenets, research and anti-racist education using CRT is guided by six consistent key tenets: (1) racism as ordinary and endemic; (2) the critique of liberalism and concepts of neutrality, fairness, and meritocracy; (3) race as a social construction; (4) Whiteness as ultimate property/normative; (5) interest convergence; and (6) the unique voice of colour and intersectionality (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Constance-Huggins, 2012; Pulliam, 2017; Kolivoski et al., 2014). These tenets encourage in-depth classroom and field education engagement in conversations about race and racism, while providing direction to challenge and dismantle systemic racism.

Locating My Voice and Experiences

In my anti-racist education research journey, I have been increasingly drawn to anti-colonial methodologies. This form of resistance provides different ways of knowing, being, doing, and sharing knowledge. In

traditional research, the voice of the researcher is often silent, providing only "facts." This stance has often been credited with continuing to perpetuate Whiteness in research, silencing marginalized voices, and sustaining systems of coloniality (Carlson, 2016). As such, and in keeping with CRT, this chapter is personal and demonstrates the connectedness of everyday experiences to research, rather than presenting the two as separate entities.

Anti-racist education does not happen in a vacuum. Instead, it is a consistent reflection of everyday encounters, rife with the subtlety of racism and Whiteness that have become so much a part of our existence that we no longer question them. As Mason-Bish (2019) observed, researchers need to reflect on their positionality and their power, because these in turn affect how the researcher engages with participants and the research topic. The importance of locating oneself is further emphasized by Fook and Askeland (2007), noting that "critical reflection must incorporate an understanding of personal experiences within social, cultural, and structural contexts" (p. 522). With this in mind, I reflect on three central aspects of my position and identity that inform my engagement in this study.

The first reflection is on the power dynamic and my positionality as a graduate student. I find myself constantly trying to imagine how my research will be received by my faculty and by social work educators. What if my findings do not paint the current curriculum or field education in a good light? Will they receive my findings as a way forward or be "disappointed in me?" I acknowledge that my research was spurred on by the realization that, as a student, I did not feel prepared to skillfully engage in anti-racist practice. I remind myself that I need to be aware of these power and positionality concerns and, at the same time, maintain the integrity of the research.

The second intersecting identity involves me as a Black student. As I reviewed the literature and noted progress and gaps within anti-racist social work education, I found that I identified with the literature in a very personal way. I felt a desperate need to be understood and seen. I wanted the change to happen here and now. Some authors described experiences that could have been taken right out of my own academic life. Later in the chapter, I use an example from an experience I had as a Black student which, when I reflect upon it, I cannot help but focus on race.

The third aspect is that, in my professional capacity, I work with immigrants and refugees, wherein I am consistently exposed to the systemic racism experienced by racialized persons. I hold their stories within me, and I feel the urgency to advocate for stronger anti-racist knowledge and skills to address racism on a systemic level.

While these positions, identities, and experiences intentionally and/or unintentionally shape how I enter into this research, naming them also empowers me. This interaction of personal and emotional experiences is crucial to name and make visible, because it ensures that knowledge is shared wholistically (Fook & Askeland, 2007). In this sense, I remain cognizant of the totality of the research, while honouring my experiences — which inform my research — and balancing it with mindful objectivity.

Vignette: "I Feel Like I Should Have Done Something Different … but I Don't Know What"

A Day in My Practicum

As a way to connect while working remotely, the team with whom I was completing my practicum met every Wednesday morning. Each week, one team member would pose a question as a way to "get to know you." This particular Wednesday, right after massive Black Lives Matter protests across Canada, the team leader was asking the question for the week. Their question was "how do you make considerations for systemic racism in the work we do?" All five team members answered before me, and each admitted that they really had not thought about how they could apply an anti-racist lens to their work. Then the leader turned to me and said, "I am sure as a social work student you likely have a better understanding, tell us what you think." I found myself giving a passionate talk about systemic racism, sharing personal experiences, and even sharing resources. When I was done, the leader responded with "Thanks. Now moving along…." And we did actually move on to other business.

A Conversation with Myself

Following the incident mentioned above, I found myself asking questions and rationalizing the experience with answers that continue to evolve and change. Below is an example of what I have continued to grapple with.

Q. Why Did They Ask Me to Share More?

A. This question raises more questions than it provides answers for me. There are so many things that, in retrospect, trouble me. The way in which the question was framed for me made it sound like more was expected of me. Was it because I am a "social work student" or because I am Black? Maybe both? To be honest, I think it is more because I am Black. I think that they assumed that, as a racialized person, I would know more about racism, more specifically, systemic racism (which was a term being discussed all over media).

The truth is that I had not really researched systemic racism. We had not discussed it in class either. Did we all assume that we know what it is? I, for sure, felt that I could "wing it," in a way that would make sense. I thought that I could explain things from my understanding and that would be enough. But what is enough? Is there ever enough in trying to explain or understand systemic racism? Should I know the answer as a Black person? Either way, I felt obligated to answer and, hopefully, get the team started on an anti-racist journey.

Q. Why Did I Feel Obligated to Answer?

A. As a student who had been engaging in a great deal of independent anti-racist education research, this seemed like a perfect "teachable moment." It felt like I finally was going to make a difference. Maybe I even wanted to look back and remember that moment as one when I really impacted people and made the world a better place. A "helper" moment of sorts? I automatically felt like there was no choice but to answer. I was a social work student and, after three years in the program, I should have been able to provide a well-constructed answer about how to employ an anti-racist lens in our work, right? Score one for the "good guys." Then I put my heart and soul into it, giving an impassioned plea for why anti-racism makes a difference.

As a Black person, I also felt obligated to add some personal experiences of racism and how these experiences had affected me. In my mind, I assumed that they would be "touched." How could they not? Now that I think about it, I realize that I often make this assumption — that if I tell my story enough and if I share what I know and how racism impacts

people like me, perhaps enough people will be touched and want to do it differently. Should I have learned differently by now? Perhaps, but then again, I never stop long enough to reflect or put it in the context of research. I have a hard time deciding if it is just me, or if there is something bigger than me going on. I often think of it as a "one off" — better luck next time. Maybe this is why I always have the need to understand. I wonder how research explains this need.

Q. Did It Even Occur to Me That I Could Politely Decline?

A. Not really. I did not hesitate, even for a moment. In my mind, if they were asking me to help them understand racism, surely, they must be interested. How could I not heed such a call? This could have gone so well, if only they had been willing to engage a little more. Then again, I was a student in my practicum. Would I really say no when asked such an important question? How would that impact my practicum? But who am I kidding: as a curious anti-racist education enthusiast, there was no way I was going to miss this one.

I am only thinking about these other considerations as retrospective reflections. At the time, I genuinely thought that answering honestly was the only way to go. There is also the consideration that they were all White. A part of me (probably the one that sustains coloniality) felt flattered that these White people had trusted me enough to ask me such an important question! I mean, what could go wrong? All I had to do was play it cool and answer compassionately because they were, after all, making an effort to do things better. Plus, if I did not answer the question, would I have otherwise been disappointed in myself for failing to live up to a potential social justice education moment? I know without a doubt that I would have been disappointed in myself. In my "what ifs," I would have constructed a perfect scenario of what my answer would have been, how well it would have been received, and the enlightening discussion that would have followed. Instead, for having gone to the trouble of answering, the team was moving on. There was no follow up — no sense of a eureka moment.

Q. Why Did This Disturb Me So Much?

A. Again my answers are more questions. Did they actually move on? Maybe they just did not know how to respond to what I said? Did I engage

in "too much disclosure?" But how much disclosure is too much or too little? Would that mean that I need to censor what I say? Well, if I did that, who would it benefit? Considering that they were all White, what was going on in their minds? Did they even think about the emotional burden that they put on me? Did the fact that I was a practicum student, while they were all in positions of power, occur to them as a power imbalance? Who were these people? How dared they? These few weeks I had worked with them, I thought I knew them … How could they not offer any feedback, even if they did not mean it? Now wait a minute, would I prefer that they say things that they did not mean, rather than sit in silence? Actually, at the time, yes!

In the backdrop of George Floyd's murder and the Black Lives Matter protests all around the world, how could they have nothing to say after a Black person answered their question about racism? I had an existential moment right there. Why did I even bother answering? Were they even interested in my answer or had they been asking the question because it seemed like the right thing to ask in light of the "political climate?" Afterwards, I also wondered whether they were afraid to speak in front of each other. After realizing that we were not going to engage in the conversation, I went into a "smile and act like nothing is going on" reaction. I may have overcompensated in later discussions, for a few weeks. I wanted them to not define me using that conversation. I also found myself wanting to be funnier, more eloquent, and to excel at my practicum tasks. In the end, I think what disturbed me was that they asked the question, but did not value the answer. They did not see or hear me. Would it have gone differently with a White student? I also felt disillusioned. How was I, as an emerging social worker, supposed to handle such a situation?

Q. What Did I Expect from the Follow Up?

A. My field instructor was not at this particular meeting, so they only heard about the conversation from me and, later, from the team leader. I now feel driven to mention that I had an amazing field instructor. I think this, in itself, is part of what I am beginning to recognize as a need to point out all the good, in order to cushion the not-so-good aspects of the conversation. I feel like I just cannot tell it as is. I cannot help but try to find the

silver lining, even when I am deeply upset. Now I digress … but do I, or is another thought to pin and reflect on?

Anyway, I requested a meeting with my field instructor, right away, and they were available. They could tell that I was upset as soon as I started talking. As I explained the situation to them, I found myself making an effort to relate what happened in such a way that I had no choice but to answer the question. I explained that I felt upset that I may have offended the team. We had a nice debrief. I call it a "nice" debrief because I did not tell them what was going on in my mind — what had disappointed me, what had hurt and frustrated me, or what I really wanted to say to the team. I found myself eager to reassure them that I was more worried about having said too much, which was a concern, but not one of my main ruminating thoughts.

Going back to the question, I do not know what I expected from the follow up. I just may have needed to vent or to be validated: I went with more of the latter for momentary comfort. We did speak about social justice and anti-racism. They asked me about them having a talk with the team, and I asked them not to do so. I did not want to draw attention to the fact that I was feeling troubled. While they did everything right, I found myself thinking that there could be more to unpack here. Maybe they could point out that I am Black, and that the whole team is White. They could ask me whether that played a role. Ask me deeper questions. I found myself unsure what to point at as the problem, so I made it out to not be a big deal.

Later, upon reflection, I knew in my heart that if my field instructor had been a racialized — and especially Black — social worker, I would have been more honest. I would have been more likely to assume that they would understand where I was coming from. It felt like a dirty secret that I could not voice, yet it remained sure at the back of my mind. I reflected on representation, and I wished that I had somebody to help me understand whether I had made a big deal out of an innocent question and discussion. I was convinced that there had been a teachable moment in there, but we missed it. In the end, I turned to research to better understand what may have happened and the ways in which it could have been different.

Q. What Does This Mean for Social Work Field Education?

A. It is easy to chalk this down to a one-off incident. Yet, as was earlier highlighted, research overwhelmingly indicates that the topic of racism is currently avoided in many schools of social work. Field education has the best potential for bringing anti-racist education to life (Razack, 2002). Perhaps the first step should be having conversations about the experiences of students, practitioners, and service users. We can explore questions about power, Whiteness, privilege, and systemic racism, and begin to articulate how these concepts operate in our societies.

Incidentally, it was while I was in the process of researching ways to engage in more race-based conversations in our social work classrooms and in field education that the 2021 Educational Policies and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) for Canadian social work education was approved (Canadian Association of Social Work Education [CASWE], 2021). The first thing I did, upon accessing the EPAS, was to search for the prefix "anti-." I was very encouraged to see the words anti-racism and anti-colonialism appear multiple times in the document (CASWE, 2021). Even more exciting was the fact that one of the core learning objectives was dedicated to "anti-racism" (p. 16). This, for me as a social work student, represented a new dawn as far as anti-racist pedagogy was concerned. It meant that soon we will be required to engage in conversations about race, racism, coloniality, anti-racism, and anti-coloniality. It meant that we will actively commit to dismantling systemic racism, instead of remaining silent, based on the false assumption that we are "non-racist and non-oppressive because the profession has a Code of Ethics to guide practice and because social work institutions proclaim they are committed to this ideology" (Sinclair, 2004, p. 52). There is hope. The road ahead is likely long and rough, but this does set the foundation for change.

Reflecting on the Conversation with Myself

The scholar in me wants to make the conversation with myself perfect, but that would defeat its purpose and the reflections within it. Like any discussion that seeks to analyze race, it is not meant to be complete and tidy. Neither is it meant to provide definitive answers. This chapter is by no means seeking to accomplish that. In fact, if it does anything, it should leave more questions than answers. It will also hopefully normalize

questions and reflexivity with the self, for therein lies the crux of who we are as individuals and as social workers.

An essential tenet of CRT is giving voice to racialized persons and the counter-stories they share (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Einbinder, 2020). My reflective conversation is an effort to add to the voices of racialized persons needing to be heard, while learning through the process (Shumack, 2010). As a Black social work student, and like many Black scholars, I remain conflicted "over whether or not to view racism for what it is — how it actually exists in the world, or view racism through the lens of their hopes for a better tomorrow" (Curry, 2008, p. 43). For now, I engage in decolonial dreaming and I find ways to finally voice my experiences.

Moreover, with this reflection, I intend to add to social work field education literature, especially as pertains to student voices and anti-racist field education, a notably under-researched area. Student experiences represent an important source of information for shaping anti-racist field education (Tang et al., 2021). Further study is needed to broaden our understanding of student experiences in navigating anti-racism in field education, and especially as it relates to students' ability to apply CRT to practice (Einbinder, 2020). Such study will form an essential foundation for informing inclass preparation and field placement supports, both for students and field instructors.

The role of critical conversations cannot be overemphasized. The intentional engagement in questions and authentic responses that explore our conscious and subconscious reflections are key to embarking on an anti-racist education journey. It is important that social work education stakeholders, including classroom instructors, field educators, students, and practitioners, continuously question the power structures they encounter and sustain (Davis & Gentlewarrior, 2015; McGuire & Lay, 2020). These conversations will become building blocks in ending the fear and race-evasiveness that continue to cloud our desire to be anti-racist (Kendi, 2019).

Conclusion

As initiators in a profession committed to social justice, social work educators need to ensure that students are prepared for the realities they will face in their practice. The conversation that I had with myself is but one example of the many ways that race permeates our everyday field encounters

as students and, later, as practitioners. It is through the conversations and reflections in which we engage, with ourselves and with others, that we begin to question and comprehend years of coloniality, white supremacy, and racist systems and structures that have gone unquestioned for so long that we hardly notice them anymore. Racism is much more than overt actions. Sometimes it is in the subtle ways we sustain it, which are harder to identify and thus dismantle. Even so, we must not despair. There is too much at stake. Instead, we must be brave and seek out ways to engage and to act. Owing to the continued pervasiveness of racism, intentional and explicit anti-racist social work education is long overdue, and it is imperative that these conversations start happening in field education. Failure to do so is to severely disadvantage social work students as they graduate to practice in environments and institutions plagued by racism.

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