Deepening the Learning: Intersectional Experiential Activities to Address White Supremacy

Elizabeth King Keenan
Shuei Kozu
Hunter Mayhew
Evelyn Saiter-Meyers
Caliyah Meggett
Paige Reynolds

Abstract: Graduate students of multiple racial identities in predominantly White institutions enter social work programs with a wide range of knowledge about and experiences of White Supremacy, particularly the ways in which structural forms of racism continue to inflict harm, block opportunities, and perpetuate wealth inequities. In addition, White students are often challenged to grasp the ways they have been socialized to participate in perpetuating White Supremacy. This wide range of knowledge and experiences makes it likely that students will experience a range of emotions and defensive resistance necessitating skillful pedagogical design and facilitation of class interactions. Intentional use of theoretical frameworks with experiential activities can deepen self-awareness and understanding of the systemic nature of White Supremacy (Okun, 2010). In this manuscript, four students and two instructors discuss their learning experiences within a course addressing White Supremacy for students of multiple racial identities in a predominantly White institution. Post-course dialogue amongst these multiracial authors identified six core areas of learning when examining intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural racism, cultural wealth of BIPOC peoples, and anti-racism actions. Two primary implications for education are: Weave conceptual frameworks with interpersonal experiential activities throughout the course design, and attend to interactional power dynamics during class meetings.

Keywords: Racism, White supremacy, anti-racism, cultural wealth, social work education

Graduate students of multiple racial identities in predominantly White institutions enter social work programs with a wide range of knowledge about and experiences of White Supremacy, particularly the ways in which historical and structural forms of oppression continue to block access and opportunities and perpetuate wealth inequities. In addition, White students are often challenged to grasp the ways they have been socialized to participate in perpetuating White Supremacy. This wide range of knowledge and experiences makes it likely that students will experience anger, frustration, disbelief, sadness, anxiety, and defensive resistance during discussions about White Supremacy theories and lived experiences (Burghardt et al., 2018). Courses examining racism, White Supremacy, and other forms of oppression require particular attention to pedagogical design and implementation to support students' capacity to engage in learning, with both each other and the instructor. Intentional use of theoretical frameworks with experiential activities can deepen self-awareness and an understanding of the systemic nature of White

_____

Elizabeth King Keenan, PhD, LCSW, Professor, Shuei Kozu, PhD, MHA, LICSW, Assistant Professor, Caliyah Meggett, MSW graduate, Evelyn Saiter-Meyers, MSW graduate, Hunter Mayhew, Master's student, Paige Reynolds Master's student, Department of Social Work at Southern Connecticut State University, New Haven, CT.

Supremacy (Okun, 2010). In this manuscript, four students and two instructors describe their experiences learning within a course addressing White Supremacy for students of multiple racial identities in a predominantly White institution. Post-course dialogue amongst these six multiracial authors identified six core areas of learning when examining intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural racism, cultural wealth of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), and anti-racism actions.

Method

This section explains the method of course construction, in course design, as well as how the six core learning areas were identified, in manuscript construction.

Course Design

This course is one of three required Human Behavior in the Social Environment courses in the MSW program at a predominantly White public university in the Northeast United States. Course objectives include using theoretical frameworks to analyze the structural, economic, and psychosocial dimensions of White Supremacy, racism, and other oppressions, and to apply this knowledge when engaging in conversations about experiences of interpersonal racism and inclusion. The four instructors who teach the course designed it. They selected theoretical frameworks, readings, course outline, learning activities, and assignments. Instructors agreed on the importance of constructing shared guidelines with students at the beginning of the semester. Instructors also viewed student participation in experiential activities as vital to promote learning about the systemic and structural nature of White Supremacy and related forms of oppression. Instructors identified two primary experiential activities with reflective assignments to support cognitive and affective learning.

Theoretical frameworks addressing forms of oppression and power (including Bernal, 2002; Jones, 2000; Kendi, 2016; Tew, 2006; Young, 2004) are introduced in the first part of the course to examine the history of White Supremacy and related oppressions. Students then participate in the StarPower simulation (Shirts, 2013). This simulation enacts White cultural beliefs and power dynamics, including the collusive power to control the rules of the game by those with the most points. Students experience a range of desires, feelings, and reactions as many strive to win and amass wealth while others feel alienated, powerless, or apathetic. A reflection paper, the first assignment for this course, invites students to reflect on what they experienced and the meaning they are making of the experience utilizing theoretical frameworks. Some students express feelings of guilt and shame from occupying positions of power, while others find ways to protest against the silencing of their voices in rule making.

Theoretical frameworks examining cycles of socialization and liberation (Harro, 2013a, 2013b), cultural capital (Yosso, 2005), intersectionality (Collins & Bilge, 2016), and interpersonal racism (Sue, 2010) are introduced in the second half of the course. After reflective discussions on their own positionalities (defined as role, status, and whether one is a member of the targeted group, a witness, or the perpetrator of harmful comments in a

specific situation and setting, Thurber & DiAngelo, 2018), students interview two people of differing positionalities about their experiences of interpersonal racism, belonging, and inclusion, then write a reflection and analysis. The instructors have found that when scaffolded within student engagement activities and theoretical frameworks, experiential activities can offer significant interactional opportunities to: 1) notice unconscious desires, assumptions, and beliefs associated with socialization into White Supremacy culture, 2) highlight interpersonal and structural power dynamics, and 3) illuminate opportunities to disrupt White Supremacy culture in practice interactions.

Manuscript Construction

At the end of the course, the two instructor authors each invited two students from their course sections to co-author this manuscript. All authors met seven times to share personal and professional experiences related to their positionalities, and to identify significant aspects of their learning in the course. During the first two meetings, each student shared what stood out for them (a concept, theory, activity, or assignment that they had learned in the class) to inform conversations by all authors about significant aspects of learning. The first author summarized the conversation, highlighted five core areas, and asked all authors to review and reflect before the next meeting. At the third meeting, authors noted that an additional aspect had been inferred but not explicitly identified. After discussion, authors reached consensus on six core areas of learning and created a writing process. The manuscript writing was emergent, iterative, and intentionally conversational. Each author wrote one of the conceptual introductions and contributed to portions of the manuscript in between meetings. Drafting began with conversational writing and brief conceptual introductions within each area. Consensus was used to decide which draft portions would appear in the final manuscript. A short description of each author follows.

- Elizabeth (she/her/hers) identifies as a White, heterosexual, cisgender woman. Elizabeth is a professor with 10 years of clinical practice experience. She has been engaged in community organizing and community leadership practice for the last 12 years.

- Shuei (she/her/hers) is an Assistant Professor. Shuei was born and grew up in Japan, having both Japanese and Chinese ancestors. Shuei has more than 20 years of clinical experience, primarily in pediatric health care settings, as well as disaster intervention.

- Hunter (he/his) is a heterosexual, White, cisgender man completing his final year of the MSW program. With the AADC credential and Accelerated Resolution Therapy certification, he has worked in addiction treatment for 5 years at an outpatient counseling center for individuals with dual diagnoses under the supervision of a clinical psychologist.

- Caliyah (she/her/hers) is a biracial Black and White, heterosexual, cisgender woman. Caliyah is in her second and final year of the MSW program. In addition to being a full-time student, she works in a therapeutic group home

with adolescent girls. Caliyah plans to pursue a social work career in crisis intervention.

- Paige (she/her/hers) identifies as a White, heterosexual, cisgender woman. Paige is in her second year of a three-year MSW program and is currently exploring her place in the social work field. Paige plans to work with children and families who have experienced trauma.

- Evelyn (she/her/hers) identifies as a Latinx, heterosexual, cisgender woman and is completing her second and final year of the MSW program. Evelyn plans to serve as a bridge for BIPOC communities and mental health support services that are trauma and culturally informed.

The six core learning areas are:

1. Learning as a spiral; the initial sequence matters
2. Socialization into White Supremacy culture
3. Learning about the matrix of power dynamics
4. Moving out of binaries to view self and others intersectionally
5. Applying a structural analysis of White Supremacy within social work organizations
6. Developing the capacity to respond to racist comments and advocate for equity

The six areas each begin with a brief conceptual introduction, followed by author conversations.

Learning as a Spiral; the Initial Sequence Matters

I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel. Maya Angelou (Goalcast, 2017, para. 5)

Racism and social justice courses can be some of the most emotionally loaded and challenging courses to teach. For example, the different and sometimes conflicting worldviews between White and BIPOC students may create divergent realities that confront instructors with pedagogical challenges (Phan et al., 2009). For many White students, it is the first time they are faced with the reality that they have been enjoying White privilege throughout their lives. It is not uncommon for some White students to resent the course material, stating that they do not feel they experience privilege (Fuller, 2016). Thus, while attempting to create a courageous and trusting environment, the content of the course can create tension in the classroom.

Another matter to consider is the dynamic between the instructor and students. Inherently, there is a power imbalance as the instructor has power over the students, particularly with students' grades. The instructor's race and experience with racism also play a role. According to Ladson-Billings (1996), White male instructors may be perceived by students as more "objective" and "scholarly" than BIPOC cisgender female and transgender instructors. As a result, instructors are required to "engage in emotional labor

and other caring work, which entails managing one's own emotions as well as those of students" (Miller et al., 2019, p. 491). Instructors, therefore, need to create a trusting and supportive relationship while maintaining student interest, addressing classroom dynamics, and motivating student learning. Garran et al. (2015) succinctly remarked, "Social justice education is an emotional and psychological process, as well as an intellectual one" (p. 799).

Anti-racism training literature suggests that the intentional selection of pedagogical activities can strengthen student engagement in learning about how White Supremacy relies on reinforcement within and between individual, group, and structural levels (Okun, 2010). Transformational learning theory supports the use of experience as the basis for learning about actions and interactions in various social systems (Jones, 2009). Pedagogical activities that incorporate critical analysis and discussion about such experiences in the learning process can create intense feelings within each student to help students mindfully use an anti-oppressive lens within the classroom, as well as in their social work practice.

Experiences of the Initial Sequence

Elizabeth: *The beginning of the course feels the most tenuous for me because the students and I don't know each other, and students usually bring a wide range of knowledge from experience and prior coursework.*

Caliyah: *I agree, Elizabeth, that the beginning of the course is tough. Not only was I unfamiliar with you as a person besides your obvious identity as a White woman, but as my professor, you were providing me with content about racism and White supremacy that made me aware of and challenged my personal beliefs, values, and biases. It was uncomfortable and sometimes awkward; I then understood why people choose to disengage and deny their privilege.*

Paige: *I am going to be honest when I say I did not realize the importance of this course in the beginning. Class discussions were awkward because there was clear hesitation among the group to express their personal beliefs, values, and biases. As a White student, I was sometimes hesitant to raise my hand and express my opinion because I did not want my response to offend anyone or "show my Whiteness." I asked myself how my response would be perceived by others. Using the class agreement to "listen with openness" during the awkward moments in the beginning of the course encouraged our learning. By listening with openness, each class activity gave a new perspective on each topic and why it was important to learn. The topics we discussed flowed together enhancing our spiral of learning.*

Hunter: *Well said, Caliyah and Paige, and to Elizabeth's point I think the beginning of the course wasn't just tenuous, it was frightening as well. The beginning of this course covered topics which were "uncomfortable" in the sense that I would have to confront two things,*

a) that the world is a beautiful but equally (or more accurately unequally) an aloof and cruel place, and that b) this course would require a deep examination of one's self and their own individuality in context of systemic oppression. I was afraid realizing that I would have to confront my own guilt about the harm others have done in the name of White power, White Supremacy, patriarchal hierarchies, or any other social construct used to perpetuate hate, stratification and humiliation. I was also worried that somebody could potentially hold me responsible, blame me, or assume that because of the privilege afforded to me as a White cisgender man in this society, I must be similar in ideology to those who perpetuate the oppression discussed in this course. I recognized that being afraid to participate would come at a very high cost. Out of fear for being associated with groups responsible for long and unjust oppression toward others, I would in essence be recognizing the problem and choosing to do nothing, ironically facilitating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Socialization Into White Supremacy Culture

Race, gender, ethnicity, skin color, first language, age, ability status, religion, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic class form an evolving mix of *social identities* throughout the lifespan (Miller & Garran, 2017). Children enter into a cycle of socialization without choice or control because they are born into an existing system of rules and roles. Harro (2013a) states that those who are born into *dominant* or *agent* groups fit the "norm" without question; on the contrary, those who are born into *target* groups tend to be devalued by dominant cultures. The system of rules and roles is taught and modeled by family members and other loved and trusted people (Harro, 2013a). These people shape development by communicating expectations for the rules and roles children must play to fit the "norm." As children move into adolescence and young adulthood, socialization expands into a meso level where more people directly and indirectly communicate expectations and rules, reinforcing the roles they are taught to play.

In the United States, the culture of White Supremacy socializes people into social identity roles in a system of social identity hierarchies (Harro, 2013a; Jones, 2000). Young (2004) discussed a similar concept a decade earlier, calling this a process of cultural imperialism. Cultural imperialism involves the universalization of a dominant group that establishes the group's culture as the norm. The dominant group reinforces its position in society by devaluing, marginalizing and exploiting BIPOC individuals and cultures (Young, 2004). It is important to recognize the power of White Supremacy culture to systematically train people "how to be" within each social identity (Harro, 2013a). Young's (2004) cultural imperialism and Harro's (2013a) cycle of socialization illuminate why treating each other with respect and appreciating differences should be simple, but isn't. Systematic conditioning by White Supremacy culture actively perpetuates the harmful cycle. Change, however, is possible when the cycle of liberation is used to cultivate

awareness and understanding to interrupt and dismantle these oppressive dynamics (Harro, 2013b).

Socialization Experiences

Shuei: *I have a very unique background of being mixed blooded between Japanese and Chinese. I was born and raised in Japan, but spent a good majority of my adult life in the United States. My socialization process as a child was vastly different from my American friends. I have always been aware of racial discrimination as my grandparents, my parents, and myself have been subjected to discriminatory treatment in Japan. Yet, we were still able to "blend into the mainstream" because of our physical features, which made it impossible to tell us apart from the Japanese, especially because we spoke Japanese as a first language. Our class and status within the small Chinese community in Japan also influenced who we were. I came to the United States first as a student, and I eventually became a social worker. As an adult, my professional identity became an important part of me, and shaped how I view the world. During my graduate education, I came across bell hooks' writing, and it resonates with me well:*

> While it is a truism that every citizen of this nation, white or colored, is born into a racist society that attempts to socialize us from the moment of our birth to accept the tenets of white supremacy, it is equally true that we can choose to resist this socialization. (hooks, 2003, p. 56)

Paige: *I have witnessed the ignorance, obliviousness, and privilege that consists of "the core," which is the source that keeps us in the cycle (Harro, 2013a). I have been socialized by my parents, family, friends, teachers, and coaches who taught me to play the role of a White female in an affluent and predominantly White town in Connecticut. I was socialized by the public schools I attended, where I learned that people of color were a minority and it mattered which college you chose to attend because they are differently judged and valued. I learned that I was always protected by the "bubble" that is my small town, especially if I fit the mold created by societal norms. We also learned to feel protected by Officer Friendly who came into our fifth-grade class to teach us that police officers were there to keep us safe. I am breaking the cycle now because I have begun to think, challenge, and question the system and see that something is wrong with this picture (Harro, 2013b). I have begun to question where others were first socialized and how they may experience the perpetual cycle. I think about why a mother would tell her son to never bring a Black girl home. I think about why someone would tell me Whites are good and Blacks are bad. And I question what is missing in the education system for K-12.*

Evelyn: *Paige, my experience is similar but from an opposite perspective. My mother taught me from a young age: the key to success in this country is education. I grew up in a town where it was racially diverse and there didn't appear to be any racial divide. My mother encouraged me to take advantage of each and every educational opportunity and reminded me that education was the equalizer. However, when I left home for college, I was shocked at how different my university was from my high school experience. I attended a private university in the same town in Connecticut where you grew up. As you mentioned the town is a bubble and the university became a small microcosm of the bubble. The university I attended had predominantly White students, staff, and professors. My classmates were predominantly wealthy, Irish American, Catholic and from various Northeastern wealthy enclaves. I felt lost because the lessons I had learned about equity and equality were not the lessons taught by my classmates who mocked the notion of White privilege, and instructors did not challenge the students.*

Learning About the Matrix of Power Relations

When thinking about power, White Supremacy culture views it as an asset, a resource accumulated as a means to qualify for leadership, control, and to be granted authority to make decisions that affect both individuals as well as large groups of people (Pinderhughes, 2017; Tew, 2006). This view is often held by people of higher socioeconomic status, such as the president of a country or the CEO of a company. Consistent with White Supremacy culture, the people who hold these positions are usually White men. This concept of power (as a resource) can instill feelings of powerlessness in people who do not occupy elite positions or belong to higher socioeconomic classes. These individuals may feel that they lack the necessary status, assets, or equity in opportunity to gain enough power and control to make meaningful decisions and access exclusive resources (Pinderhughes, 2017). This can make change seem impossible and ultimately be avoided.

Tew's (2006) power matrix offers a more dynamic perspective on power. The conventional concept of power includes the oppressive and collusive types that seek to obtain and maintain control over people through wealth and resources. This reflects a belief that there is a limited amount of power. If one person has power, then the other person has none, such as in cases of intimate partner violence where there is a perpetrator and a victim. Tew (2006) establishes two additional forms of power that are more productive and challenge the idea of zero-sum power. These forms—protective and cooperative—are established on the belief that "power operates in all levels of human functioning and is critical to all relationships," not just among those in positions of power (Pinderhughes, 2017, p. 1). This reflects the idea of power as a collective value. Equal rights and access to resources and services for everyone does not mean less for those who already possess that privilege. Ultimately, Tew's (2006) concept displays the immense power and value in unity and collective action, which has an important place in dismantling White Supremacist culture and the racism that has plagued society.

Views and Experiences of the Power Matrix

Elizabeth: *I remember thinking that power was always harmful. My community organizing work showed me that relational power is real and necessary to counter oppressive forms of power. I find the matrix helpful because it helps me notice when I feel pulled to enact oppressive power in practice (e.g., telling a client they "have to" do something because of program constraints instead of honoring the impact of those constraints in a conversation with the client).*

Caliyah: *You make a great point about the association between being powerful and being harmful, Elizabeth. The StarPower activity was instrumental in not only learning about, but experiencing, this matrix. The activity showed me what people are willing to do, almost subconsciously, to gain and maintain power. I personally experienced that inherent pull to do everything I could to obtain wealth, resources, and make decisions that benefited myself without even thinking about others. Overall, the activity is effective in debunking common myths that are used to justify power and White Supremacy* (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017)*, including statements such as, "I earned everything that I have," and "Anyone can make it if they work hard enough." StarPower displays that oppressed people remain oppressed not because of their own wrongdoing, but because of an individualistic system that naturally favors privileged people over collectivism and equity.*

Shuei: *The thought that power must always be harmful might be the consequence of how women are socialized. In social work, a field of predominantly White women, we often use the word "empowerment," which is regarded positively. As women, to give power to someone else is encouraged, and yet, to seek or obtain a power for oneself is often frowned upon because women internalize the power imbalance in society, focusing on oppressive and collusive types.*

Paige: *I remember internalizing such power imbalance when I had a conversation with a White male on the topic of protesting for Black Lives Matter. There were so many thoughts, feelings, and emotions running through my entire body at that moment; however, I remember feeling weak and powerless. I listened to his harmful words and thought to myself, "Nothing I say will change his mind; I have no power in this situation." When I was given a chance to speak, my words were shut down, but I'm learning that power is not always harmful, and that I am capable of obtaining power as a woman in society.*

Moving out of Binaries to View Self and Others Intersectionally

It is vital when critiquing and analyzing U.S. history to understand that it is based on a historical system of conscious and unconscious racism. Yosso (2005) uses critical race theory (CRT) as a "theoretical and analytical framework" in education to "challenge the ways race and racism impact educational structures, practices, and discourses" and illuminate the barriers to equitable education (p. 74). Yosso's (2005) conceptualization of community cultural wealth goes beyond the notion of simply identifying the issues of White privilege and institutional racism. Community cultural wealth allows BIPOC students to hear their stories for the first time and realize they are not alone, to find collective strength to fuel their ability to defy barriers in education.

Yosso (2005) argues that the community's cultural wealth framework acknowledges the disadvantages BIPOC students face in higher education and other educational settings. However, most importantly, community cultural wealth focuses on the strategies, strengths, and innate experiences that people have acquired via their unique sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds (Yosso, 2005). According to Aragon (2018), counterstories are the strengths and resiliency factors that BIPOC students possess via their cultural experiences inside and outside of their homes. Aragon (2018) studied the experience of Latinx, Spanish-speaking women in college and found that students identified their parents' encouragement for them to study as reasons to complete college and be the first to graduate in their families. Aragon uses their experiences as an example of how cultural wealth strengthens BIPOC students in education. Although students may begin at a disadvantage, it is important to focus on the strengths of BIPOC students to promote anti-racist education.

Views and Experiences of Intersectionality

Evelyn: *Prior to this class, it was easy for me to focus solely on White privilege and the historical and institutional imbalance of power that "Whiteness" holds in our culture. However, the coursework pushed me to think about my own intersectionality and positionality. I found it powerful to be asked to critically reflect on how my positionality "as a college-educated, middle class, light-colored, cisgender woman, married to a white man, Latinx" worldview was formed. This course highlighted to me that I often, without realizing, have ignored my own positionality. I learned via the White Supremacy Iceberg* (tmckinney, 2020) *that colonial ideas are still thriving in my identity as a Latinx, such as the jokes said amongst family or nationalistic pride or common tropes in Caribbean beliefs. Furthermore, I recognize the audacity of me saying to a client who is undocumented, that I understand their experience, simply for sharing some common heritage. Those are some of the thoughts I have begun to unpack piece by piece. I have always thought of myself as an ally to other communities facing oppression or racism, but it wasn't until learning about "Five Faces of Oppression"* (Young, 2004) *that I really came to understand "mi lucha es tu lucha," or "your battle is my battle, too."*

Intersectionality shows us that we are aware that White Supremacy's tactics are not simply one form of oppression but rather that their effects are felt in various ways and in various communities. Intersectionality helps us see that while White Supremacy divides us, intersectionality allows us to dismantle it collaboratively.

Caliyah: *As a biracial, Black and White woman, I also have had to recognize the intersectionality of my targeted and dominant identities. At a young age, I learned that my light Black skin is valued more in society than dark skin, which is privilege. At the same time, I have had my accomplishments and leadership positions questioned or minimized because of my race. As social workers, intersectionality allows us to stand in the gap between continually learning and reflecting on our own biases, while simultaneously advocating for and working towards a more racially just and equitable world. When we know better, we must do better.*

Paige: *I agree with Caliyah. Intersectionality allows us to reflect on our own biases and continually learn about ourselves and others. During this course, I was able to recognize my own biases and further examine my own power relations. I am a White woman who grew up in a predominantly White community where we were conditioned to ignore our "Whiteness." Before this course I believed I had been the victim of "reverse racism." Now I know better; therefore, I must do better. I must be honest about my past biases and move forward with my new knowledge of intersectionality. My knowledge is power, and I desire to share my knowledge with others in how I react, respond, and advocate for others.*

Applying a Structural Analysis of White Supremacy Within Social Work Organizations

Cultural humility has become a powerful evidence-supported practice in the fight against racial inequities that exist in many institutions (Mosher et al., 2017). Practicing cultural humility and recognizing the impact of intersectionality is the responsibility of social work institutions, and can create a culture that represents equity of treatment, appropriate language assistance, employee accountability, cultural awareness, and inclusion while placing high value on constant reflection and challenging exclusive cultures (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health, 2018). When an institution's practices are guided by an exclusive White culture, however, specific moments of interpersonal racism can accumulate, causing substantial psychological distress as well as an increase in depressive thoughts and anxiety for BIPOC individuals (Robinson-Perez et al., 2020). While certain policies have been enacted to reduce racism, the radical overhaul necessary to truly build cultural humility into these institutions seems to remain an unrealized dream of "progressive idealists" and BIPOC staff. Acknowledging this reality illuminates the importance of incorporating cultural humility in a course about racism, not only as a concept critical to social work education but also as an early pedagogical strategy to prepare students to confront devastating

realities like the overwhelming presence of covert and overt White Supremacist culture found in institutions. It prepares students to confront and respond to heartbreaking events like the killing of George Floyd, which represents an institution's failure to demonstrate equity in treatment, as well as empower students with the strength and courage to acknowledge, challenge, and dismantle White Supremacist cultures within internship and workplace institutions.

Experiences of White Supremacy within Organizations

Elizabeth: *I find this part of the course challenging because so many of the organizations in the area are predominantly White organizations that are "works in progress" with equity and inclusion. I try to stir student imagination to envision possibilities beyond what they experience at their internships and am also mindful of my own blind spots and limitations given my experiences working within these organizations.*

Hunter: *I find this discussion particularly important, Elizabeth, because while some organizations are works in progress, I think others have yet to work towards any progress. I view this topic through my lens as a counselor in an outpatient addiction treatment center. The culture of an institution is made up of many aspects, including the practice model, how clients' feelings and experiences are addressed, the way an assessment is performed, diagnostic criteria, staff training, and how an organization addresses problems. Diversity in staff is not enough to say the organization is a culturally competent or humble place. The institutional culture impacts every part of the institution whether the staff is diverse or not. This means that social work institutions that embody a traditional White culture from the 20th century are not allowing voices of BIPOC staff to be represented in organizational practices. Staff diversity is important, but so is incorporating diversity into the culture of the program. Recognizing issues, like historical trauma* (Barocas & Barocas, 1979; DeGruy, 2005) *or the underdiagnosing of PTSD in certain BIPOC populations are both important concepts for staff training. Adopting cultural humility must also become an organizational philosophy that guides all practices in an institution.*

Evelyn: *As we began to discuss leadership and company cultures in the social services field, I was inspired to put into words what I had experienced in my career thus far. While I enjoyed working in environments that celebrated diversity and equity, it became clear that an "invisible tax" was placed on BIPOC staff to "unpack" the agency's policies and the purpose for interventions. I began to observe that leadership was predominately White and rarely represented the communities it was serving and the individuals it led. However, the greatest challenge I have experienced is being witness to interpersonal racism and obvious*

preconceived notions about poverty, class, racism, and gender around clients. The coursework focused on cultural humility is essential in preparing students to tackle the ethical challenges experienced in both their personal and professional lives because it beckons the student not to simply dismantle and build awareness, but rather become a lifelong student of self-awareness, introspection, and a responsibility to act.

Shuei: *This is going to be an extremely important and challenging topic to keep in mind, given the current climate concerning police brutality and social workers taking on some aspects of work police officers have been handling, especially with the mental health crisis and working with homeless populations. I believe that social workers are better trained to address these matters than law enforcement officers. However, social workers should not simply replace the police officers. As we partner with them, we have obligations to train and enlighten police officers about institutional racism and work with them to change the organizational culture. Having a few racial minority officers in the force will not make the police force "racially diverse." If social workers are going to partner with police officers, as appears to be happening already in some parts of the country, social workers should work with them to change their culture to reduce institutional racism and become aware of internalized bias, especially regarding White Supremacy, or the brutality toward people of color will continue to happen.*

Caliyah: *A large public outcry to defund the police has risen as a result of police brutality. This topic is of particular interest to me as I hold an undergraduate degree in criminal justice and have found my career passion at the intersection of the criminal justice and social work fields. Police officers specialize in and are trained to respond to incidents that involve criminal acts and violence for law enforcement purposes. Officers are less equipped and less trained to deal with mental illness, trauma, and special needs. I echo Shuei when I say that this presents a unique opportunity for law enforcement agencies to partner with social workers and other social service agencies that specialize in the prevention of and response to issues such as addiction and homelessness. Until this partnership exists in public service agencies and organizations, these issues will continue to be criminalized and perpetuate disproportionate minority contact, institutional racism, and use of excessive force.*

Developing Capacity to Respond to Racist Comments and Advocate for Equity

A wide range of knowledge, exposure, and experiences of White Supremacy in our society influence the way students respond to racist comments and actions. Awareness and critical analysis of interpersonal and systemic racism within organizations can fuel a sense

of urgency for students to actively resist and shift oppressive power dynamics within interactions. Some students might feel unsure, powerless, or fed up because they haven't ever spoken up or because previous efforts have not had the impact they hoped for. There are also students who struggle with the reality that they have benefitted and enjoyed White privilege because they focus more on how they treat everyone "equally." Deciding whether and how to respond involves assessing specific situations and identifying possibilities based on one's positionality (e.g., is the person likely to hear feedback or is the person more interested in debating what is "right"?).

Areas for advocacy and resistance can be illuminated by defining the difference between equity and equality and using questions to identify which groups are disadvantaged or privileged by a policy, procedure, or decision (Racial Equity Tools, n.d.; Center for Urban Education, n.d.). Advocacy for equity inherently challenges White Supremacy beliefs and assumptions, triggering claims and statements that justify the status quo or dismiss the request (e.g., maintaining individually-focused merit-based decisions that ignore the social capital that influenced achievement for White, middle class, and affluent students). Examining these beliefs, assumptions, and other conditions perpetuating inequitable racial outcomes within specific institutions can inform specific policy and procedure advocacy strategies (see, for example, Acevedo-Garcia et al., 2020; Metzger & Khare, 2017).

Experiences of and Responding to Racism in Graduate Education

Shuei: *As an instructor, the challenge for me is when inappropriate comments are made during the class time. I have to make a split-second decision as to if I should intervene or not, and leave it for students to respond to practice speaking up. This is especially challenging when I know students make those comments when they are well-intentioned. Sometimes, students do not respond in the class but will write about it in the paper, making me wish I and/or they had spoken out.*

Elizabeth: *Yes, I, too, experience this challenge. Although I name the importance of bystanders speaking up when hearing a harmful comment, I find that many students wait for me to address it. I recognize the power in my role as instructor and, at the same time, that social workers need to be able to speak up in their practice. I encourage students to develop and practice habits that I also work at: to notice what stirs within them, welcome and work with those reactions, listen with openness and curiosity, and stay engaged in the conversation whenever possible.*

Paige: *One of the major components I took away from this course was how to respond to others during conversations with racial comments. I never recognized how important it was, especially as a White woman, to practice making a habit of speaking up rather than allowing my privilege to avoid the situation and brush it off because it did not directly affect me. Being silent is a way of eliminating the uncomfortable*

conversations; however, I've noticed that being silent is a cop-out and does not promote the change that is needed throughout our country. I am appreciative of the awareness I now have and will continue to practice responding appropriately, leading with humility, and encouraging uncomfortable but necessary conversations both in my career as a social worker and in my personal life. In order to do so, I will continue to educate myself, listen with openness, and learn to find more confidence in my voice. I am determined to find my voice, encourage change, and be sure I am taken seriously.

Evelyn: *Paige, I underestimated how useful this class would be. To be honest, I felt that all of my peers and I would have already possessed great awareness around the issues of race. As individuals preparing to be social workers and clinicians, I felt my colleagues would be already comfortable discussing racism and how to pursue a life of anti-racism. Of course, I now realize how much introspection was still needed by our classmates and myself. I was especially challenged when Shuei led us in the StarPower activity. I immediately felt frustrated with having to start at the lowest economic/privilege group. As I struggled to learn the "rules of the game," I realized I was the only BIPOC in the group. My teammates began to debate whether or not they should help me acquire more tokens, when suddenly a classmate asked if the team was "bailing me out" out of "White Guilt" by asking: "Are we going to keep giving our tokens to people because we feel guilty?" I have to say it stung to hear that comment. I just felt this heat consume me due to the embarrassment and shame I felt from that comment. I realized that it's the small, every day, personal offenses that need to be challenged as future clinicians. I felt so angry, and I didn't say anything because I didn't want to be the angry minority woman or attract any more attention.*

Hunter: *In agreement with Paige, I found one of the most valuable areas in this class was the opportunities to have the culturally "taboo" conversations about White privilege that exists in the world. Change will never happen if it is unacceptable to have conversations about racial inequalities, oppression, interpersonal racism, and other subjects determined to be taboo by social standards. Our society must become a more acceptable place for these discussions about racism and White supremacy because it will not become easier unless it begins now. To acknowledge the problems from the past that are persisting in the present, and feeling too ashamed to discuss it openly, leaves us at risk for enabling it to keep occurring. Developing greater capacity to have conversations about White Supremacy, White privilege, oppression, and interpersonal racism is one of the more valuable skills that an individual can cultivate and is something that is important for all to explore in their day-to-day life.*

Caliyah: *Paige, you make an excellent point about speaking up rather than staying silent in order to remain comfortable. As incidents of police brutality against Black men and women came to light, including the murders of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd, there was a subsequent surge in the Black Lives Matter movement. I remember scrolling through social media and feeling hurt, angry, and betrayed by the silence of my non-Black friends. I took time to sit with my emotions but felt the need to address their silence. When I engaged in conversations with some of my close White friends, the overwhelming response was that they supported BLM and wanted to say something; but they did not know what to say, and they were afraid of saying the wrong thing. My response to them was that I would rather them show up and speak up imperfectly than not at all.*

Implications for Social Work Education

The findings from this dialogue between students and instructors provide pedagogical suggestions for courses on racism and dismantling White Supremacy through course design and class meetings.

Course Design

Instructors are encouraged to weave conceptual frameworks with interpersonal experiential activities throughout the course in the following ways: 1) Provide opportunities for students to engage in self-awareness, reflection, and conceptual analysis of the experiential activities to connect affective, cognitive, and interpersonal aspects of White Supremacy with systemic and structural dynamics; and 2) Begin with a combination of student social identities, structural racism, and collective resistance. Next, highlight the cultural wealth of BIPOC peoples, followed by how interpersonal and organizational forms of racism impact society. Finally, explore actions to dismantle White Supremacy culture in social work practice.

Class Meetings

Instructors are encouraged to attend to the interactional power dynamics between instructors and students in the following ways: 1) Cultivate an environment of acceptance, respect, curiosity and care with shared class agreements and intentional inclusion of resistance and resilience of targeted groups; 2) Foster cultural humility and an interest in hearing what students do not know or have experience with; 3) Encourage students to speak up when a harmful interaction or comment has occurred; 4) Provide support to students who have been harmed by another student's comments; 5) Model how to interrupt harmful interactions and directly respond to harmful comments; 6) Facilitate reflection of the impact on the class; and 7) Provide education to deepen understanding of the harm using social work values and conceptual frameworks. In addition, instructor flexibility to include current campus, local, and national issues throughout the semester strengthens student

engagement while also providing immediate relevance for the urgency to dismantle White Supremacy culture and structure.

Conclusions

Four students and two instructors in a course examining structural, systemic, and interpersonal racism found that simulations and interviews expanded and deepened learning. Intentional sequencing of theoretical frameworks with experiential activities appear to positively influence learning across ecological levels: developing self-awareness and knowledge of structural racism provide a foundation for learning about socialization into White Supremacy culture, interpersonal forms of racism, and analysis of structural inequities within organizational and institutional systems. Personal awareness and knowledge of the pervasiveness of systemic racism fuel commitments to develop the capacity to respond to interpersonal racism and advocate for equity within organizational practices. To dismantle White Supremacy cultural processes within class requires instructors to engage in emotional labor, make in-the-moment decisions to respond to harmful class interactions, and strive to model habits of being that communicate care, curiosity, humility, and respect. Recognition and acceptance of the wealth of lived experience amongst students, as well as differing gaps in awareness and understanding, can create space for students to learn with and from each other as they develop the capacity to address interpersonal and structural racism in their practice.

References

Acevedo-Garcia, D., Noelke, C., & McArdle, N. (2020). *The geography of child opportunity: Why neighborhoods matter for equity. First findings from the Child Opportunity Index 2.0.* http://www.diversitydatakids.org/research-library/research-report/geography-child-opportunity-why-neighborhoods-matter-equity

Aragon, A. (2018). Achieving Latina students: Aspirational counterstories and critical reflections on parental community cultural wealth. *Journal of Latinos and Education* 17(4), 373-85. https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2017.1355804

Barocas, H. A., & Barocas, C. B. (1979). Wounds of the fathers: The next generation of Holocaust victims. *International Review of Psycho-Analysis, 6*(3), 331-340.

Bernal, D. D. (2002). Critical race theory, Latino critical theory, and critical raced-gendered epistemologies: Recognizing students of color as holders and creators of knowledge. *Qualitative Inquiry, 8*(1), 105-126. https://doi.org/10.1177/107780040200800107

Burghardt, S., DeSuze, K., Bryant, L.L., & Vinjamuri, M. (2018). *A guide for sustaining conversations on racism, identity, and our mutual humanity.* Cognella Academic Publishing.

Center for Urban Education. (n.d.). *Equity and student success.* https://cue.usc.edu/about/equity/

Collins, P. H., & Bilge, S. (2016). *Intersectionality: Key concepts.* Polity Press.

DeGruy, J. (2005). *Post traumatic slave syndrome: America's legacy of enduring injury and healing.* Uptone Press.

Fuller, L. (2016). Don't feel White privilege? It might be political. *Radical Pedagogy*, *13*(1), 39-53.

Garran, A. M., Aymer, S., Gelman, C. R., & Miller, J. L. (2015). Team-teaching anti-oppression with diverse faculty: Challenges and opportunities. *Social Work Education*, *34*(7), 799-814. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2015.1062086

Goalcast. (2017, April 3). 25 Maya Angelou quotes to inspire your life. https://www.goalcast.com/2017/04/03/maya-angelou-quotes-to-inspire-your-life/

Harro, B. (2013a). Cycle of socialization. In M. Adams, W. J. Blumenfeld, C. Castañeda, H. W. Hackman, M. L. Peters, & X. Zúñiga (Eds.), *Readings for diversity and social justice* (3rd ed., pp. 45-52). Routledge.

Harro, B. (2013b). Cycle of liberation. In M. Adams, W. J. Blumenfeld, C. Castañeda, H. W. Hackman, M. L. Peters, & X. Zúñiga (Eds.), *Readings for diversity and social justice* (3rd ed., pp. 618-625). New York: Routledge.

hooks, b. (2003). Teaching community: A pedagogy of hope. Routledge.

Jones, C. P. (2000). Levels of racism: A theoretic framework and a gardener's tale. *American Journal of Public Health, 90*(8), 1212-1215. https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.90.8.1212

Jones, P. (2009). Teaching for change in social work: A discipline-based argument for the use of transformative approaches to teaching and learning. *Journal of Transformative Education, 7*(1), 8-25. https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344609338053

Kendi, I. X. (2016). *Stamped from the beginning: The definitive history of racist ideas in America*. Bold Type Books.

Ladson-Billings, L. (1996). Silences as weapons: Challenges of a Black professor teaching White students. *Theory into Practice, 35*(2), 79-85. https://doi.org/10.1080/00405849609543706

Metzger, M. W., & Khare, A. T. (2017). *Fair housing and inclusive communities. Grand Challenges for Social Work Initiative Working Paper No. 24*. American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare. https://grandchallengesforsocialwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/WP24.pdf

Miller, J., & Garran, A.M. (2017). *Racism in the United States: Implications for the helping professions* (2nd ed.). New York: Springer Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1891/9780826148858

Miller, R. A., Howell, C. D., & Struve, L. (2019). "Constantly, excessively, and all the time": The emotional labor of teaching diversity courses. *International Journal of Teaching & Learning in Higher Education*, *31*(3), 491-502. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1245085.pdf

Mosher, D. K., Hook, J. N., Captari, L. E., Davis, D. E., DeBlaere, C., & Owen, J. (2017). Cultural humility: A therapeutic framework for engaging diverse clients. *Practice Innovations, 2*(4), 221-233. https://doi.org/10.1037/pri0000055

Okun, T. J. (2010). *The emperor has no clothes: Teaching about race and racism to people who don't want to know*. Information Age Publishing.

Phan, P., Woods, D. R., Vugia, H., Chu, M., Wright, P., & Jones, T. (2009). Teaching note: A social work program's experience in teaching about race in the curriculum. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *45*(2), 325-333. https://doi.org/10.5175/jswe.2009.200700056

Pinderhughes, E. (2017). Conceptualization of how power operates in human functioning. In E. Pinderhughes, V. Jackson, & P. A. Romney (Eds.), *Understanding power: An imperative for human services* (pp. 1-23). NASW Press. https://doi.org/10.1080/08841233.2018.1382273

Racial Equity Tools (n.d.). *Racial equity*. https://www.racialequitytools.org/resources/fundamentals/core-concepts/racial-equity

Robinson-Perez, A., Marzell, M., & Han, W. (2020). Racial microaggressions and psychological distress among undergraduate college students of color: Implications for social work practice. *Clinical Social Work Journal 48*(4), 343-350. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10615-019-00711-5

Sensoy, O., & DiAngelo, R. (2017) *Is Everyone Really Equal? An introduction to key concepts in social justice education* (2nd ed.). New York: Teacher's College Press.

Shirts, R. G. (2013). Starpower: Director's instructions. Del Mar, CA: Simulation Training Systems. https://crtda.org.lb/node/12108

Sue, D. W. (2010). *Microaggressions in everyday life: Race, gender, and sexual orientation*. Hunter Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Tew, J. (2006). Understanding power and powerlessness: Towards a framework for emancipatory practice in social work. *Journal of Social Work, 6*(1), 33-51. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017306062222

Thurber, A., & DiAngelo, R. (2018). Microaggressions: Intervening in three acts. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work, 27*(1), 17-27. https://doi.org/10.1080/15313204.2017.1417941

tmckinney. (2020, May 27). *Some* of the ways people practice and reinforce White supremacy. https://arapahoe.extension.colostate.edu/2020/05/27/some-of-the-ways-people-practice-and-reinforce-white-supremacy/

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health. (2018). National CLAS Standards. https://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/omh/browse.aspx?lvl=2&lvlid=53

Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race, Ethnicity and Education, 8*(1), 69-91. https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006

Young, I. M. (2004). Five faces of oppression. In L. M. Heldke & P. O'Connor (Eds.), *Oppression, privilege, and resistance: Theoretical perspectives on racism,*

sexism, and heterosexism (pp. 37-63). McGraw-Hill.
https://www.sunypress.edu/pdf/62970.pdf

Author note: Address correspondence to Elizabeth Keenan, Department of Social Work, Southern Connecticut State University, New Haven, CT, 06515. Email: keenane1@southernct.edu