

## Decentering Whiteness in Social Work Curriculum: An Autoethnographic Reflection on a Racial Justice Practice Course

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**Abstract:** *The social work profession has historically been dominated by the presence and perspectives of whiteness. The centering of whiteness in social work education is reflected in course offerings, course content, assignment construction, and inherent racialized assumptions about who clients and social workers will be in practice spaces. Critical race theory (CRT) and liberation theory provide a framework for considering how to make visible the ways in which white supremacy is embedded in social work education, and to identify strategies for disrupting its presence by decentering whiteness. The purpose of this project is to foster critical thought about ways to dismantle racism and white supremacy in social work educational spaces. Using the reflexive methodology of collaborative autoethnography, the four authors - two course instructors and two students - with varying racial identities and positionalities, reflected on the experiences of coming to, being in, and transitioning out of the course. Areas of convergence and divergence in the autoethnographic reflections revealed strategies such as embracing vulnerability, promoting authentic relationships, and normalizing emotional as well as cognitive engagement for decentering whiteness in social work education. Implications and recommendations for social work educators and students committed to engaging in anti-racist practice are also discussed.*

**Keywords:** *Decentering whiteness, social work education, anti-racist, critical race theory, autoethnography*

Social workers are expected to confront social injustices such as discrimination and oppression using a culturally sensitive lens, while social work programs are required to ensure students “engage diversity and difference in practice” (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015, p. 7; National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017). Both the NASW and CSWE have publications outlining the concept of cultural competence, encouraging social workers to acknowledge cultures other than their own and understand that diversity has an influence on an individual’s behaviors and thoughts. While these guidelines addressing diversity exist, research has found a significant gap in social work’s ability to address racism in an explicit manner (Campbell, 2017). As racial injustices continue to persist, social work education focuses on prejudice reduction, equity, and normalizing oppression and privilege rather than addressing the oppression that fuels these plights (Constance-Huggins, 2012). The systemic refusal to address the roots of racial inequality permeates to the individual, as research has found that students and educators alike tend to resist their own racial privilege. The profession itself promotes racial homogeneity, as 69% of social workers are White and mostly female (Salsberg et al.,

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2017). The lack of diversity in the profession places a continued strain on the relationship between social workers and clients in Black, Indigenous and Latinx communities, as well as Black, Indigenous and Latinx folks who choose to practice social work.

The glaring gaps in the social work community have inspired many to take a closer look at social work curriculum. Critical race theory (CRT) has been a foundational influence, as it acknowledges race as a social construct and racism as integral to society (Constance-Huggins, 2012). CRT also emphasizes intersectionality, or the interconnection of one's identities, encouraging acceptance and empowerment of the human experience as pedagogy (Wagaman et al., 2019). To maximize the advantages of lived experiences, liberation theory can be paired with CRT, as it removes the power differentials from the classroom, making educator and student learning equals. By utilizing CRT and liberation theory, the social work classroom can be an environment of personal and professional growth.

Two professors at a predominantly white institution in Richmond, VA created this environment in their own classroom in the spring of 2020. The societal landscape changed drastically during the course, disrupting the delivery of the course but increasing the relevancy tenfold, as a global pandemic exposed racial disparities in healthcare and video footage exposed systemic racism in the police force. Using collaborative autoethnography, the professors, along with two students, reflect on their experiences with the course.

### **Literature Review**

Extant literature suggests that social work educators should become versed in pedagogical techniques aligned with CRT and liberation theory as mandatory aspects of the social work curriculum (Campbell, 2017; Constance-Huggins, 2012; Einbinder, 2020; Nixon & McDermott, 2010; Olcoñ et al., 2020; Razak & Jeffery, 2002). Schools of social work, by offering formal training programs for future social workers, assume an ethical responsibility to embody antiracism, yet curricula typically utilize hegemonic "multiculturalism" and "cultural competency" models to discuss race in the classroom (Campbell, 2017; Constance-Huggins, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995/2017; Razack, 2002). Critical race and liberation theories urge us to move beyond these models. This is not merely a theoretical proposition, but a practical necessity—social workers can both cause social change as racial justice agents and cause harm to Black, Indigenous, and Latinx communities as pawns of state repression; thus, researchers urge social workers to embrace an anti-oppressive community practice model and strive for community equity (Edmonds-Cady & Wingfield, 2017).

Critical race theorists assert that racism is the water we swim in. CRT emerged from legal scholarship in the 1980s as a system of analyzing race and racism in U.S. law (Hutchinson, 2004). CRT developed in response to the slow pace of transformation of racial oppression in the U.S., despite the Civil Rights Movement's liberal and legal strategies to address racism (Constance-Huggins, 2012). Nearly four decades of development expanded CRT's influence into interdisciplinary terrain — including social work education (Einbinder, 2020). As early as 2002, social work scholars Razak and Jeffery introduced eight CRT-inspired tenants for social work: (1) racism as the norm, (2)

value of storytelling, (3) critique of liberalism, (4) recognizing power and privilege, (5) critique of Whiteness, (6) integrating antiracist discourse, (7) legitimizing race scholarship, and (8) globalized understandings of race (Razak & Jeffery, 2002).

The endemic nature of racism shaping compulsory and institutional education in the U.S. shapes the professional training experiences of the country's social workers (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995/2017, p. 18). Before they decide to follow the social work career path, conventional school systems socialize university social work students: public high schools, community colleges, and state universities. Lower socioeconomic backgrounds in families of origin plus the desire to serve their communities typically motivate Black, Indigenous, and Latinx social work students' career choices (Carlton-LaNey, 1999; Daniel, 2011). Simultaneously, Black students at predominantly white institutions report experiencing microaggressive violence during their experiences in graduate-level social work education (Hollingsworth et al., 2018).

Under these racist educational conditions, earning an advanced degree becomes deeply associated with both racial and socioeconomic privilege. Racial capitalism makes the disentanglement of race and class unrealizable; thus, we must address their simultaneous role in racialized educational disparities along with other systems of oppression such as patriarchy and heterosexism (Card, 2020). The entanglement of race and class speaks to the larger need to incorporate an intersectional theoretical approach to understanding oppression and guiding anti-oppression education. Intersectionality [also coined by a legal scholar, Kimberle Crenshaw (1991)] offers a perspective on the collective and individual experiences of people who embody multiply marginalized identities under interlocking oppressive social systems such as race, class, gender, ability, region, and sexuality (Crenshaw, 1991; Dill & Zambrana, 2009). We need an intersectional approach to understanding inequity, yet because of the tendency to erase race in (neo)liberal institutions, we must focus on the primacy of race as a social determinant in U.S. society. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) asserted race remained untheorized into the mid-1990s: Marxist theory related to class, feminist theory to gender, but neither theoretical model genuinely considered racism in theorizing social inequity. Ladson-Billings and Tate also analyzed race and property rights in the U.S. and problematized simplified Black/white notions of ethnicity and race. The (neo)liberal U.S. context frames *equality* in terms of individual property rights; the authors argued that educational curriculum extends this concept in the notion of *intellectual property rights* (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995/2017). Rejecting property- and rights-based concepts of "knowledge production" connects to liberation theory, which serves as another theoretical foundation for racially just social work education.

Brazilian educator and philosopher, Paulo Freire proposed that liberatory education recognizes students as subjects, not objects and emphasizes the co-creation of knowledge among facilitator-educators and learners, rejecting the capitalist "banking metaphor" that characterizes knowledge as possessed by the educator and somehow disbursed to students (Brigham, 1977). The incorporation of liberation theory, intersectionality, and CRT in our analysis speaks to the epistemological task inherent in dismantling oppressive systems and the need to accept multiple ways of knowing and learning. Liberation theory promotes Freire's argument against teacher-student hierarchies, metaphorized in a "banking" model

of education. In this educational scenario, typical of the U.S. classroom, the teacher supposedly holds “the knowledge” which will be distributed to the students’ minds through lecture-notetaking (Brigham, 1977; Freire, 1970/2005). Liberation theory stems from liberation theology and the spiritual nature of social action. Multiracial feminists (like Gloria Anzaldúa, bell hooks, Audre Lorde) uplift the practices of “loving criticism,” such as honoring and “recovering old knowledges,” (Doetsch-Kidder, 2012, p. 449), accepting our shared humanity while theorizing difference, accepting the powerful nature of pain stemming from oppression, facing conflict with kindness, and nourishing ourselves through positive action. Theorist-activists underscore liberatory spiritual practices to ground social change work, writing that the systemic nature of oppression requires life-affirming spiritual practices in order to dismantle oppressive systems while healing ourselves and transforming society (Doetsch-Kidder, 2012).

Importantly, CRT and liberation theory explicitly reject individualist frameworks, while recognizing the inadequacy of an oppositional “counterstance” and the deep personally felt pain of racial oppression (Doetsch-Kidder, 2012). These theoretical groundings also ask us to practically reimagine educational spaces and authentically embody racial justice practice in classroom activities. As Brigham pointed out in 1977, it is impractical for social work educators to employ the traditional “lecturer-notetaker” model for teaching about group work. Correspondingly, social work educators who wish to embody racial justice practice must design courses specifically to decenter whiteness in syllabi and classroom dynamics (Anaissie et al., 2020).

In a content analysis of 14 peer-reviewed articles related to social work and CRT published from 2007 to 2014, Campbell (2017) shows education was a major theme — 43% of content focused on social work curricula and education. Campbell reiterates the importance of the paradigmatic shift from “cultural competency” and “multiculturalism” toward critical race theory, as many researchers discuss the importance of creating educational environments that disrupt traditional hierarchies and engage students on individual/personal levels. Researchers also found that while addressing the systemic nature of race, racism and racial-consciousness, social work students struggle with the emotional nature of internal work to unlearn racist beliefs and patterns (Brigham, 1977; Campbell, 2017; Constance-Huggins, 2012; Einbinder, 2020; Nixon & McDermott, 2010; Olcoń et al., 2020). This point brings up questions about how whiteness is centered - and requires decentering - in antiracist social work educational discourse.

Use of “voice” and counter-narrative is a central strategy of CRT in education: storytelling underscores the social construction of racial realities and provides a situational context for understanding race. Stories can affect the behavior of the oppressor and serve as “psychic preservation of marginalized groups” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995/2017, p. 20). They write, “Storytelling has been a kind of medicine to heal the wounds of pain caused by racial oppression” (p. 21). Scholars view the contrast between the traditional civil rights legal approach and CRT legal approaches as analogous to the central tension between a multicultural paradigm and critical race theory in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995/2017). By 1995, a watered-down “multiculturalism” emerged as the paradigm for talking about race in education. As a much less critical version of the intentions of liberation movements of the 1960s and 70s, multiculturalism is a political philosophy

urging respect and “tolerance toward many cultures” without explicitly naming racial hierarchies (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995/2017, p. 24). In 2020, a quarter-century later, where is social work education? Stagnant on multiculturalism and cultural competency? For nearly two decades, scholars like Razak and Jeffrey (2002) have been urging the field to embrace CRT and a growing cadre of social work educators are echoing their call today. Across disciplines, our current moment requires a more thorough, rigorous, and critical antiracist pedagogy; and social work education particularly requires drawing from CRT, intersectionality, and liberation theory (Brigham, 1977; Olcoñ et al., 2020; Wagaman et al., 2019).

### Method

In an effort to honor the theoretical underpinnings of intersectionality, critical race and liberation theories, collaborative autoethnography (CAE) was chosen as the research methodology for this study. CAE is a reflexive methodology that aligns with the principles of CRT and liberation theory by centering (counter)storytelling, resisting a dominant narrative, and openly addressing power. This methodology is also multi-vocal, relational, and centers dialogue, which are core components of anti-racist practice. Given the intention of the course and the dynamic time in which it was offered, it was important to examine the course through various lenses of positionality, relationship, and the complexities of navigating the COVID-19 pandemic. Even as the course was being developed, the two instructors discussed the idea of CAE as a tool to examine the pedagogical intent and impact of the course as well as the multi-racial lens that was used in course development.

As a qualitative ensemble methodology, CAE centers the collective “we” in research as opposed to the individualistic “I” that is often seen as preeminent in research (Hernandez et al., 2017). With the intention of dismantling white dominance in social work education, it was important to avoid research methodologies that reinforced the value of singular expertise without adequate acknowledgment of positionality and relational consciousness. As Audre Lorde (1984/2007) notably stated, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (p. 111). CAE as a liberatory research practice acknowledges difference in identity and power, and attempts to create and explore knowledge *with* instead of *for* others (Anaissie et al., 2020). Additionally, thinking about the role of social work education, utilizing a research methodology that is a model for practice with clients is an additional attempt to decenter whiteness in favor of collective voice throughout this process.

The philosophical values of CAE offered the authors the opportunities to engage in participatory storytelling, explore areas of divergence and convergence in perspective and experience within the course, embracing ambiguity, emergence, and exploration as a destination instead of a starting point. With the intention of resisting traditional power structures within academe and white dominant narratives regarding expertise, the authors consciously chose to center the voice of both student and instructor.

In an effort to contextualize the author voice and variation of experience during the course, positionality statements have been included in Table 1 below. Aligned with anti-

racist practices, noting positionality within teaching and research acknowledges the influence of identity, location, time, and space on our work and understanding of it.

### Positionality Statements

Table 1. *Author Positionality Statements*

Author	Positionality Statement
A1	I enter this process as a Black, cisgender woman, raised in the south by a single parent. Growing up in a working class neighborhood, I learned the value of community and collective responsibility. I am able-bodied and have terminal practice degrees in both social work (MSW) and education (EdD). My auto-ethnographic reflection is based on my role as a co-instructor of the racial justice course being examined.
A2	I enter this process as a white, cisgender, middle class, able bodied, queer woman. I have a PhD in social work and am a tenured faculty member in the social work program where this class was taught. I was born and raised in the Southern U.S., in communities where I observed significant racial injustice about which I rarely had opportunity to discuss. My auto-ethnographic reflection is based on my role as a co-instructor of racial justice course being examined.
A3	I enter this process as a Black, able-bodied, working class, cisgender woman. I was raised by my Pentecostal paternal grandmother who protected me from the poverty, racism, and sexism we experienced in our Southern home. I am currently pursuing my masters of social work. My autoethnographic reflection is based on my role as a student in the racial justice course.
A4	I enter this process as a white, transgender, queer, working class, able-bodied person. I am currently in a doctoral program studying social work, although I was finishing the MSW program during this course. I was born in the North to a Jewish family who moved South, where I witnessed myriad social injustices about race, class, gender, and sexuality. My autoethnographic reflection is based on my role as a student in the racial justice course.

Each author positionality statement was written independent of each other and without prior discussion. Authors statements are an authentic reflection of how they see themselves positioned within the world.

### Course Overview

During the spring 2020 semester, a racial justice practice course was offered to MSW students as a topical elective. The primary objective of the course was to prepare students to engage in racial justice work across multiple settings of micro, mezzo, and macro practice settings. Using the four modules of examining self, engaging one another, analyzing our context, and actionizing collective liberation as a framework, the course explored topics such as anti-black racism, white fragility and dominance, identity salience and intersectionality, and intergroup dialogue. The course was designed and co-taught by two instructors of differing racial backgrounds. The instructors sought to model racial liberatory practices in their pedagogy by using their positionality and relationship with each

other to engage students in critical thinking and dialogue regarding race, racism, and justice.

### *A Note About Context*

It is important to note that the COVID-19 pandemic occurred while the course being discussed in this manuscript was offered. The disruption of the pandemic not only significantly altered how the course was delivered, it also impacted how the authors reflected on the experience. It was impossible to reflect on the course without acknowledging the devastating impact of the virus. The shift to exclusive online learning occurred at the halfway point of this course and prevented the instructors and students from finishing the course as planned. While every attempt was made to maintain the integrity of the course and the explicit anti-racist focus, the perpetual impact of the pandemic must be noted.

It is also important to note that the pandemic continued throughout the collaborative autoethnographic process that resulted in this manuscript. While we can only speculate as to how the CAE method would have been implemented in a different time and context, it is most likely that the reflective meetings would have happened in person rather than virtually. Otherwise, the method was carried out in a manner that would have been similar in a non-pandemic context. The reader can infer what they will about the impact of the virtual reflection meetings on the outcome of the study. The authors were all personally and professionally impacted by the pandemic, which may have had a greater impact on reflections than any methodological adaptations.

Table 2. *Reflective Prompts Framing Our CAE*

Reflective Prompt	Key Questions
1. Coming to the Class	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What did you think and/or feel about joining the racial justice social work practice course?</li> <li>• What assumptions (if any) did you make about the course?</li> <li>• What led you to the course?</li> </ul>
2. Being in the Class	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What was your experience being in the course?</li> <li>• What did you notice?</li> <li>• Were you impacted in any way? If so, how?</li> </ul>
3. Transitioning Out of the Course	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What did you think and/or feel as you left the racial justice practice course?</li> <li>• What did you take with you and to what spaces did you take it?</li> </ul>

### **Process**

Shortly after the conclusion of the course, the instructors approached two students to discuss this study, methodology, and the intended impact. Beginning with an exploratory conversation set the tone for what the process would be as well as how each researcher

would honor the unique perspective that the others brought to the process. Through an engaged discussion, the authors mutually agreed upon three reflective prompts for individual and group processing. See Table 2 for a list of reflective prompts we used to frame our CAE.

Each author was given one week to respond to each reflective prompt. At the end of the week, the authors exchanged reflective writing and read each other's responses. After a week for review, the authors met virtually to check in with each other, discuss the prompt and the process of writing. The authors also discussed the upcoming writing prompt and the timeline for the manuscript. Meetings were audio-recorded and transcribed. Additionally, we co-created guidelines to inform the reflective writing process. See Table 3 for a list of process guidelines for the project team.

Table 3. *Process Guidelines for the Project Team*

- Space will be made for different forms of writing and expression. Rather than privileging academic writing, we will open it up to the form that is most comfortable to the writer. This is not to say that academic writing will not be an option, just not the only option.
- Each writer will write for expression and openness. The writing piece will be shared internal to the project team only, and selected reflections will be edited (with writers having control over what is included in the final version) as a team before being sent out for publication.
- The team will discuss and be attentive to the literal and visual power that is given to each voice.
- We will talk openly about power at our debriefing meetings.
- If a project team member decides to end participation prior to project completion, then they will have full control over whether their stories are removed or kept in the project.
- We will try not to self-edit too much before sharing our writing with each other.
- Let your process come as it comes. Reflections can be submitted as poetry, narrative, visual, etc.

### **Analysis**

In CAE, data is created through narrative and repetitive, collective reflection (Gant et al., 2019). Words, tones, inflections, and any other evidence of reflection are analyzed through lenses of connection and relationship, positionality, and current socio-cultural phenomena (Gant et al., 2019; Tham et al., 2020). Analysis in CAE is truly dynamic in that each author is not only engaging in radical self-study, but transformative collective examination as well. Relationships often shift and deepen through the process of repetitive reflection and discussion. In the words of famed author Anais Nin (1974, as cited in Gant et al., 2019) “we write to taste life twice...in the moment and in retrospection” (p. 149).

Within this study, the authors reviewed each prompt again as well as the transcriptions of each of their virtual meetings once all three reflective prompts were completed. The use of CAE as a qualitative methodology helped neutralize power amongst the authors, as everyone was equally required to be vulnerable in their individual prompt reflections as well as during the reflective dialogues that occurred after each writing prompt. CAE allowed the authors to step in, out, and aside in the examination of the course from multiple

vantage points. Through analysis of personal and collective narratives and emergent reflection, the authors were able to interrogate assumptions made about the function of social work education, target audiences for anti-racist education, and the value of intellectual and emotional engagement in teaching.

Through several rounds of review, reflection, and collective processing, the authors identified several themes. The authors also uncovered several points of convergence and divergence in reflection. Additionally, similarities and differences were uncovered related to author positionality, specifically in regard to racial positionality. These themes will be defined and explored further in the following section.

### **Limitations**

As with most studies, limitations exist. As previously noted, the impact of the pandemic undoubtedly influenced the conclusion of the course as well as the way in which the authors reflected upon it. Teaching the course uninterrupted for a second time and engaging in the CAE process with another group of students may yield different results. However, the value of CAE is in the positional storytelling. The pandemic became a part of the course and in many ways during the instructions and subsequent reflection served to further illuminate racial disparities discussed in the course as well as the role of social work in addressing them. While CAE may not be a widely used or popular methodology, the authors believe that social work educators can learn from the practice, particularly as they seek to deepen their understanding of racial justice and anti-racist pedagogical practices. What it does not lend itself to is findings that can be generalized to other contexts. A different method would be required to include the experiences of all people who participated in the course.

### **Findings/Uncoverings**

We use the word *findings* to introduce this section because it is a positivist research tradition; rooted in the belief that we have somehow discovered something new and not yet known. But we know and feel compelled to acknowledge that this is not the case. So we choose to use the word *uncoverings* too because it better describes what we present here. This knowledge is not new. It has been known and has been silenced for a long time. Black, Indigenous, and Latinx students and faculty in social work programs have been talking about the need to decenter whiteness in spaces and places where they have found one another and sought refuge from the violence that is white supremacy in the social work classroom (Carlton-LaNey, 1999; Daniel, 2011; Einbinder, 2020; Hollingsworth et al., 2018; Nixon & McDermott, 2010; Razak, 2002). They have also spoken publicly about these experiences, forming organizations like the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) in direct resistance to the erasure of Black knowledge and practices in social work education (NABSW, 1998, 2020). Our collaborative autoethnographic process has simply uncovered some of these truths and we use this space to lift them again, perhaps extending in some small way, while acknowledging the shoulders of many students, scholars and faculty who have come before us.

Three primary areas of convergence and three primary areas of divergence emerged from the individual and collective analysis of the data generated through our collaborative auto-ethnographic process. These uncoverings will be described in this section with emphasis on the ways in which these areas offer insight into strategies and considerations for decentering whiteness in the social work classroom. The words and reflections of the co-authors will be woven into the descriptions in order to illustrate how points of convergence and divergence manifested in our experiences. Overall, our reflections through the autoethnographic process highlighted some important lessons for social work educators seeking to decenter whiteness in course design and implementation. We will begin with these.

First, decentering whiteness requires constant and persistent effort. It does not happen solely in the course design process. It requires a vigilance that is maintained through consistent and intentional reflective practices. These practices require an examination of self that is painful and uncomfortable. Use of self is necessary. And in that, reflexivity is key. Second, decentering whiteness is not just about changing texts and creating new assignments. It must be embedded in the very essence of the classroom, which is a politicized space. And it requires an ability and willingness to identify the educational practices that need to be resisted as well as the pivots required to move us away from what we have come to know and understand as a learning space. In particular, whiteness has been conflated so perniciously with concepts like rigor and quality and effectiveness in educational settings that making intentional moves to decenter it can generate internal and external resistance. White supremacy is embedded in us all. And it can cause us to doubt and question ourselves and the credibility of anything different. This process of questioning and resisting is best done in relationship and community. And third, the work of decentering whiteness in social work education is simultaneously exhausting and liberating. It is important to find and soak up the moments where we feel the latter to fortify us for the long-term investment this requires. Like any social work practice though, the proximity to those most directly affected (in this case the social work students) reinforces our awareness that this decentering is necessary. It is essential. It cannot be ignored. If we don't make movement in the direction of decentering whiteness we are complicit in causing harm.

### **Areas of Convergence**

#### ***Centering Relationship and Connection as a Praxis***

A primary area of convergence across all of the reflections and discussions among the authors was the importance and value of relationships and connection. Pre-existing relationships and connections were what brought each of us to the course, intentional efforts to build connections within the classroom created spaces for vulnerability that fostered learning, and relationships allowed for a level of reflexivity about dynamics within the classroom that fostered analysis and practice that would have otherwise been unattainable. In reflecting on the first day of class, A3 described the chemistry she felt between the instructors.

*We were all in a relationship rather than a lecture.*

A1 and A2 intentionally talked about their connection and relationship with the class, including their desire to model interracial racial justice work as co-instructors of the course. As A2 shared in one of her reflections,

*We [A1 and A2] built in a lot of time to prepare and feel centered in our process and planning, which really helped us to pay attention to where we might be slipping into modeling things we didn't want to reflect in the class. And just like we do in other places/spaces where we work together, we centered our relationship first. If we weren't ok then we didn't push into the work until we were.*

The relationship between A1 and A2, as co-instructors, was invested in throughout the course. There were multiple weekly meetings for reflection and class preparation. There were conversations about intentional use of self, particularly our racialized selves, to challenge students to push themselves further in their reflections and assignments.

The abrupt nature of the class having to shift online and our limited ability to acknowledge an end to the relationships within the context of the class was difficult. A4 reflected on this.

*I look back with sadness and resentment about the abrupt way we ended though. It was no way to say goodbye - unable to wrap up relationships with classmates or professors from school...Especially in our Racially Just Practice in Social Work course, with the emotional nature of discussing racism and the rawness of the material, I wish we had had more time together.*

This speaks to the importance of paying attention to the building of connection as well as the transition of those relationships as a course comes to an end.

### ***Engaging the Head and the Heart: Resisting Intellectualization***

A second area of convergence across all of the authors' reflections was the balance and tension between engaging in the heart or emotion-oriented work of racial justice with the head or thinking-oriented work of racial justice. First, we embrace that this is a false binary. At the same time, there is a tendency in white-centered classrooms to intellectualize race and racism without acknowledging the deep emotions that people experience. As A1 pointed out in one reflection,

*What's missing is like the heart of it. The heart leads to the action. Cause you can think something all day and do nothing. It's a little bit harder to resist doing something when you've connected like a full body experience or like it's connected to your heart.*

In our experience, when emotions around race and racism are addressed in the classroom, it is usually to take care of white people's emotions rather than centering the emotional experience and labor of Black, Indigenous and Latinx persons.

Heart work allows people to name and sit with their feelings. It allows students and instructors to have differences of emotion in relationship to the content or topic of

discussion. It explores those different emotional responses without trying to come to consensus or aim for resolution or comfort. During the semester in which the class was taught, two public anti-Black incidents occurred. A3 reflected on how the discussion of these incidents blended the heart and head - starting with the heart - to engage the students in racially just social work practice.

*We opened up with a really transparent and slightly painful conversation about the School of Social Work and the racial events that were happening. We had an actual discussion, we named our feelings, we explored race for what it was. Our professors were honest with us. They allowed us to ask questions, we had space for the first time. I think it was actually perfect timing - it was our class in practice for the first time.*

Tapping into our emotions and intentionally sitting with them helps us to resist intellectualizing too quickly, or going straight into thinking, analyzing and explaining. In our experience, White people, in particular, have a pattern of doing this in both mixed-race spaces and homogeneous spaces. This tendency played out with A2 and A1 as a teaching team. It took intentional effort to hold both as important, and in some cases to prioritize the heart or feeling work because we knew that we were counteracting the head or thinking work tendency. A2 reflected on her own tendency to intellectualize in the following quote.

*Something that A1 has taught me (well before this class) is the importance of making space to honor how racism impacts how we are - our feelings, our being, our sense of self - rather than jumping straight into intellectualizing and/or straight into action.*

### ***Vulnerability as an Act of Resistance***

The third area of convergence across our reflections was the role of vulnerability in decentering whiteness as there are a number of risks. First and foremost, we acknowledge that teaching a course like this and signing up to be a student in the course is a risk. Students come to their courses having personal history with classes and spaces that aim or claim to address race and racism. Those have not always been positive. Putting hope into a new space that feels uncertain is making oneself vulnerable. A4 captured this sentiment in the following reflection.

*After we endured oppressive circumstances in all classes and field placements where classism, racism, sexism, and transphobia played out daily in covert and overt ways, I entered this class in a sense hopeful that we would get into some rigorous discussions and, on the other hand, guarded and prepared for classmates to keep enacting the same B.S.*

The effort that is required of each person in the classroom to be open enough to share things that feel deeply personal or that extend ourselves beyond what we have been asked to do in other classes is an act of vulnerability.

For the instructors, there is vulnerability in releasing power and control - power over content, power over process, power over allowing the outside world into the classroom in raw and real ways. A2 reflected on this.

*I think I will end on a reflection about my own sense of vulnerability in teaching this class. It is intense to have confidence and passion and energy while also experiencing a lot of uncertainty and personal exposure in a class. It is risky to try things like facilitating an intergroup dialogue about a recent anti-Black incident that happened in your School and having no idea what is going to happen or if you will be equipped to handle it.*

The aspect of this area of convergence that was a point of divergence for us was the acknowledgement that each of us had differences in the amount of risk we took on when we allowed ourselves to be vulnerable. For example, A1 and A2 identified different risks they assumed in embodying honesty and transparency with students in the classroom. A1 reflected,

*I am intentional about being 100% myself in classroom and professional settings because I spent too many years of my life shrinking myself and hiding to be seen as more palatable/credible. Now that I have gotten used to the freedom of radical authenticity, I can't go back. I also know that it makes some folks uncomfortable initially because they don't know what to do with me and may not take me as seriously. This dynamic is a perfect storm in that I had to be myself but knew that in doing so I might be making it easier to not see me as an equal instructional contributor.*

Our identities and positions shaped how we viewed and experienced vulnerability.

### **Areas of Divergence**

The areas of divergence that emerged from our reflections and discussions highlight the fact that a racial justice social work practice course must attend to the differences in perspective, experience and positionality of students and instructors, particularly those related to race. Courses such as this one cannot be one size fits all. Our divergences in experience and reflection draw our attention to key areas where the needs of students of color may differ and where instructors can center and prioritize those needs as they seek to decenter whiteness.

### ***Making and Taking Space***

There was a constant unspoken negotiation around participation in the class that all of us noticed and that we experienced very differently. The racial dynamic of politeness - moving in and moving out of active participation was a trend among white students that placed significant burden on the Black, Indigenous and Latinx students. The experience of this dynamic was personalized and intellectualized by A2 and A4, the white co-authors, making them hyper-aware of their own participation and raising feelings of frustration targeted at other white people in the classroom - targeted at the whiteness. And both white

co-authors, A4 and A2, reflected on the potential for harm. A4, after reflecting on observing a white classmate's growth in the class, wrote,

*...at what cost did her evolution come? What did she say that might have harmed BIPOC in her life and social work practice?*

This dynamic often shifts focus to the needs of white students, centering their limitations and comfort.

Through collective reflection, the question of who racial justice classes are really for was asked by A1. Who is gaining? When white students feel ill-informed or miseducated or uncomfortable, their participation wanes and the unspoken expectation is that students of color will fill the void. But what do students of color gain from this environment? Have their needs been considered and incorporated? This is further amplified by where the course is situated in the curriculum. This course, specifically, was taught in the MSW program as an elective. Electives in this program's curriculum are reserved for advanced MSW students, and the MSW program is predominantly white. In a reflective discussion during the autoethnographic process, the authors explored this question.

*...thinking about social work as a profession and the value of having these types of discussions. But yeah, a lot of times like those critical conversations or that access to knowledge only happens when you're at the most advanced point of education.*

This question of who courses like this are designed for was further emphasized in reflections on the second area of divergence - affinity groups.

### ***Affinity Groups***

The experience of racial affinity groups during the class was identified as an important and meaningful point in the class by the two Black co-authors, A1 and A3. As a point of divergence, it highlighted the differential impact of the experiences of Black, Indigenous and Latinx students on Black, Indigenous and Latinx faculty. It also highlighted the value and complexity of having space just for Black, Indigenous and Latinx students to discuss their experiences and needs without the presence of white students, particularly in the context of a predominantly white institution (PWI). A1 described the way that hearing about the experiences of students of color in the affinity group space impacted her sense of responsibility to Black, Indigenous and Latinx students in the program.

*I was particularly excited to see so many black women in this class. It was rare to have more than 1-2 in a course and during my own MSW experience, I was often the only one in my courses. While I was excited to see them I was also nervous because I felt an additional responsibility towards them. I knew how isolating the program could be and how rare it was to be taught by someone who looked like them. This feeling of guilt and responsibility would increase after the affinity group class when they shared the depth of their experiences within the program. I remember leaving that class angry and even more determined to be supportive given their experiences and the numerous acts of anti-black racism occurring within the school.*

For A3, she described the affinity group experience as painful and a space that generated motivation to work for change.

*It felt good to sit in the room with these beautiful, smart, Brown women and know we all face a similar hell everyday, and we still choose to do it. Some would think that's insanity, I think it's beautiful and necessary.*

For social work educators seeking to decenter whiteness, it is important to acknowledge that the affinity groups in this class experience were approached with a common general theme but then allowed to take shape as was needed for the particular students in the group. For example, the class had been assigned to read Robin DiAngelo's (2018), *White Fragility*. The white students wanted and needed to unpack and discuss the aspects of the book that were new to them and to explore how they manifested in their own experiences of whiteness. The Black, Indigenous, and Latinx students shared that they had not read the book and instead explored the ways that they experienced the burden of participation in their classes when race and racism came up; what A3 called the "reliance on the Black story."

### ***The Power of Representation***

Similar to the divergent areas of experience described above, the final area highlights the importance of representation in class instructors, class readings and other course materials resources for all students with a differential impact on Black, Indigenous and Latinx students. A1 and A3 both acknowledged the importance of having a Black woman as instructor for the course. Representation in the course materials was also experienced differently by the co-authors along lines of race. A4 described the ways that white students read the content for the course, when reading was often seen as optional if time allowed for other courses. He reflected,

*I keep thinking about a few of my white classmates in particular who seemed committed to a lot of intellectual understanding of antiracism. In short, they (we) did the reading. Due to the rigorous nature of clinical internships, it is not uncommon for SW students to fully skip the intellectual side of the program and skim over academic readings.*

This is certainly not a negative divergence. The importance here is the ways in which the reading is done and the impact it has. Similar to the reading and subsequent discussion of *White Fragility*, reflecting on the readings and authors highlights how much of this learning is soul work, heart work. A3 reflects,

*I'd heard of James Baldwin before but reading his work was so nurturing to me. It gave me hope, especially in such a hopeless time as COVID started.*

The readings were either nurturing or triggering depending on the students' positionality.

## **Discussion and Implications for Social Work**

With social work practitioners, educators, and students all over the globe working to address social inequities and injustices made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic, specific training in anti-racist practice is needed now more than ever. While the revolution may not come in the form of a diversity training, it should be informed and sustained by anti-racist socio-political action. The themes uncovered in this paper highlight a need to re-examine social work curriculum and pedagogy through an anti-racist lens. Adding authors of color and discussing white supremacy is not sufficient. Social work courses intended to adequately prepare students for racially just practice must consciously decenter whiteness in the construction, delivery, and assessment of learning.

### **Recommendations for Social Work Programs**

As social work is a practitioner-focused discipline, much of the curriculum centers the practical application of skills and theory (Brigham, 1977). However, courses regarding race and racial justice are frequently offered as topical seminars or concept courses that do not include direct connections to social work practice. A consequence of such course offerings is that racial justice is only conceptualized for content and is not applied to the conscious construction of the syllabus, assignments, and teaching modalities and in an effort to disrupt white supremacy. As noted in our findings, it requires conscious and persistent effort to decenter whiteness in the classroom. Many of us have been socially conditioned to question the credibility of Black, Indigenous, and Latinx persons in academic spaces. Assignments that do not center the written word are often viewed as less rigorous. Emotion, in particular, has been separated from the educational process. However, how can we teach about race and justice without acknowledging, exploring, and sitting with the impact of racism and oppression? How can you objectively intellectualize lived experiences of trauma in real time? Most importantly, what is the impact of this expectation on Black, Indigenous, and Latinx students enrolled in our courses? Such questions should guide curriculum and pedagogy development for all social work courses not just those centered on race.

As referenced in our findings, transformation occurs through radical resistance. Embracing vulnerability, promoting authentic relationships, and normalizing emotional as well as cognitive engagement with course content are key takeaways for social work educators. While none of our areas of convergence are novel phenomena, they are atypical in social work curriculum development and at times even discouraged. Resisting white supremacy and learned social messages about value, belonging, and credibility in academia is incredibly hard. In fact, it is a direct function of white supremacy that it is so difficult, as noted in all of the author reflections on the course. Social work educators must take a conscious stance to resist white supremacy in the totality of their teaching and scholarship and not just discuss the concept within the context of courses. Racial justice work is a full body experience.

Additionally, as noted in our areas of divergence more time and attention should be devoted to differential student and instructor experiences based on racial positionality.

Consideration for conscious and unconscious impact of content and pedagogy on Black, Indigenous, and Latinx students and faculty should be openly acknowledged and addressed during course construction and delivery. The question of who is the intended audience of racial justice education arose during the delivery of our course and in our CAE reflections. Therefore, making space and acknowledging the various entry points of engagement with racial justice content becomes a more critical consideration in course construction and delivery.

We must decenter whiteness because social work education does not occur in a cultural or political vacuum. If we intend to teach about racial justice and decentering whiteness, then we must do so in the construction and delivery of the courses as well. A host of social work educators and practitioners have vocalized the need to facilitate effective conversations about racial justice in social work classrooms for decades (Brigham, 1977; Constance-Huggins, 2012; Daniel, 2011; Einbinder, 2020; Razak & Jeffery, 2002). The time is ripe (and long overdue) for dialogue about how race and racism shapes our daily social realities and thus our experience within social work (as practitioners, educators, and students) in the United States. Our CAE reflects the need to decenter whiteness. The integrity of our racial justice work depends on our ability to co-create vulnerable educational spaces which decenter whiteness.

Contemporary schools of social work, which continue churning out MSW-holding social workers every semester, would benefit from mandating CRT and intersectionality components in the social work curricula (Crenshaw, 1991; Constance-Huggins, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995/2017; Olcoñ et al., 2020). In addition, in spaces where Black, Indigenous and Latinx faculty are in the numeric minority this becomes added labor that faculty take on in addition to navigating their own experiences of racism in the academy. Administrators within schools of social work must acknowledge the added workload for faculty of color and shift expectations in other areas in order to decenter whiteness. Compared to other professional training programs, the ethical stakes are arguably higher for social work students who adhere to a professional code of ethics and often serve marginalized populations. Students should experience what they are learning about in real time so that they are more readily prepared to actionably engage in racially just practice.

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