

Beyond “Cultural Competency”: Confronting Whiteness in Social Work

Editorial

Lobna Yassine, School of Allied Health, Australian Catholic University, Sydney, Australia

Emma Tseris, Sydney School of Education and Social Work, University of Sydney, Australia

In beginning this editorial, we would like to draw attention to the unceded Aboriginal land on which we are writing. We acknowledge the Gadigal, Wangal, Daruk and Eora peoples, on whose lands we work and live, recognizing their continuing connection to land, culture, and community. We pay our respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past, present, and emerging.

Social work is a profession that espouses social justice and progressive values, but that has a problematic relationship to the project of dismantling structural racism. Pertinent examples of social work’s complicity with racialized oppression include social work’s active participation in colonization practices and policies (Bennett, 2015), social work’s present-day complicity in Islamophobia within roles that involve the policing of Muslim communities (Yassine & Briskman, 2019) and social work’s routine utilization of Eurocentric theories within everyday practice (Schiele, 2017), leading to devastatingly coercive practices within child welfare and mental health contexts, among others. Within social work education, theories of Whiteness, a recognition of historical and ongoing practices of colonization, and knowledge of First Nations languages and worldviews, have remained marginal (Bennett, Zubrzycki & Bacon, 2011). Moreover, as a profession with distinctly white and middle class historical roots, social work has often failed to address the role of white privilege in extending racism, in particular, demonstrating a reluctance to ask critically reflective questions about how social workers themselves may be involved in maintaining racialised structures and in perpetuating racism (Hamilton-Mason & Schneider, 2018).

Our call for papers for this special issue commenced with two questions: Are you interested in contributing to the current debates around the role of whiteness across the human services? Are you concerned about the deployment and function of surface-level notions such as “cultural competency”? Typically, “cultural competency” fixes the gaze towards “the Other”. This edition is an attempt to redirect the gaze to the “non-Other” (Patil & Ennis, 2018). Thus, the impetus for this special issue came from a desire to problematize simplistic attempts by social workers to “understand culture” or to gain mastery regarding “how to work with the Other” and to instead redirect attention towards interrupting the Western gaze (Beck, Charania, Abed-Rabo Al-Issa & Wahab, 2017), including its influence in both pathologizing the perspectives and experiences of First Nations people and people of color, and in concealing the role of whiteness in social work knowledge and practice. In addition, we wanted to highlight the incredible labor that is already

being undertaken by First Nations people and people of color in grappling with daily experiences of white supremacy and its profound effects.

The subsequent articles provide incisive critiques of racialized oppressions within human service contexts, wherein notions of “cultural competency”, “diversity training” and “cross-cultural skills” perpetuate and normalize racism, by othering people of color, sanitizing racialized violence, obscuring colonization, and silencing social workers of color by assuming a default position of whiteness. In addition, the articles present a range of strategies to resist and challenge such depoliticized approaches, and to instead engage explicitly in naming power relations, and in critiquing naive narratives about social work’s history of engagement with anti-racist practices (Brady, Sawyer & Perkins, 2019). Further, they highlight the importance of re-positioning social workers as responsible not merely for making a rhetorical commitment to anti-racism but also for engaging in the ongoing work of making visible and undoing white privilege and its consequences on personal, professional, and institutional levels.

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