Social work addressing racism

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Social workers and the social work profession are mandated by our Code of Ethics (NASW, 2008) to engage in social and political action against injustice. Our inherent responsibility as social workers, therefore, is to midwife the birth of equality and social justice. Given the current climate of disproportionate fatalities at the hands of peace officers and incarceration of African Americans, collectively in the United States we continue to witness a race-based human rights violation; and, it is our duty, therefore, as social workers, to act. This paper provides a multi-level examination of racism, as manifested in current events around the murders of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, as well as the campaigns “Black Lives Matter” and “Hands Up Don’t Shoot” (Garza, 2014; Larson, 2014; Warren, 2014). In response, an exploration is presented that challenges the role of social workers in addressing the levels of racism with micro, mezzo, and macro practice.

Movements Responding to Anti-Black State Violence

Recent events have sparked increased public unrest in response to institutionalized and structural racism and its effects on African American individuals, families, and communities (Warren, 2014). Specifically, widespread outrage over grand jury decisions not to indict police officers responsible for shooting two unarmed Black men, Michael Brown and Eric Garner, has erupted in mass demonstrations across the country. These movements bring into focus the conditions of racism under which people live in the United States, that is, “rates of death [as the result of ‘legal intervention’] for Black males are from 3 to 5 times greater than those for White males” (Sikoral & Mulvihill, 2002, p. 842). These figures point to an epidemic of institutionalized and structural racism, the outcomes for African Americans are far too often gruesome. Recent analysis of the FBI database of “justifiable” homicides, found that a Black person was killed by a White police officer twice weekly over the seven-year period examined (Johnson, Heath, & Hoyer, 2014). Unfortunately, these figures represent a significant underestimation of these deaths, due to inconsistent and low participation by police agencies.

Statistics such as these point to a pervasive reality of anti-Black state violence (Garza, 2014). Some have even claimed that currently, Black men are actually killed at higher rates than during the archaic Jim Crow era of lynching (Taylor, 2014). The fatality rate of African Americans during encounters with police becomes even more troubling when combined with data on incarceration of African Americans. According to Alexander (2012), one in

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1 See Alexander, 2012, and Heath, Hoyer, & Johnson, 2014
2 It is estimated that less than 5% of the 17,000 police agencies nationwide currently reporting to the FBI database (Johnson, Heath, & Hoyer, 2014).
14 Black men was incarcerated in 2006, compared to one in 106 White men. For Black men ages 20 to 35 years old, the incarceration rate increases to one in nine (Alexander, 2012). When the intergenerational traumatic impacts of slavery and lynching in the United States are then overlaid (cf. Evans-Campbell, 2008), it becomes very difficult to refute the catastrophic harms to African American communities and families from the significant, perpetual loss of Black lives and livelihoods. Additionally, it has been found that exposure to racism can cause serious and sometimes debilitating psychological conditions, such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Harris, 2013). This means that African Americans are not only enduring extreme fatality and incarceration rates, but are also subject to potentially disabling and comorbid psychological impacts as the result of racism and discrimination.

In response to this current culture of racism and anti-Black violence, several movements in the United States have begun in which participants have joined in strategic public displays in contempt of injustice. One such movement is “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot,” which represents just that during televised events (Larson, 2014; Sikes, 2014); for instance, four members of the Congressional Black Caucus displayed this gesture of raising their hands during remarks from the House floor, and five St. Louis Rams players entered the field displaying this hand motion. This gesture has become an emblem of Michael Brown’s death, and it also signifies the injustice of entrenched, pervasive, racist attitudes that define Black men as ‘dangerous’, even when in a submissive pose is assumed with their hands above their head.

Sufficient quantitative estimates are not available to accurately understand the scope of this problem, as there is no national database capturing statistics on deaths during police encounters. The FBI receives voluntary reports from only 5% of police departments (Johnson, Heath, & Hoyer, 2014). Furthermore, it is difficult to measure the losses of intellectuals, role models, wage-earners, leaders, and parents, among other social roles, as well as the positive impacts on society by those who have died or been imprisoned. The paucity of data available may best be treated as an indicator of a much larger problem of racism, and may support the argument that a gross human rights violation is underway against African American individuals, families, and communities. As such, social workers must work to fortify the struggle for justice in order to further the values upon which the profession is based.

**Hands Up Don’t Shoot: Social Work Call to Action**

Racism and other forms of oppression have been found to operate on individual, institutional, and structural levels. Rothman (2008) identified the individual level oppression to include racist remarks and stereotypes, whereas the institutional level includes lack of access, such as cultural differences or physical conditions. And, the structural
level includes norms and (societal) worldviews. Using Rothman’s model, three levels of oppression can be identified that are at play in these abovementioned current events as follows. First, the police officers’ potential racist attitudes and actions exist on the individual level. Second, the institutional level is described by the potential cultural differences between African American communities and police culture that limit understanding and access to services. Third, the homicides of African Americans by police officers with seeming impunity falls within the structural level.

Under the current conditions of heightened public outcry and the emergence of a widespread movement for Black lives in the United States, it is time for social workers to advance the movement. In response to the grand jury decision not to indict Officer Darren Wilson, the National Association of Social Workers (2014) made a strategic statement calling for important police reforms around the issues of excessive force and racial profiling. While this statement made reference to racial profiling, it failed to clearly address the ongoing systemic human rights violations faced by African Americans. This seeming moderate stance could be due to the NASW’s role in the field, specifically the need to appeal to a broad spectrum of stakeholders including a wide range of government officials, police, and citizens, as well as the need to maintain the efficacy of the profession. On the other hand, it is possible that the NASW is overlooking the structural nature and urgency of the problem. Since the statement was released over a month ago, the NASW has remained silent on this issue in spite of further related events, such as the decision not to indict Eric Garner’s killer, continued nationwide protests, and several additional unarmed African American people shot by police (Johnson, 2014, Richinick, 2014; Warren, 2014).

While understandably walking a fine political line, the NASW’s statement also invites social workers to become involved in social justice efforts. Support of social workers in this movement is critical due to the distinct skills, abilities, and perspectives offered by its practitioners. It is now time for social workers to take aim at the structures permitting anti-Black state violence to continue. This can be achieved by working for justice at micro, mezzo, and macro levels.

**Micro: Racism and Individuals.** Social work often interacts with individual people in their current, local context. Applied to anti-Black state violence, micro level practice addresses individuals – both who benefit from and who are impacted by racism. In supporting those impacted by racism, social workers can focus on strategies of validation, support, and empowerment. Knowledge and awareness of oppression generally, as well as the particular oppressive dynamics present, can strengthen social justice in micro practice. On the other hand, strategies of
education, confrontation, and modeling are more useful in working with those benefiting from racism (Nieto, 2014). For example, teaching White people about the nature of racism and its historical context would be considered education, while questioning racist behavior could be considered confrontation or, really, a modeling behavior. Addressing White privilege and White supremacy is especially helpful when strategically applied by those in power. When selecting a strategy to use, self-reflexivity is critical; therefore, it is important to consider the nature of one’s own position regarding privilege. For example, it may be harmful for an African American employee to educate a White manager about their racist behavior, whereas the same information delivered by another White manager / peer may be more effective.

**Mezzo: Racism and Institutions.** Social workers also support families, groups, and organizations. Important tools for social workers to use at this level include advocacy, conflict resolution, and group building. There is currently a large multi-ethnic movement protesting the institutional violence faced by African Americans and racial tensions have emerged (Garza, 2014). These tensions stem from differences in lived experience and seem to echo the existing conflict between police and the African American community that caused the protests in the first place. This type of intergroup conflict can benefit from culturally competent social workers skilled in cross-cultural advocacy and conflict resolution, which aims to transform racial tensions often through caucus groups. Social workers can facilitate communication between groups in order to alleviate conflicts. Social workers can build momentum of the movement by advocating for African American groups and facilitating dialogues with other ethnic groups as conflicts arise.

**Macro: Racism and Structures.** Social work macro practice often concerns itself with the creation and implementation of social (welfare) policies. The difficulty with addressing structural racism at both the micro and mezzo levels is that they do not touch “the root” of the problem – given that racism permeates every aspect of the culture as well as it constitutes social structures. Micro and mezzo level practice often do not, or cannot, leverage systemic change nor do they necessarily shift the ongoing policies and practices that impact individuals, families, and communities who social workers aim to serve. Dr. Cornel West (Facebook status update, December 5, 2014) recently addressed this notion when he said:

*The public visibility of the police killing of unarmed precious Black folk puts more pressure on the Black President and Black Attorney General to pursue Federal prosecution of unaccountable police. The multiracial protests are beautiful but without Federal action remain symbolic. We need real pressure on the administration -- not uncritical cheerleaders for the administration trying to misdirect our rage.*
In this view, it seems a poignant moment to apply pressure top-down. Federal action may be the most effective fulcrum to change structures of anti-Black state violence. African American citizens have been disenfranchised in all levels of society – and without intervention, the injustice persists. Accordingly, social workers are in a key position to apply pressure to state and federal administrations in support of the national movement for change. Social workers have a long history of being change makers and, thus, carry credibility. We are at a critical moment in which we can leverage the groundswell of national support in order to advocate for social change that shifts the societal operations of oppression.

**Strategies for Strengthening Movements**

Social workers have unique skills and abilities that, when leveraged well, have had powerful impacts on individuals, policies, and our society. Historically, social workers have successfully advocated for the rights of oppressed groups such as immigrants, women, and those in poverty (Byers, 2011). For example, Mary Richmond and Jane Addams, two prominent founders of the profession, formed the Hull House to address the needs of impoverished immigrants in the late 1800s. In addition Addams was known for advancing policy at the macro level (Byers, 2011). Given this history, social workers are uniquely positioned to support the work of those challenging police brutality and its effects on African Americans. Social workers, skilled in developing rapport and engagement across significant difference, can use these skills to strengthen the current movements and aid in bringing about real change. Social work values, such as cultural competence, human rights, and social welfare are directly applicable to the present day struggles and are deeply needed to transform race-based inequality. In addition to these skills adopting strategies exemplified by the movement itself could further strengthen the work and yield lasting systemic change in the current climate of anti-Black racism and violence.

**Resist the Urge to Co-opt.** “Black Lives Matter” (BLM) is another campaign that has emerged, highlighting the violence specifically experienced by African Americans (Garza, 2014). Both the BLM and Hands Up Don’t Shoot campaigns are significant movements that originated out of the lived experiences of African Americans in the face of the horrific consequences of systemic racism. While widespread participation has facilitated more visibility and recognition, co-opting these symbols has also emerged – particularly by those beneficiaries of White privilege. Alicia Garza (2014), cofounder of the BLM campaign, has criticized those changing the meaning of the phrase by replacing the word Black with other words, such as “all” or “queer:”

*When we say Black Lives Matter, we are talking about the ways in which Black people are deprived of our basic human rights and dignity. It is an acknowledgement Black poverty and genocide is state*
violence. It is an acknowledgment that 1 million Black people are locked in cages in this country—one half of all people in prisons or jails—is an act of state violence. It is an acknowledgment that Black women continue to bear the burden of a relentless assault on our children and our families and that assault is an act of state violence. Black queer and trans folks bearing a unique burden in a hetero-patriarchal society that disposes of us like garbage and simultaneously fetishizes us and profits off of us is state violence; the fact that 500,000 Black people in the US are undocumented immigrants and relegated to the shadows is state violence; the fact that Black girls are used as negotiating chips during times of conflict and war is state violence; Black folks living with disabilities and different abilities bear the burden of state-sponsored Darwinian experiments that attempt to squeeze us into boxes of normality defined by White supremacy is state violence. And the fact is that the lives of Black people—not ALL people—exist within these conditions is consequence of state violence. When Black people get free, everybody gets free.

According to Garza, there is a imperative to articulate the specific experience of anti-Black state violence; to universalize the experience does injustice and is harmful to Black people and others. Applying the campaign to “all” people subverts and sanitizes the powerful discourse that focuses on the brutal lived experiences of Black people in the United States. It shifts the discomfort of looking directly at the gruesome truth and permits us to reside in an easier, more palatable reality. Of course “all lives matter” but what is the function of saying it now? All lives are not subject to the extreme level of violence. As Garza (2014) explicates, state-sanctioned injustices, including but not limited to incarceration, murder, poverty, and genocide, does not represent a universal experience. The BLM campaign specifically highlights the breakdowns in our systems for Black people and therein lies its power. It stands alone. It does not need to be generalized to encompass all lives. In fact, co-opting the movement in this manner dilutes recognition of the specific impacts state violence has on African Americans. Universalizing BLM decentralizes Black people and Black experiences from the discourse and works to perpetuate the same institutionalized racism it seeks to challenge (Garza, 2014).

United and Different. While co-opting movements of those in struggle can damage and has risks, it also indicates the emergence of a multi-ethnic movement. Cultural conflicts, such as White people co-opting BLM, develop when cultures come into contact. There are real and substantial differences in the lived experiences of the two groups. The involvement of Whites in both BLM and the Hands Up Don’t Shoot campaigns, perhaps indicates that these movements speak to many people from all different backgrounds and is therefore gaining momentum.

Responses from White people to the critique of co-optation has birthed movements uniquely situated within the White experience of racism. One example of such as response is the online campaign called Criming While White, which explicates tangible benefits of White privilege when interacting with law enforcement (Cohen, 2014). This campaign further increases the visibility of the extreme nature of anti-Black police brutality and, therefore, serves to challenge the same cultural phenomena that BLM addresses – while originating from the lived experiences
of its authors, rather than appropriating the voices of Black people. This inspiring example of White accountability and continued action strengthens the overall movement for justice. Perhaps, then, the emerging cultural conflict is actually a sign of hope. If social workers are able to work through cultural conflict and arrive at authenticity, like those who brought forward the Criming While White campaign, while working to support each other then we are more able to unify. The question to ask in moving forward is: how can social workers come together in our differences to transform what we deem to be unacceptable? Authentic critiques of injustice originating from and embedded in our specific social locations, which honor and relate to the struggles of those whose struggles are different than our own, may be the key to societal transformation like we have never before seen.

“You do You:” The Importance of Social Location. Garza (2014) locates her analysis within her specific social location as a queer, Black, feminist woman and, in so doing, reveals the complicated set of intersections she uniquely experiences walking in a world that perpetuates anti-Black state violence. For solidarity to grow, despite differences in lived experiences of oppression, social workers may be guided by Garza’s example and relate their own unique set of experiences with privilege and oppression to the broader contexts of the social justice for which we fight. We need not all be the same, and, in fact, we are not. As a queer, biracial, Filipina, with a temporarily able-body, and who carries class privilege, I admonish the systematized, rationalized, and obfuscated violence against African Americans. I do not claim the experience as my own, though I let the pain reverberate in my heart. I let the tears come. I mobilize my resources, and I fight for the just world I desire and envision. My experience with racism does not equate to anti-Black state violence and I can still humbly stand in solidarity with the movements, owning my relative privileges and utilizing them to facilitate the change I want.

Authenticity and Moving Towards Justice

Racism is a complex social phenomenon with specific consequences that play out within specific contexts. As social workers charged with working towards social justice, knowledge of racism and its effects is critical to the work and the profession. An intersectional approach, one that accounts for the particular interacting attributes of specific oppression areas, makes it possible to articulate distinct features of oppressive dynamics, and can, therefore, enhance communication, compassion, growth, and solidarity across different lived experiences (Adewunmi, 2014). Authenticity and awareness of one’s own location within the broader context of intersectional oppression are key in supporting the dynamic and diverse human rights campaign that impacts the lives of those we serve as well as our own. In fact, grounding action in ones’ own lived experience is critical to building effective movements.
As social workers, we aim to affect large-scale social change, which resides in the broader context of racism and the larger framework within which racism persists. Schools of social work, such as one housed at Smith College, have joined in voicing concern over the “forces of structural oppression and injustice that result in violence and dehumanization” (Kang, Newdom, O’Neil, & Yoshioka, 2014, p. 1), as related to Ferguson and the broader context of racism in the United States and around the globe. As such, the human rights violations present for African Americans, when considered holistically, exemplify the reason social work exists in the first place. Kang and colleagues (2014) issued a call to action to respond to the “everyday crisis of racism in every neighborhood, every town, and every city” (p. 1).

Social work is founded on the values of social justice, service, integrity, and competence (NASW, 2008). It does not exist solely within the context of the micro, mezzo, and macro frameworks; rather, it exists within all of these levels simultaneously. It is not just acknowledging or ameliorating the effects of racism, nor is it just providing conflict resolution between community groups which creates something new that social work lives and breathes. It is in dreaming of justice and fighting daily for this reality. Garza (2014) asserts that our collective liberation is intrinsically tied to that of Black people. If she is right, we must work towards liberation for Black people in our creation of a more just world. We must rely on the values of the social work profession to guide our actions as we push for a new societal norms, new policies, new standards, and to design a better world. Social workers must be at the forefront of this social movement, advancing the cause of social justice. It is time to shift the framework within which racism and oppression continue to exist. It is time to create the world in which we want to live.
References


