The Stories We Tell: Examining the Persistence and Impacts of Normative-Whiteness and White Supremacy Within Social Work Education

Danté Bryant
Karen M. Kolivoski

Abstract: *Although there is a growing body of literature denoting social work's efforts to engage many of the internal racial challenges it faces, there remains a paucity of research exploring the impacts of normative-whiteness and White supremacy within the profession. In an effort to address this gap in the literature, this investigation uses quantitative survey responses from 167 non-racially specific, currently active, social work faculty and administrators, and 12 qualitative interviews with African American, currently active, social work faculty and administrators to gain a more lucid understanding of how they view the roles and impacts of whiteness and White supremacy within Social Work. Thematic findings from this investigation include narratological-deception, epistemological-omission, and a divided-profession. Implications for social work suggest the need to equitably incorporate the contributions of racially underrepresented populations, while critically engaging and responding to the "why," "how," and "impacts" of their historical omission.*

Keywords: Normative-whiteness, whiteness, White supremacy, social work education

In 1971, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) publicly acknowledged the need to develop trainings and resources that would better prepare social workers to engage effectively with racially marginalized, and non-majoritarian populations (Pinderhughes, 1995). As a result, by the early to mid-1980s, social work programs across the country began to enact a series of initiatives focused on developing and importing a wide range of cultural competency and diversity trainings, workshops, and curricula, many of which have become synonymous with today's profession (Corley & Young, 2018).

However, in the last two decades, these efforts have come under considerable scrutiny. The primary source of criticism has been informed by the a-political or de-political nature of these initiatives (Bowles & Hopps, 2014; Briggs et al., 2018; Pon, 2009; Sakamoto, 2020). For instance, Sakamoto (2020) suggests that existing cultural competency literature largely omits any meaningful analysis of power, specifically as it relates to culture as a racialized-politic. Correspondingly, culture is presented as a socially and politically neutral phenomenon that exists independent of social determinants of capital, access, or power. As a result, the systems of racial inequality that prompted social work's call to action remain largely unchallenged, and in more extreme cases, unacknowledged. As it relates to the latter, many of the educational resources deployed within the profession fail to name or engage what Mills (1997) once referred to as the most pervasive, and influential social and political systems in the modern world; White supremacy.

Danté Bryant, PhD, MSW, MTS, Assistant Professor, School of Social Work, University of North Carolina Charlotte, Charlotte, NC. Karen M. Kolivoski, PhD, MSW, Associate Professor, School of Social Work, Howard University, Washington, DC.

The ongoing absence of such naming has captured the attention of social work professionals, some of whom have begun to express concerns regarding social work's potentially unacknowledged investments in normative-whiteness, particularly when contrasted with social work's assumed ability to model the type of racial equity it professes to publicly propagate (Corley & Young, 2018; Cramer & McElveen, 2020; Loya, 2011; Sakamoto, 2020). In light of these concerns, the dearth of literature exploring social work faculty's perceptions of White supremacy within the profession are troubling, particularly given how faculty function as professional gatekeepers who not only police but also produce scholarship, thought, practitioners, and future educators. To this extent, it is imperative that social work researchers critically explore their awareness of, and the profession's potential relation to, unexamined practices that may contribute to the persistence of White racial hegemony. In an attempt to support these efforts, this investigation uses a convergent mixed-method approach to explore how social work faculty and administrators perceive and experience the roles and impacts of normative-whiteness and White supremacy within the profession (Rubin & Babbie, 2016).

Literature Review

Although research explicitly examining the perceived implications of normative-whiteness and White supremacy among social work faculty are limited, efforts have been made to investigate alternative articulations and impacts of racial inequality within social work and social work education (Abrams & Gipson, 2007; Basham et al., 1997; Bowles & Hopps, 2014; Briggs et al., 2018; Davis, 1985; Davis et al., 1983; Garcia & Van Soest, 1997; Nylund, 2006). For example, in 2015 Deepak and colleagues conducted a series of focus groups with the intent of elucidating how social work students, faculty, and staff viewed the delivery of diversity and social justice materials. Results from their investigation suggest that effectively discussing systemic issues of social injustice requires that instructors exercise a level of self-actualization (e.g., a clear awareness of their social identities, biases, triggers, competencies, etc.) they may not have obtained. According to Deepak et al. (2015), in the absence of these resources, instructors too often function as topical-referees, retarding both their and their students' opportunities to confront, be confronted by, or engage more difficult and complex systemic issues.

Correspondingly, Varghese's (2016) qualitative exploration of 15 clinical social work faculty, 80% of whom identified as White, offered support for Deepak's et al. (2015) claims. According to Varghese (2016), the majority of participating members conceptualized racism as an individual construct, disconnected from historical and cultural productions of structurally institutionalized systems and practices of marginalization. In addition, Varghese's (2016) content analysis of 27 master of social work syllabi revealed that materials related to diversity and social justice topics largely omitted epistemological vantages informed by systemic acts of institutionalized oppression. In keeping with Deepak's et al. (2015) proposition, in the absence of these vantages, social work faculty and students are denied the opportunity to critically explore, engage and deploy social work's most prized conceptual model (i.e., person in space). As a result, both are encouraged to individualize the cause and effects of racial inequality, thus, turning their

attention toward reforming individuals or communities while simultaneously omitting the need for institutional transformation.

However, while much of the current literature has tended to focus on pedagogical concerns, in the 1980s researchers such as Davis et al. (1983) and Davis (1985), actively explored experiential discrepancies between Black and White social work faculty. For example, in their 1983 investigation of 133 Black social work faculty employed at predominantly White collegiate institutions, Davis et al. (1983), found that Black social work faculty not only expressed feeling as though their chances for professional advancement were less than their White colleagues, but that pejorative racial ideologies served as the primary source of professional tension.

In keeping with the theme of experiential demarcation, in 1985 Davis surveyed 133 Black and 114 White active social work faculty employed at predominantly White collegiate institutions. According to the results, Black faculty experienced receiving less respect from students and colleagues, lower levels of job satisfaction, and felt the need to manage both overt and covert acts of racism engendered by peers and students (Vakalahi et al., 2007).

Although the existing body of literature helps to denote social work's efforts to engage some of the internal articulations of racialization, the paucity of research exploring their shared socio-political contextual determinants (i.e., normative-whiteness and White supremacy) remains largely unexamined. In an effort to address this gap in the literature, the current investigation uses quantitative survey responses from 167 non-racially specific, active, social work faculty and administrators across institutional types, and 12 qualitative interviews with active, African American social work faculty and administrators employed by predominantly White collegiate institutions. The purpose of this investigation was to gain a more clear understanding of how academic social workers view the roles and impacts of whiteness and White supremacy within their profession.

Method

This study, which was approved by the University of North Carolina at Charlotte's Institutional Review Board, used a convergent mixed-method approach (Rubin & Babbie, 2016). According to Rubin and Babbie (2016), this particular methodology allows the researcher to collect and analyze qualitative and quantitative data both concurrently and independently. As a result, each data set is independently assessed then synthesized with the corresponding data type to provide a more comprehensive view of the topic under investigation (see Figure 1). Quantitative data were collected using an online, 25-question, Likert scale survey that was disseminated to more than 200 schools of social work across the country. See Table 2 for sample survey items. Concurrently, qualitative results were collected via 12 one-on-one, phenomenologically informed interviews conducted using a virtual web-based platform (Smith et al., 2009). See Table 1 for the interview guide.

Figure 1. *Convergent Mixed Methods*

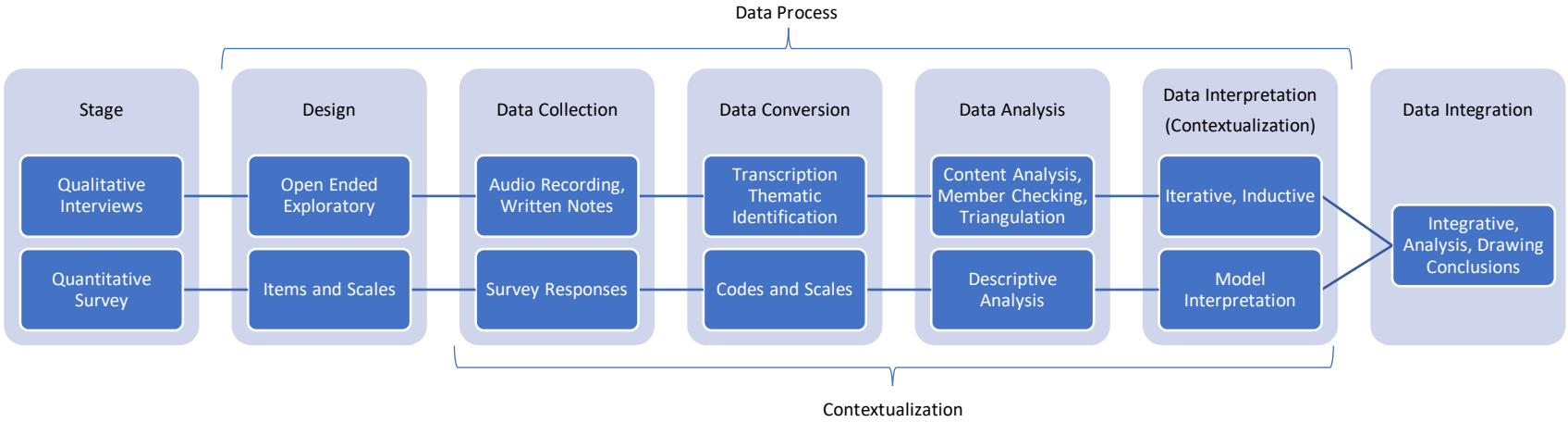

Table 1. *Interview Guide**

Section	**Research Question Addressed**	**Interview Question**
I: Background	Demographic questions	None
II: Questions I	How do AA faculty and administrators perceive the role or impacts of whiteness and white supremacy within social work education?	Descriptive/Narrative: *Please, can you tell me what roles or impacts, if any, you believe whiteness and or white supremacy to play in social work education?* Prompts: • Can you tell me a bit more about that? • What do you mean when you say**…?**
III: Question II	How do AA faculty and administrators perceive the role or impacts of whiteness and white supremacy within social work practice?	Evaluative: *Please, can you tell me what roles or impact, if any, you believe whiteness and or white supremacy have on social work practice?* Prompts: • Can you tell me a bit more about that? • What do you mean when you say…?

*Questions are based on Smith et al. (2009) suggestions for a set of in-depth interview questions (pp. 59-61).

Operational Definitions

Whiteness: A conscious or unconscious set of cultural behaviors or practices, performed by persons who are or do identify as white, which rely upon, contribute to, or fail to challenge the production and maintenance of structures that produce White-Privilege and systemic-racism.

White Supremacy: A set of conscious or unconscious beliefs, practices, or ideologies which support, perpetuate or fail to challenge the social, political, historical, economic or institutional dominance and assumed superiority of persons socially identified as White.

Table 2. *Sample Survey Items (Likert-scale*)*

• Whiteness and White supremacy are two primary social contexts that influence the lives of all US citizens.
• Preparing Social Work students to deal specifically with whiteness and White supremacy is consistent with Social Work's code of ethics.
• Preparing Social Work students to deal specifically with whiteness and White supremacy is consistent with Social Work's use of Person in Space/Environment.
• Standard Diversity or Cultural Competence course textbooks do an adequate job of addressing the impacts of Whiteness and White supremacy.
• Graduating Social Work students are adequately prepared to contextualize their clients (i.e., person in space) without additional coursework focused on whiteness or White supremacy.
• My formal Social Work education adequately prepared me to identify, engage and respond to issues of whiteness and White supremacy.
• I have received professional or formal training on the social implications of whiteness or White supremacy.
• Whiteness and White supremacy are significant problems within the Social Work profession (i.e., academic or direct practice).
• As a whole, my department believes that whiteness and White supremacy are significant problems within the Social Work profession (i.e., academic or direct practice)
• Society for Social Work and Research is fully committed to addressing whiteness and White supremacy within the Social Work profession (i.e., academic or direct practice).
• Council on Social Work Education is fully committed to addressing whiteness and White supremacy within the SW profession (i.e., academic or direct practice)
*Score ranged from 1 (*Strongly Agree*) to 5 (*Strongly Disagree)*

Quantitative Sample

Survey participants (n=167) were limited to active full- and part-time university social work faculty, staff, and administrators who were English speaking and identified as 18 years of age or older. Of the 167 anonymous survey participants, 70% (n=117) identified as non-Hispanic White, 17% (n=29) as Black-African American, 5% (n=8) as not listed, 3% (n=5) as Latinx, 2% (n=4) as being of Asian descent, 1% (n=2) as Indigenous American, .6% (n=1) as Pacific Islander and .6% (n=1) did not declare. Furthermore, of those who completed the survey, 83% (n=138) identified as female, 16% (n=26) as male, 2% (n=3) did not declare, 49% (n=81) were between the ages of 39 to 55, 25% (n=41) were

38 years of age or younger, 26% (n=43) were 56 years of age or older, 1% (n=2) did not declare, 28% (n=47) were full-time assistant professors, 17% (n=29) were administrative faulty, 14% (n=24) were associate faculty, 13% (n=22) were adjunct faculty, 10% (n=16) were full-time lectures, 8% (n=13) were full professors, 4% (n=7) were clinical professors, 4% (n=7) were full-time administrators and 1% (n=2) did not declare. Quantitative data analyses used Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) software to run descriptive, frequency, and cross-tabulations (see Table 3).

Table 3. *Demographics Profile of Survey Respondents (n=166)*

Characteristic	n (%)
Race / Ethnicity	
Non-Hispanic White	117 (70.5%)
Black-AA	29 (17.5%)
Latinx	5 (3.0%)
Indigenous American	2 (1.2%)
Asian decent	4 (2.4%)
Pacific Islander	1 (0.6%)
Not Listed	8 (4.8%)
Biological Sex	
Female	138 (83.1%)
Male	26 (15.7%)
Not listed	2 (1.2%)
Age	
<38	41 (24.7%)
39-55	81 (48.8%)
56<	43 (25.9%)
Not listed	1 (0.6%)
Education	
MSW	59 (35.5%)
DSW	9 (5.4%)
PhD	98 (59.0%)
*Academic Classification**	
Adjunct Professor	22 (13.3%)
FT-Lecturing Professor	16 (9.7%)
FT/PT-Clinical Professor	7 (4.2%)
FT-Assistant Professor	47 (28.5%)
FT-Associate Professor	24 (14.5%)
FT-Full Professor	13 (7.9%)
Administrator / Faculty	29 (17.6%)
FT-Administrator	7 (4.2%)
*n=165	

Qualitative Sample

Qualitative participants included 12 individuals who identified as currently active African American university social work faculty and/or administrators, who were English-speaking, and were 18 years of age or older at the time of the interview. Of the qualitative study participants, 75% (n=9) identified as woman, 25% (n=3) as men, 42% (n=5) as tenure track assistant professors, 25% (n=3) as tenured full professors, 25% (n=3) as tenured associate professors, and 8% (n=1) as a full-time lecturer.

All qualitative interviews were conducted via a WebEx video-conferencing platform and lasted no more than 45 minutes. All recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, and data analysis consisted of an iterative and inductive analytic framework informed by Smith et al. (2009), an interpretative phenomenological approach. In keeping with Smith et al. (2009), data analysis consisted of a cyclical review of each audio recording, and its corresponding transcript, the generation of preliminary exploratory comments, the conversion of this data into a series of themes, thematic clustering of individual transcriptions, and the clustering of all transcription data themes into meta Super and Sub-ordinate themes representative of relevant participant cases (Smith et al., 2009). Additionally, bracketing, triangulation, and member checking were used when possible. The results of this process were the identification of 10 sub-ordinate themes: Dishonesty, Denial, Suspended Development, Invisibility, Marginalization, Neglect, Isolation, Professional Conflict, Differing Ethical Obligations, and Differing Practices. These 10 sub-ordinate themes were then distilled into three super-ordinate themes: *Narratological-deception, Epistemological-omission,* and a *Divided-profession.*

Results and Findings

Quantitative Results

Of the survey participants, 98% (n=163 of 164) expressed that they either agreed or strongly agreed that Whiteness and White supremacy are two of the primary social contexts influencing the lives of United States citizens. In keeping, 93% (n=154 of 166) of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that preparing social work students to deal with these issues is not only consistent with social work's code of ethics but social work's use of person-in-space.

However, despite these beliefs, 91% (n=149 of 164) of participants did not feel (61% at n=100 of 164) or were unsure (30% at n=49 of 164) if social work's standard diversity and cultural competency text provided students with an adequate foundation to engage these efforts. In keeping with these results, 74% (n=123 of 166) of participants agreed that if graduating social work students are going to be expected to adequately contextualize their clients, then they need additional coursework focused on whiteness and White supremacy. Additionally, when reflecting on their education preparation, 78% (n=129 of 166) of faculty, either did not feel (63% at n=105 of 166) or were unsure (14% at n=24 of 166) if their formal social work education adequately prepared them to identify, engage or respond to these same concerns. Still, although expressing personal awareness of their

under-preparedness, 54% (n=89 of 165) of participants stated that they had not received or pursued supplemental education specifically focused on these topics.

Building on the perceived dearth of formally required social work training in this area, 91% (n=151 of 166) of all respondents agreed, or strongly agreed, that whiteness and White supremacy are significant problems within the social work profession. However, only 67% (n=111 of 166) of participants felt that their departments view these issues similarly. The lack of individual confidence in social work's institutions is further reflected in respondents' views regarding the commitments of the Society for Social Work and Research and the Council on Social Work Education to dismantle whiteness and White supremacy within the profession. More specifically, when asked if the Society for Social Work and Research was truly committed to these efforts, a combined 81% were either unsure (50% at n=83 of 165) or disagreed (30% at n=50 of 165) altogether. Similarly, when responding to inquiries related to the Council on Social Work Education's perceived commitment, a combined 74% of participants were either unsure (45% at n=74 of 166) or disagreed (30% at n=49 of 166) altogether. The cumulative notation of these results suggests that while participants believe whiteness and White supremacy to be significant issues confronting the social work profession, they are not confident that social work's primary institutions are either prepared or committed to addressing them.

Qualitative Findings

The following section seeks to provide plausible interpretations of participants' qualitative responses. Table 4 provides a detailed account of the Super and Sub-ordinate themes identified in the data. To protect the anonymity of all qualitative participants, pseudonyms are used throughout this document.

Table 4. *Theme Identification*

Super-Ordinate Themes	**Sub-Ordinate Theme**
Narratological-deception	1.1 Dishonesty 1.2 Denial 1.3 Suspended development
Epistemological-omission	2.1 Invisibility 2.2 Marginalization 2.3 Neglect
Professional division	3.1 Profession Conflict 3.2 Isolation 3.3 Differing ethical obligations 3.4 Differing form of practice

Narratological-deception

Narratological-deception was the first super-ordinate theme to emerge. This term was developed by the investigators in their attempts to capture the unique ways social work's educational and professional practices promote a constitutive narrative-identify that miss-situates the profession as historically and currently independent of investments in practices of normative-whiteness and White supremacy. All 12 interview participants explicitly

identified narratological-deception as a primary means of engendering an autopoietic professional identity that not only undermines social work's ethical commitments, but dampers its capacity to identify, engage or critically assess its investments in, and dependencies on, White normativity (Maturana & Varela, 1972).

Within the context of Narratological-deception, the researchers identified overlapping and compounding sub-ordinate instances of dishonesty, denial, and a suspended-development. For example, Dr. Tyson highlighted how the use of dishonesty and denial results in a suspended professional development when discussing what she perceived as a lack of congruency between social work's narratological/ethical commitments, and its professional practices, "we are not who we say we are, we never have been, and I'm not convinced we have what it takes to ever be." Dr. Tyson went on to say, "…it takes real courage… until we are honest about who we are… we will always look like this [referring to practices of racialization and normative-whiteness within the profession]…" Additionally, Dr. Jackson echoed Dr. Tyson's relational claims when he asserted, "… we think, somehow, we are separated from the things we are trying to change in the world [referring to the persistence of White supremacy]… The problems out there are the same problems in here… in some cases worse, because we think we don't do that…"

However, while Drs. Tyson and Jackson addressed the perceived impacts of dishonesty and denial within the profession, Dr. Anderson focused on how these practices matriculate through the educational process and contribute to suspending the development of future social workers by further concretizing, and extending the persistence of the existing narrative, and its relational dependency on normative-whiteness.

> *…we don't tell the truth, we're not honest about who we are and where we come from. From the time a student walks through the door, we tell them what it means to be a social worker… we tell them what makes us different from everyone else* [referring to sociology, psychology, and counseling]. *But what we don't tell them how we practice the same stuff they practice, how everything we teach them was developed by White people, or how our profession is dominated by White folk and White literature and White research and White everything …we exclude Black and Brown people from our history…. by the time they* [social work students] *leave our programs, a lot of them are worse off than when they came… when they came they thought they had work to do … when they leave, they think they're done…*

Conversely, while reflecting on the matriculating effects of dishonesty and denial, Dr. Chambliss recalled interactions she had with students following the conclusions of her Race and Social Justice courses, "…every time, I have a least two or three [referring to White students] say they didn't get much out of the class… they already learned all this stuff…I've never had a Black student say that, and they live this stuff every day." Similarly, Dr. Dixon exclaimed,

> *…every semester I have MSW* [master social work] *students who don't understand why they have to take diversity in their BSW* [Bachelor of Social Work] *and MSW … some of them, and some of our faculty too, really think if you get an A in the class, then you're done…*

However, while some participants noted the internal effects of narratological-deception, others focused on its external impacts. One such notation was provided by Dr. McCormick who stated,

> *… we've been saying this* [referring to professional claims of racial equity] *for so long, and criticizing everyone else… we think we've got it all worked out, and we don't… we haven't even dealt with our own stuff, but now you want us to ride along with police when we are the same people who over-report Black families for child neglect … you're just replacing lethal criminal treatment with non-lethal criminal treatment… it's the blind leading the blind, but everyone thinks we know what we're doing.*

Similarly, Dr. Davidson exclaimed,

> *…it's dangerous… our entire college comes to us* [referring to their school of social work] *for anything about race… we lead every diversity committee, every race committee, everything. Mind you, we have a chair who says she doesn't use the phrase White supremacy because she doesn't think it's an accurate description of America… almost none of them* [referring to other non-Black social work faculty] *seem to have a problem with this. But everyone is lifting us up like we're doing something progressive because that's what we go around telling everyone…*

Epistemological-Omission

Building on narratological-deception, the super-ordinate theme of *Epistemological-omission refers* to the absence, or limited presence, of resource materials, critical discussions, or non-Eurocentric epistemological contributions that challenge either the existing narrative identity or social work's investment in perceived forms of White normativity. Of the 12 interview participants, 11 explicitly identified epistemological-omission as not only a product of narratological- deception but a primary means by which social work encumbers the decentralization of normative-whiteness within the profession. Within the context of epistemological-omission, the researchers identified overlapping and compounding sub-ordinate instances of invisibility, marginalization, and neglect.

For example, Dr. Paul touched on the invisibility of non-Eurocentric voices in social work when he stated,

> *…you don't hear about us* [referring to Black contributions to the profession] *social work is rooted in White progressive views, beliefs, perspectives... they protect it, whether they admit it or not, but they think they're doing the work… if you really challenge that, they'll let you know.*

Correspondingly, Dr. Adams echoed these sentiments when discussing the compounding effects of marginalizing voices that challenge existing practices within the profession. While recalling her failed attempts to publish a series of articles on White supremacy and social work practice as a junior faculty, Dr. Adams stated,

> *…All I kept hearing was, get publications, use your dissertation so I did… I took some articles to my chair that kept getting pushed back, and she was like, these*

> *are good, but you're going to need to wait for a special edition… this isn't a topic too many journals like to normally publish on.*

Dr. Adams later expressed, "...after a while I left it alone, all I could think was, let me get tenure first, then I'll come back to it." Similarly, Dr. Everest offered a parallel experience within her department while trying to help integrate more non-Eurocentric materials into the curriculum as a first-year assistant professor,

> *…It was my research,* [referring to racial inequality and curriculum] *they knew that when they hired me… the chair pulled me aside, and said to my face, we appreciate everything, but I don't know that we're quite ready for all of this, just give us some time to catch up.*

Dr. Everest went on to explain that she was then encouraged to focus on developing positive relationships with faculty

> *… she really said, it will be important when you go up for tenure and that they had a lot of applicants and that I should be thankful I got the job. I was blown away, I am the only Black person in the department and the only one from a top ten R1 program… and you're telling me I need to be thankful, and stay in my place if I want tenure?*

Although the majority of faculty denoted personal experiences of omission, others acknowledged pedagogical or practice-related concerns,

> *…if 80% of social workers and social work faculty are White then at least 20% of the materials we use should be produced by Black and Brown social workers. But they're not, all our human development theories are based on the White experience… you cannot say the scholarship isn't there because there are entire departments dedicated to it… We incorporate stuff from women's and gender studies all the time and just about everything we use for LGBTQ content is produced by them… we choose not to do it when it's time to talk about race…* (Dr. Hollands)

When asked why she believed social workers have chosen to engage in the limited incorporation of non-Eurocentric materials, Dr. Hollands went on to say,

> *People are comfortable talking about their specific marginalization, and the ways that they are disadvantaged, which is why social workers are so comfortable talking about gender inequality or LGBTQ issues… but not how these things intersect with race to create new inequalities... we are not comfortable talking about how White privilege shows up all over social work.*

Although mirroring Dr. Hollands' initial remarks, Dr. Davidson departs from the notion of discomfort as determinant of instances of invisibility, marginalization or neglect, "…we don't incorporate other voices because deep down we don't feel like it's necessary… the White perspective is the only thing that has serious value in social work." Later, when reflecting on her remarks Dr. Davidson exclaimed,

> *… when it comes to racial issues, social workers have convinced everyone they are better than they really are… everyone except the non-White social workers who have to deal with them, and those are the same people they ignore…The truth is they're not prepared to have honest discussions about race, even if they really want to, they aren't ready, and every Black person knows it, so what do you do, you nod and pretend to have honest discussions because that's really all they are, pretend… we do the same with the students… then send them out into the world… It's saddening…*

The final super-ordinate theme identified was *Professional-division*. This term professional-division refers to the unique ways narratological-deception and epistemological-omission intersect to inform two pragmatically and experientially distinct forms of social work. More specifically, professional-division denotes the perceived experiential needs of African American social workers to conceptually differentiate their professional and ethical identity, and commitments, from those practiced by many of their non-African American colleagues. Of the 12 study participants, 11 explicitly expressed experiencing or engaging in professional-division. Within the context of profession-division, the researchers identified overlapping and compounding instances of professional conflict, isolation, differing ethical obligations, and differing forms of practice.

When initially asked how she reconciles the professional persistence of normative-Whiteness with social work's professed ethical obligations, Dr. Townson stated, "… I don't… there's Black social work and there's White social work, I leave it at that… we don't do the same things...". Similarly, Dr. Lawson shared how he deployed notions of differing obligations and practices to account for his experiences with professional conflict and isolation when he stated,

> *…when I first got into social work I realized when I read the code of ethics I saw one thing, but the person* [referring to White social workers] *sitting next to me saw something totally different … we* [referring to Black and White social workers] *don't have the same commitments, because we don't have the same concerns and we don't have the same problems… we're both technically social workers, but we have different professions.*

Dr. Anderson echoed Dr. Lawson when she declared,

> *…we don't have the same concerns, because they* [referring to non-African American social workers] *don't have to deal with the contradictions like we do, they don't affect them like they do us. If Black people aren't treated fairly it doesn't affect them, if we don't really deal with White supremacy, it doesn't affect them… I don't know what kind of social work they practice, but I know it's not what I do…*

However, while some participants chose to manage experiences of professional conflict and isolation by dividing the profession into differing ethical and practice obligations, others, such as Dr. Marbury, simply denounced or relegated any practice of social work that did not explicitly work to ameliorate racism and White supremacy to professional dishonesty, denial, or narratological-deception; "If you are not trying to liberate all people, which means you have to get rid of White supremacy, then you're not

a social worker… you might say you are, you might be a social activist, but you're not a social worker…"

Discussion

According to survey responses, the overwhelming majority of participants recognize normative-whiteness and White supremacy as primary social (98% at n=163 of 166) and professional (91% at n=151 of 166) issues confronting social work today. In addition, social work faculty acknowledge that it is not only necessary to prepare current students to deal with these systems, but that doing so is consistent with social work's code of ethics (93% at n=154 of 166) and its primary conceptual model of person-in-space (93% at n=154 of 166). However, despite this awareness, the majority of faculty are either unsure or do not feel as though their formal education (78% at n=129 of 166) or current standard diversity and cultural competency curriculum text, adequately address these challenges (91% at 149 of 164). Furthermore, the majority of faculty expressed a lack of confidence in their departments (81% at n=135 of 166) and national organizations' (SSWR - 81% at n=133 of 165, CSWE - 74% at n=123 of 166) commitments to dismantle such practices within the profession.

Interestingly, these findings not only provide contextual support for the qualitative experiences of interview participants but are, in part, explained by them. For example, the shared experience of *narratological-deception* suggests that the persistence and pervasiveness of social work's professed identity hampers its efforts to fully come to terms with the profession's investment in, and dependency on normative-whiteness and White supremacist practices. This is demonstrated in the data in two ways. The first can be seen via participants' recognition that additional course work focusing on whiteness and White supremacy is needed to aid current social work students in their attempts to better contextualize their clients (75% at n=125 of 166). The second is presented via faculty's recognition that addressing issues of normative-whiteness and White supremacy are not only consistent with the profession's code of ethics (93% at n=154 of 166), but social work's primary conceptual model (93% at n=154 of 166; i.e., person-in-space). As a result, what is implied in the public and private promotion of social workers' ethical obligations and theoretical position is an educational and professional experience that equips students to address whiteness and White supremacy in their various articulations. However, as noted by survey participants, social work as an institution has not only failed to adequately equip past - now acting as practitioners and faculty - and present learners, but they have failed to redress a public and professional identity that is shaped by social work's expressed ethical commitments to fully engage racial inequality. The resultant effect is an existing educational model that does not fully support the pronounced ethical obligations or the expressed identity of the profession.

In light of such incongruence, social work is confronted with having to either alter its existing professional and pedagogical models, resign its current identity, or mute its detractors. If defaulting to the last option, the voices and positional knowledge of those who are not only in the profession but best situated to testify to its internal dissonance must be marginalized, muted, or omitted (Warren, 2018). Within this context, intentional or not,

the presence and more specifically the voices of Black social work faculty, serve to disrupt and undermine the legitimacy of the existing social work project (Harney & Moten, 2013; Lomax, 2018; Moten 2018; Warren, 2018; Wilderson, 2020). As a result, the act of *epistemological-omissions* must be, if it is expected to aid in stabilizing the perceived legitimacy of the professional narrative, chronically protected, pervasive, and transmittable (Dubois, 1920; Glaude, 2016). Put differently, in order to sustain its sense of personal and public integrity, the social work profession must continually deny or at the very least marginalize dissenting voices or epistemological realities that do not comport with its current narrative identity.

Furthermore, social work must also reproduce and re-assert this narrative within successive generations of practitioners, faculty, and administrators (Baldwin, 2010; Glaude, 2016; Mills, 1997). This medium of narrative-identity production serves as an autopoiesis – that is, a self-perpetuating and sustaining system of interactions - that not only engenders normative-whiteness, but positions the experiential and professional epistemological realities of Black social work faculty as aporetic – that is, a source of internal contradiction (Baldwin, 2010; Mills, 1997; Merriam-Webster, 2016; Warren, 2018; Wilderson, 2020).

To the extent to which this holds, Black social work faculty are confronted with the challenge of reconciling social work's continued omission of the aporetic (i.e., the voices and epistemological vantages of Black social workers) with its professed professional and ethical commitments. As a result, many of these faculty, to borrow from Harney and Moten (2013), will not deny that the profession as it currently stands is a place of refuge, but they will not accept that it is a place of enlightenment or liberation. The resultant impact is the experiential need to re-imagine the profession, and self-differentiate, via the import of a *professional-division*.

Limitations

Given the dearth of literature on this topic, it is difficult to cross-reference findings with existing research. Further, qualitative outcomes cannot be generalized or broadly compared to participants outside of the existing study. In addition, given the sensitivity of the topic and the broader political climate at the time of survey data collection (the summer of 2020), social desirability should be considered. Lastly, given the race and profession of the primary investigator – a Black male university social work faculty member – social desirability, confirmation bias, and those associated with an emic perspective were a constant threat. However, mediation efforts did include bracketing, member checking, and triangulation of data.

Implications for Social Work

If it is assumed that who and what social work highlights and omits tells something about what social work values and who social work is, then it also holds that to advance the profession, social work must redress its narratological identity. However, to do so requires that social work critically engage itself, by turning itself over to the critiques of

those within and without the profession who have been most adversely impacted by its current narrative identity. This means that social work, which has historically exalted the voice of individuals such as Jane Addams, must now temporarily render her mute, while lifting her up to be compassionately interrogated by works produced by persons such as Ida B. Wells, Charles Mills, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Paulo Freire, James Baldwin, Frank Wilderson, Dorothy Height, E. Franklin Frazier, Mit Joyner and others.

This performance of care is an essential act of destabilization that undermines the pervasiveness of normative-whiteness, as a professional and ideological taken for granted, while providing social work with the reflective resources it needs to evolve (Baldwin, 2010; Watson, 2013). It is only by offering her and her colleages up in this way - to be examined by those who have documented and critically explored the implications of whiteness for more than two hundred years - that Jane Addams will ever come to truly know who she is, what she is, and what she can become. However, if social work is unwilling to do so, the profession will be no better tomorrow than it is today, and those who are dependent on the stability of the existing story will remain less free to evolve than those whose voices they currently exclude.

To this end, social work must begin to not only engage in a compassionate-interrogation, but it must practice the equitable incorporation of knowledge shared by racialized groups who have been historically excluded from full participation in shaping what is accepted as normative-canonical notions of truth. In addition, social work must engage the "why," "how," and "impacts" of the historical omission of these groups. This means social work must revisit its historicity of unspoken assumptions regarding what is considered knowledge, who possesses it, who the social worker is, who they serve, and the truth of their mission.

The comingling of a compassionate and epistemological-integration can guide and support social work's efforts to not only expand the existing narrative but to demystify the ethical commitments and practices within the profession. By incorporating the voices from the margins, social work can begin to decentralize whiteness, while aiding students and faculty in their development of a more expansive epistemological repository. Furthermore, the examination of the historical absence of such vantages can help to call attention to the need to actively critique both past and present social work practices. These types of efforts can help to provide faculty and students with the preliminary intellectual freedom and tools they need to confront, question, critique and reimagine what was, what is, and what could be.

The import of such efforts should be articulated at the national, programmatic, and pedagogical levels. At the national and programmatic levels, social work must publicly acknowledge and wrestle with its relationship to normative whiteness. In addition, it must speak to its matriculating effects within racialized communities, and among non-racialized majoritarian practitioners, faculty, and administrative staff. However, to do so implies that social workers have taken the time to educate themselves on whiteness as an identity, politic, religion, ideology, and source of power.

Lastly, social work must engage and prioritize the voices of historically marginalized racial communities within the profession. This means that social work must invest,

promote, and help cultivate scholars, practitioners, administrators, scholarship, and faculty among racialized populations. The co-mingling of these activities is essential if the profession desires to ascend to its ethical ideals in both proclamation, and practice.

At the pedagogical level, the practices of recognition and equitable incorporation should be pervasive. However, they will likely have their greatest impact within an introductory social work course. This is primarily informed by the course's function and placement within most programs. Often situated as either a prerequisite for admission or advancement, the introduction to social work courses provide students with conceptual frames for filtering and understanding the profession, its obligations, their place in it, and all other future information and activities.

By gifting aspiring social workers with these tools and opportunities, social work can invest in a future narratological identity that not only encourages critical professional engagement, but increases the likelihood of participation in a more expansive and just conception of justice.

Implications for Future Research

Future research should explore the experiential perceptions of whiteness and White supremacy across racial categories within social work. In addition, quantitative investigations should seek sample sizes that will allow for more in-depth analyses of the differences and similarities across various cohorts of social work faculty and administrators. Furthermore, future inquiries should explore curriculum, policies, practices, and the racial cultural climate within social work programs. Lastly, these efforts should look to more fully incorporate theoretical models and lenses such as Black feminist theory, critical race theory, intersectional theory, and Afro-pessimism.

Conclusion

It could be argued that social work is at a crossroads. According to participants, social work's greatest obstacle is not the character or integrity of the individual, rather it is the persistence of a culture and narrative mythology that suggest that the profession either fully understands or has adequately addressed its relation to, and potential dependency on, whiteness and White supremacy. In this sense social work has, by and large, narratively insulated and positioned itself outside the reach of racial critique. As a consequence, manifested acts of normative whiteness within the profession are too often unrecognizable, unacknowledged, or unaddressed by those who perform them. However, those instances that are highlighted, or placed on center stage, are too frequently viewed as abortions or disconnected acts that simply reflect social work's failure to live up to its ideals. However, if one were to assume that a system is what it persistently produces over time, then social work must confront the possibility that such acts are not abortions or failures, but the successful articulation of its values. Such recognition is the beginning of a new beginning, the point in which social work pivots, choosing to be more, choosing to be what it has always claimed to be but is yet to become.

However, if unwilling to engage in the possibility, social work will likely continue to move to-and-fro in what Glaude (2016) describes as a "Thick Fog of Unreality" (pp. 5-10). This is, beyond dispute, a life of willful ignorance, a conscious decision to choose to remain deceived by the stories one tells and the voices one mutes. Ultimately, if social work is unwilling to redress, it will remain a profession whose ethics, identity, and value are supported by nothing more than a "fantastic system of evasions, denials, and justification" (Baldwin, 2010, p. 95).

References

Abrams, L., & Gipson, J. (2007). Critical race theory and cultural competence dilemma in social work. *Journal of Social Work Education, 45*(2), 245-261. https://doi.org/10.5175/jswe.2009.200700109

Baldwin, J. (2010). *The cross of redemption: Uncollected writings*. Vantage Books.

Basham, K., Donner, S., Killough, R., & Werkmeister-Rozas, L. (1997). Becoming an anti-racist institution. *Smith College Studies in Social Work, 67*(3), 564-585. https://doi.org/10.1080/00377319709517507

Bowles, D. D., & Hopps, J. G. (2014). The profession's role in meeting its historical mission to serve vulnerable populations. *Advances in Social Work, 15*(1), 1-20. https://doi.org/10.18060/16677

Briggs, H. E., Holosko, M. J., Banks, L., Huggins-Hoyt, K. Y., & Parker, J. (2018). How are African Americans currently represented in various social work venues? *Research on Social Work Practice, 28*(3), 275-287. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731517706553

Corley, N. A., & Young, S. M. (2018). Is social work still racist? A content analysis of recent literature. *Social Work, 63*(4), 317-326. https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swy042

Cramer, D. N., & McElveen, J., S. (2020). Undoing racism in social work practice. *Race, Gender & Class, 10*(2), 41-57. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41675072

Davis, L. B. (1985). Black and White social work faculty: Perceptions of respect, satisfaction and job performance. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare, 12*(1), 79-94. https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1691&context=jssw

Davis, L., Freeman, P., Louis, H., & Cartwright, R. (1983). Black faculty in predominantly White schools of social work: A qualitative assessment. *Journal of Education for Social Work, 19*(1), 15-23. , https://doi.org/10.1080/00220612.1983.10778591

Deepak, A., C., Rountree, M., A, & Scott, J. (2015). Delivering diversity and social justice in social work education: The power of context. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, *26*(2), 107-125. https://doi.org/10.1080/10428232.2015.1017909

DuBois, W. E. B. (1920). *The souls of White folk*. Duckwater: Voices from within the veil.

Garcia, B., & Van Soest, D. (1997). Changing perspectives on diversity and oppression: MSW students discuss the effects of a required course. *Journal of Social Work Education, 33*(1), 119-129. https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.1997.10778857

Glaude, E. (2016). *Democracy in Black: How race still enslaves the American soul*. Broadway Books.

Harney, S., & Moten, F. (2013). *The undercommons: Fugitive planning & Black studies*. Minor Compositions.

Lomax, T. (2018). *Jezebel unhinged: Loosing the Black female body in religion & cultural*. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478002482

Loya, M., (2011). Color-blind racial attitudes in White social workers: A cross-sectional study. *Smith College Studies in Social Work., 81*(2-3), 201-217. https://doi.org/10.1080/00377317.2011.589341

Ludden, D. (2003). Reading subaltern studies: Critical history, contested meaning and the globalization of South Asia. Permanent Black.

Maturana, H., & Varela, F. (1972). *De maquinas y seres vivos* [*On machines and living beings*]. Lumen Publications.

Merriam-Webster. (2016). *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. Merriam-Webster Incorporated. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/autopoiesis

Mills, C. W. (1997). *The racial contract*. Cornell University press.

Moten, F. (2018). *Stolen Life: Consent not to be a single being*. Duke University Press.

Nylund, D. (2006). Critical multiculturalism, whiteness and social work: Towards a more radical view of cultural competence. The power of context. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, *17*(2), 27-42. https://doi.org/10.1300/J059v17n02_03

Pinderhughes, E. (1995). Empowering diverse populations: Family practice in the 21st century. *The Journal of Contemporary Human Services, 76*(3), 131-140. https://doi.org/10.1177/104438949507600301

Pon, G. (2009). Cultural competency as new racism: An ontology of forgetting. *Journal of progressive human services*, *20*(1), 59-71. https://doi.org/10.1080/10428230902871173

Rubin, A., & Babbie, E. (2016). *Essential research methods for social work* (4th ed). Cengage Learning Publications.

Sakamoto, I. (2020). Anh anti-oppressive approach to cultural competence. *Canadian social work review, 24*(1), 105-114.

Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, L. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory method and research*. Sage.

Vakalahi, H. F., Starks, H. S., & Hendricks, C. O. (2007). *Women of color as social work educators*: *Strength sand survival.* Counsel on Social Work Education.

Varghese, R. (2016). Teaching to transform? Addressing race and racism in the teaching of clinical social work practice. *Journal of social work education, 52*(S1), 134-147. https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2016.1174646

Warren, C. L. (2018). *Ontological terror: Blackness, nihilism and emancipation*. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822371847

Watson, V. T. (2013). *The souls of White folk: African American writers theorize whiteness.* University Press of Mississippi. https://doi.org/10.14325/mississippi/9781617038891.001.0001

Wilderson, F. B. (2020). *Afropessimism*. Liveright Publishing.

Author note: Address correspondence to Danté D. Bryant, School of Social Work, The University of North Carolina Charlotte, Charlotte NC 28223: Dante.Bryant@UNCC.edu