The Racial Projects of White Social Work Students

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Abstract: *Despite a theoretical shift toward anti-racism, racial projects within social work assert public positions against structural racism, while upholding mechanisms that perpetuate its existence. Analyzing the perceptions and intentions of incoming white liberal social work students is necessary for any effort to deconstruct racial projects in the social work profession. The sample used in the present study is composed of a white (n = 139), mostly liberal-identified (84%) group of incoming first year MSW students. Students were asked to provide open-ended responses to a vignette about a Black mother engaging with Child Protective Services (CPS). The vignette was designed to assess structural analysis and decision-making in response to real-world examples of racism and anti-Blackness. The study employed semantic thematic analysis to describe the ways social work students make meaning of the vignette and how this process informs their proposed actions. Students varied significantly on the level of analysis they provided in response to the vignette. The analysis examines patterns of racial projects across 3 main response categories: 1) Descriptive, 2) Analytical, and 3) Action. This analysis is important for informing pedagogical innovations aimed at training anti-racist and anti-oppressive social workers.*

Keywords: *Anti-racism, liberalism, whiteness, social work education*

Social work education, practice, advocacy, and research are deeply rooted in a legacy of white supremacy and coloniality (Almeida et al., 2019; Gregory, 2021; Lerner, 2021; Maree, 2020; Singh, 2014; Teasley et al., 2021). Increasingly, social work scholars and practitioners are calling for anti-racist, anti-oppressive, and anti-colonial social work education and practice (Absolon, 2019; McCoy, 2020; Powell & Kelly, 2017; Singh, 2014; Tamburro, 2013). These calls are not new (McMahon & Allen-Meares, 1992; National Association of Black Social Workers, 1968), but are growing as part of a global movement in social work to take ownership of our commitments to racial justice (American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare [AASWSW], 2021; NASW [*Code of Ethics*], 2020; Rao et al., 2021) and to move beyond superficial solutions to racial inequities in our societies (Absolon, 2019; Coxshall, 2020; Lerner, 2021; Social Work Policy Institute, 2014). Calls for a reckoning with whiteness have also become more central in the discourse championing an anti-racist evolution in social work (Frey et al., 2021; Singh, 2014). Gregory (2021) specifically calls for social work in the United States to take "an honest, rigorous, critical account of its own whiteness" (p. 33).

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The current study, part of a larger research project with a multi-racial sample, focuses specifically on whiteness (as a positionality, ideology, and structure) within social work. We leverage the concepts of racial projects (Ifitikar, 2017; Omi & Winant, 2014; Rhee, 2013; Williamson, 2017) and racial ideologies and frames (Feagin, 2020; Bonilla-Silva, 2003) to evaluate patterns of racial meaning-making among white social work students. Racial projects are the tools used to construct meaning and value related to race. This includes structural and cultural tools, such as educational or media systems (Cogburn, 2019; Omi & Winant, 2014) as well as individual-level processes, such as identity and personal racial ideologies (Omi & Winant, 2014). Racial projects in social work, or the ideological maps used to guide meaning-making and practices related to race and racism in social work, are important to identify and reimagine as a part of the process for deepening social work's engagement with racial justice. The ability to critically evaluate and engage systemic racial oppression is a type of racial project and a critical developmental task for all social workers.

Social workers' racialized positionalities, ideologies, and histories vary widely and should be considered when developing social work curricula aiming to support racial project development. Members of actively constructed and brutally maintained dominant groups (e.g., white people) may practice and conceptualize social work, race, and racism differently than people who experience the brunt of that social domination. These differences in social position have implications for the types of racial projects that undergird our education and training, the ways social work is practiced and in turn, the specific educational and training tasks that need to be engaged (Dyer, 1997; Frey et al., 2021; Morrison, 1992; Roediger, 1998). Our analysis focused on understanding the racial projects white social work students bring to their social work training, which can help to inform the development of decolonized and anti-racist social work curriculum. We contend that this type of analysis is foundational to the development of anti-racist social work education and practice.

Racial Projects and Whiteness

Race is a constructed, dynamic, and ubiquitous social phenomenon that intersects with all major social conflicts. Regarding race, Omi and Winant note "that no other social conflict — not class, not sex/gender, not colonialism or imperialism — can ever be understood independently of it" (Omi & Winant, 2014, p. viii). From this perspective, race functions (though not inherently) as a fundamental organizing principle in society. In their theory of racial formation, the authors forward the concept of *racial projects* to represent the social processes that inform the racialization of people and social structures and the exchange between these systems that embed racial meaning and value (Omi & Winant, 2014). Racial projects are the processes through which race is constructed, maintains dynamism, and sustains relevance across social structures, societal domains, and social interactions.

Whiteness functions independently as a racial project and is also embedded at the roots of all contemporary racial projects and in turn, all racial projects are fundamentally tied to whiteness (Ifitikar, 2017; Mills, 1997/2014; Omi & Winant, 2014). We use the phrase *white*

racial projects to emphasize the ways in which whiteness functions as an independent racial project. An analysis of whiteness as a specific racial project forces visibility and accountability of whiteness. Using white racial projects as a frame also supports our engagement of a targeted interrogation of whiteness, which we argue is necessary to any effort to establish anti-oppressive and anti-racist practices in social work. The construction of whiteness and white hegemony rely upon and have value that is sustained through the myth of white supremacy and distorted assessments of social reality (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Feagin, 2020; Mills, 1997/2014; Omi & Winant, 2014). We focused specifically on conceptual models that help us understand how the myth of white supremacy functions as a cultural and belief system. White supremacist ideology is commonly (and mistakenly) reduced to a belief system that includes the espousal of white superiority (genetic, cultural, etc.) and ordained dominance often symbolized through clandestine codes and meetings, burning torches, and polo shirts (Dyer, 1997). White supremacy also functions as a cultural system, often invisibly shaping social norms and values as well as collective racial ideologies and frames—the tools used to rationalize, make meaning of and maintain material hierarchies around race in society (Okun, 2021; Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008). We contend that white racial projects are: a) fundamental to social work education and practice and b) inform the perceived roles and intentions of white social work students. It is important to note, however, that we do not assume that the use of white racial projects is exclusive to white students or that white students exclusively rely on white racial projects who may also employ alternative frames, such as anti-racism and critical race consciousness.

In order to observe racial projects operating in these ways we merely need to "examine the many ways in which we 'notice' race" (Omi & Winant, 2014, p. 126). Building a social work curriculum and training model that responds to this need depends on a clearer understanding of the ways students employ white (and other) racial projects as it relates to the function of racism in society and the practice of social work. The language of race (Blauner, 1994) varies considerably between minoritized (particularly Black) and White students. Black students, for instance, may be more likely to centralize the significance of race in everyday experience (e.g., Blauner, 1994; Hope & Bañales, 2019) and locate the source of racial inequities in the histories and contemporary functioning of social systems and structures (e.g., Eschmann, 2021). In contrast, White students may be more likely to dismiss the central importance of race (Blauner, 1994; Rucker et al., 2019), which can render the realities of racism as relatively invisible or exceptions rather than rules. Omi and Winant (2014) describe these discordant views on racism as a "crisis of meaning" (p. 71). The unique positionality of whiteness (and in turn white social workers) is also reflected in what Feagin and colleagues describe as "social alexithymia" or "the sustained inability to relate to and understand the suffering of those who are oppressed" (Feagin, 2013, pp. 27-28).

Accurate assessments of the degree and mechanisms that sustain racial inequities across social domains is critical to decision making, policy and behavior. White Americans are less likely to employ structural (vs. interpersonal) frames for evaluating racism (Nelson, et al., 2013; Rucker et al., 2019; Unzueta & Lowery, 2008). In one study, 70% of white participants endorsed interpersonal beliefs about racism (e.g., individuals own beliefs

cause them to treat other races poorly), while Black participants were equally divided in their endorsement of interpersonal and structural beliefs (e.g., discrimination is historically built into our society and institutions; Rucker et al., 2019). Likewise, white Americans also substantially underestimate racial economic inequality (Kraus et al., 2019; Rucker et al., 2019) and are resistant to data or information aimed at correcting their misperceptions (Onyeador et al., 2021). The psychology underlying these stubborn misperceptions lies partly in commitments to seeing society as just, fair and merit-based, which leads to granting greater credence to information that confirms those beliefs and paying less attention to data that are inconsistent with those beliefs (Kraus et al., 2019). When structural framings of racism are more prominent (i.e., focusing on the role of systems, structures, policies in producing racial inequity), individuals are more likely to understand the cause of racial inequities as being structural in nature (O'Brien & Major, 2009; Richeson & Sommers, 2016) and are less likely to support policies known to exacerbate racial inequities (e.g., habitual offender laws, Rucker et al., 2019).

Racial Ideologies and Frames

Racial ideologies and frames arguably form the bedrock of white racial projects. Patterns between white people (social position), their assessments of racial inequity in society, and their resistance to correct data and frames are manifestations of whiteness as a racial project. These ideologies and frames reflect how reality is being assessed and serve as guides for meaning-making and action (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Feagin, 2020). There are several frames that align with what we have described as "white racial projects." Similarly, *neoliberal* frames privatize and individualize understandings of race, while fashioning structural racism—such as inequitable resource distribution—as unrecognizable (Giroux, 2003; Martin, 2013). *Colorblindness* and *neoliberal* ideologies are also core to white racial projects (Feagin, 2020; Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Omi & Winant, 2014).

White racial projects benefit from whiteness being an invisible, hegemonic organizing structure in society. Colorblindness and neoliberalism serve as ideological foundations of "white invisibility" through a) rejecting the social significance of race and whiteness in society, b) emphasizing the role of economic systems (divorced from an analysis of "race") in the production of social inequality, and c) an idealistic urging to see people as individuals and humans unencumbered by race, functionally ignoring the realities of racial oppression. Another frame is the reliance on *paternalism* (e.g., restricting client agency through authoritative control; Reamer, 1983) and *white saviorism* (e.g., a sense of self-serving charity to help or fix oppressed groups that are undergirded by notions of white superiority, e.g., values and norms; Sondel et al., 2019). These frames all function as key features of white racial projects.

Anti-Racist Projects

Racial projects serve a sociological function in shaping policy and practice, and a psychological function in helping to shape our understanding of how racism operates in everyday life (Omi & Winant, 2014). We have provided conceptual grounding for features of white racial projects which inform racial meaning-making processes, such as

neoliberalism and colorblindness, among white students. In addition to racial projects, anti-racist projects (Omi & Winant, 2014), which include combinations of seeing, engaging, and aiming to transform the conditions of racial oppression, can also be employed for meaning making. Racial frames that are consistent with this type of critical assessment and action include *critical race consciousness* and *anti-racism*. *Critical race consciousness* references awareness, evaluation, and action in response to oppressive social conditions (Godfrey et al., 2019), and similarly, *anti-racism* uses reparations as a guidepost, while also calling humanity to action against the throes of racial oppression to design a fully inclusive social, economic, and political democracy (Androff, 2010; Omi & Winant, 2014). In contrast to colorblindness, for instance, each of these frames requires the explicit engagement of racism in social analysis, policy, and practice in order to address racial inequities (Feagin, 2020; Kennedy, 2013; Omi & Winant, 2014).

The Present Study

The present study assessed structural analysis and decision-making in response to real-world examples of racism and anti-Blackness in a sample of white social work graduate students. The study was organized around three premises. The first premise is that racial projects (specifically various characteristics of white racial projects) are foundational to social work education and practice. The second premise is that understanding the ways white social work students build and employ these projects is essential for designing social work curriculum and training that prepares them for engaging in an anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice. The third premise is that the education and training of white social workers to engage in an anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice is particularly important for diminishing the role of social work in perpetuating racial oppression. Building on these premises, patterns in ideologies among an incoming graduate student class of self-identified white social work students (referred to as "baseline racial projects") in response to a social work case vignette were analyzed to a) evaluate patterns in their description and use of racial projects, b) the ways they position themselves in relation to those projects and c) perceptions regarding their responsibilities (as social workers) for responding to those projects or systems.

Methods

Sample

The sample utilized in this study was entirely composed of White-identifying social work students. These participants were a part of a 2019 incoming cohort of MSW students at a Northeastern region university (n = 139). The majority of participants in the sample identified their political affiliation as liberal (84%) and 2.9% of the sample identified their political leanings as conservative. The remaining 7.9% of students identified as neither liberal nor conservative. The average age of students in the sample was 27 years old (SD = 7). The sample was primarily composed of students who self-identified as female (87%; n = 121). Ninety-two percent of students were born in the United States.

Research Design

Procedures

The current study presents an analysis of qualitative data taken from a larger multi-methodological study focused on examining the effects of an immersive virtual reality experience. The larger study employed longitudinal data to explore topics related to anti-Black racism, structural analysis, and decision making. In the current analysis, we focus on a subset of the data collected during baseline (responses provided prior to the start of their graduate program). We analyze open-ended responses to a narrative vignette detailing a fictional account of a Black mother's experience with Child Protective Services using the racial projects framework to examine how they "notice" race within the vignette (Omi & Winant, 2014, p. 126). Whiteness is embedded at the root of all contemporary racial projects but also functions independently as a project (Omi & Winant, 2014). We use the phrase *white racial projects* to organize our targeted (though not exclusive) consideration of whiteness as a specific form of racial project, which we argue forces visibility and accountability of whiteness.

Table 1. *Narrative Vignette and Response Prompt*

A few days after an argument with her boyfriend led to a 911 call made by a neighbor, Ms. L, a Black mother of two young boys, received an unexpected visit from Child Protective Services (CPS). The caseworker asked her if she used drugs, and Ms. L truthfully responded that she smoked marijuana from time to time. According to Ms. L's attorney, the admission led to a child neglect proceeding against her in which the state claimed that Ms. L did not properly care for her children. The only evidence presented on the petition was Ms. L's admission that she smoked marijuana. The court adjudicated her as "neglectful" and implemented a "family service plan," a combination of ongoing state surveillance and mandatory "services."
Her family service plan included the following: parenting classes; anger management classes; parenting classes for children with special needs; participation in a drug treatment program; submission to drug testing; submission to unannounced visits from CPS, including full access to the apartment for inspection; and participation in all family court conferences and hearings, regardless of her work schedule.
When Ms. L was unable to comply with all these demands on her time while maintaining her job, her children were taken from her and placed in foster care. The state then added individual and family counseling services to her service plan, along with supervised visits with her children. Ms. L eventually quit her job in order to comply with the plan. Yet, despite her efforts to comply, Ms. L still faced termination of her parental rights. Her children have rotated through different foster care placements, and the emotional stress of separation from their mother has taken its toll.
Response Prompt: You are a social worker who has recently been assigned to Ms. L's case. Please briefly describe your thoughts based on the information you've been provided above.

The present study was approved by the University's Institutional Review Board as a part of the broader study's protocol. Prior to beginning the fall semester, all incoming students completed an online survey as part of their onboarding for the program. The

students in the current sample completed all study protocols after enrolling but before beginning any coursework. Students provided informed consent and were given the option to decline participation. In the survey, students were asked to respond to a narrative vignette detailing the experience of a Black mother engaging with Child Protective Services (CPS; Table 1). After reading the vignette, students are provided the following prompt: "You are a social worker who has recently been assigned to Ms. L's case. Please briefly describe your thoughts based on the information you've been provided above". The students were not provided any further instructions on how to respond, beyond this prompt.

The narrative vignette utilized for this study (Table 1) was designed to assess the racial project themes employed among incoming, White-identifying SW students. We were particularly interested in the analysis students would volunteer with minimal guidance from the vignette text. The vignette text did not explicitly identify the race of any actors aside from the mother, Ms. L, who was identified as a Black woman. The vignette described how the individual actions, as well as CPS and judicial protocols, contributed to the outcome of the case without explicitly making connections between individuals and systems. The construction of the vignette text deliberately avoided guiding students to an anti-racist or structural analysis, which supported unaffected responses from students and undoubtedly led to a range of interpretations of appropriate responses to the vignette.

Data Analysis

Semantic thematic analysis was used to assess the use of white (and other) racial projects in their analysis of the vignette. The analysis focused on the interpretive frames students used, the basis upon which these understandings were grounded, and how this framing informed (if at all) their proposed actions as social workers. As this study was interested in exploring themes related to anti-Black racism, thematic analysis was selected due to its ability to allow for social and psychological patterns and themes in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Assuming that White-identifying social work students begin their programs carrying a set of worldviews and beliefs around justice and equity, this analysis assumes a contextualist perspective that acknowledges the ways individuals make meaning of their experiences and the ways the broader societal context influences this process (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The data analysis team consisted of four trained graduate research assistants and the principal investigator (PI). First, the analysis team familiarized themselves with the data through several rounds of immersive reading. During this time, the team individually recorded initial ideas and reflections about the vignette responses. Next, the team met collectively to discuss reflections and aggregate these findings into preliminary categories. Collective team meetings were utilized to discuss observations made during individual readings and draw comparisons between coders. Initial categorizations generated from this round of analysis include codes (e.g., *Focus on Individuals or Structures, Naming Racism or Gender)*. Once codes were developed, refined, and clearly exemplified in the coding frame, the analysis team looked to determine agreement amongst coders. Two members of the analysis team independently re-coded a subset of the data in order to gauge correspondence between coders. When a disagreement between coders occurred, a

collective discussion was held with the analysis team and PI to further define and operationalize respective codes. From these discussions, a new coding frame and refined codes were developed.

After a final list of codes was generated, the team worked collectively to identify dominant themes within the dataset by distinguishing types of responses, as well as exploring the significance of overlaps between codes. While codes were identified based on their existence within the dataset, final themes were identified based on an aggregation of these codes, their prevalence within the data set, and their relevance to the present research interests.

Results

The student responses are first organized and described according to three overarching categories that were identified during the final phase of coding: 1) *Descriptive*, 2) *Analytical,* and 3) *Action*. In the following section, we outline and provide examples of the main categories as well as the sub-themes and racial projects employed within each of these categories.

Descriptive Responses

Descriptive responses (Table 2) focused on relatively superficial explanations of the events in the vignette as well as responses that focused on personal, emotional reactions to the vignette. These responses did not seek to analyze or propose actions in response to the problem. Prominent sub-themes included in this response category are *Sympathetic, Empathetic, or Personal Feelings Focus*. The *Descriptive* assessments utilize racial projects that employed neoliberal and white saviorism frames, particularly through an emphasis on individual levels of analysis and centering of personal emotions.

Table 2. *Descriptive Responses*

Theme	Definition	Example
Sympathetic, Empathetic, or Personal Feelings Focused (*n* = 42)	Students who expressed emotional reactions in response to the vignette. Students might describe negative emotional reactions such as guilt, shame, disgust, grief, stress, or anger, as well as, positive emotional reactions such as hope and empathy.	*Wow, this is awful. I feel so bad for Ms. L and her kids. What she experienced was unfair and racist. Ms. L worked her hardest to comply, but the system was stacked against her.* (Participant #160)

Sympathetic, Empathetic, or Personal Feelings Focused

Some students (*n* = 42) focused on their emotional reactions to the vignette, which is an analytical approach consistent with neoliberalism. Responses in this category included negative (e.g., guilt, shame, grief, stress, or anger) and positive emotional reactions (e.g., hope, empathy). Even in naming unfairness or injustice, these responses centered on

emotional reactions and Ms. L's individual traits (e.g., seems like an honest woman) rather than any analysis of why systemic "failures" had occurred. One student expressed feeling bad about the circumstances (while also generically identifying "the system" as being inequitable or unfair).

> *Wow, this is awful. I feel so bad for Ms. L and her kids. What she experienced was unfair and racist. Ms. L worked her hardest to comply, but the system was stacked against her.* (Participant #160)

Another student commented:

> *My initial response was one of empathy. Ms. L seems like an honest woman who has been dealt an unfair hand.* (Participant #122)

In the second example, the student has emphasized an individual and interpersonal framing in focusing on their emotional reaction (i.e., claiming empathy) and in their focus on Ms. L's personal attributes (i.e., honest woman). The student's reference to Ms. L being "dealt an unfair hand" seems to imply that the vignette events are a series of unfortunate, irregular circumstances rather than predictable and inequitable systemic features. The student's emotional reaction to the circumstances of the vignette are arguably irrelevant and should raise questions about why personal emotions are being introduced. The use of emotion in this case may reflect an attempt by the student to more closely align themselves with the experience of oppression rather than the role of oppression. The practice of centering personal emotions (and in turn centering the self) in response to racism may reflect attempts by students to remove or minimize their proximity to the source of harm and may also undermine the possibility of fostering a trusting relationship with Ms. L (e.g., Frey et al., 2021).

Analytical Responses

To varying degrees, the *analytical* responses (Table 3) focused on identifying underlying reasons for problems evident in the vignette, and, in only one instance ($n = 1$), did a student also provide an analysis of their own positionality in relation to a problem. Prominent themes that emerged from these responses were *Positioning Race, Racism* and *Whiteness* and *Situations, Systems, and Self*. In comparison to the descriptive responses, the analytical responses provided more substantive assessments. Elements of white racial projects were still evident as many of these responses continued to ignore structural and systemic issues (e.g., thinking of the challenges faced by Ms. L as abnormalities in the system) or did not provide any specific analysis around race or racism. Responses in this category may be described as embodying burgeoning consciousness. The language used in these responses, for instance, suggests an awareness of certain terminology but lacked evidence of an ability to meaningfully describe how the system was functioning to produce inequity, which is critical to identifying possibilities for change or intervention.

Systems Glitch vs. System Intention

In response to the vignette, some students (*n* = 87) chose to explicitly analyze the role of the CPS system and other broad governing bodies often referred to as "the system" but varied in the conclusions drawn about the functioning of these systems. When characterizing the role and behaviors of CPS, some students framed the actions and subsequent outcome of the case as an unfortunate consequence or "glitch" in the system. In these responses, students are moving beyond an individual-level analysis but are not acknowledging the systemic nature of the problems faced by Ms. L. Other students characterized CPS' actions and associated outcomes as an expected intention of the system. In the latter set of responses, students are implying that structural racism is both embedded and intentional (e.g., the system is working as designed), which suggests a higher level of critical consciousness. We have categorized this dichotomy as: *System Glitch* and *System Intention*.

System Glitch. These responses characterized the case outcomes as unfortunate but uncommon or counter to the system's intended function. When employing this frame students often sought to situate what happened to Ms. L as a rare occurrence and as a failure or mistake made by the system, which suggests a limited understanding of structural racism and an ability to engage in structural analysis. In the following response, the student fails to reconcile the stated contradiction between the intention of CPS to "protect children" and implicating CPS policies in "ensuring" failure, which suggests systemic failures:

> *CPS is supposed to protect children, but by creating a situation in which the mother will be unable to fulfill what is demanded of her CPS is ensuring that the children will be separated from their mother and will suffer as a result.* (Participant #44)

System Intention. Conversely, some students characterized the outcome of Ms. L's case as an expected result of such an interaction with "the system." These students described the behaviors and impact of CPS as intentional. Some of the responses in this category explicitly identify anti-Black racism as a system feature, noting that interactions with the system often lead to negative outcomes for Black people, and more acutely Black women. In the following example, the student response identifies specific processes (e.g., not accommodating Ms. L's work schedule) that contributed to negative outcomes and also implies that there are fundamental flaws embedded within the system design (e.g., saviorism orientation in "fixing" "problems"):

> *Ms. L and her family were forced to endure invasion of privacy and required to use services that did not accommodate her work schedule or what she wanted. I suspect it is because the CPS and the foster care system was created with the intention of "fixing" a family and removing "problems" instead of supporting individuals and their specific needs.* (Participant #190)

Table 3. *Analytical Responses*

Theme	Definition	Example
Systems Glitch vs. Systems Intention (*n* = 87)		
Systems Glitch	Students characterized the outcome of Ms. L's case as unfortunate, but described it as an unintentional outcome of how systems, like Child Protective Services, traditionally operate.	*Ms. L was put in a position where she would be guaranteed to fail because the "punishment" did not fit the "crime". While smoking marijuana is illegal and not something that should be done around children, forcing Ms. L to participate in classes within her family service plan that had nothing to do with her admittance to marijuana use (i.e., anger management classes, classes for children with special needs) is only setting her up to fail. CPS is supposed to protect children, but by creating a situation in which the mother will be unable to fulfill what is demanded of her CPS is ensuring that the children will be separated from their mother and will suffer as a result.* (Participant #44)
Systems Intention	Students characterized the outcome of Ms. L's case as an expected result of such an interaction with "the system".	*I think that the neighbor may have called the police because of racial bias and stereotypes of domestic violence and unmarried women. Then, these stereotypes in addition to stereotypes of black women not parenting well and that all drug-use leads to abusive, neglectful, or otherwise dangerous households forced Ms. L and her children into a system that set them up to fail. Ms. L and her family were forced to endure invasion of privacy and required to use services that did not accommodate her work schedule or what she wanted. I suspect it is because the CPS and the foster care system was created with the intention of "fixing" a family and removing "problems" instead of supporting individuals and their specific needs.* (Participant #190)
Neutral Critiquer (*n* = 61)	Students spoke with clarity about themselves having a definitive understanding of the situation, but also refrained from speaking explicitly about what they would do as the social worker in this situation.	*This is blatant and disgusting discrimination, and illustrates perfectly how one seemingly "well meaning" or "concerned" neighbor's prejudice can start a chain reaction. It demonstrates how microaggressions are not just annoying, small detours in a day, but rather legitimately damaging actions that have long-term consequences for the wellbeing of ethnic and racial minorities. This situation is blatantly hypocritical, as countless white people smoke marijuana and parent their children and are never questioned for it. Some of them now are even making millions of dollars profiting off of the relatively new marijuana industry, while Black individuals are still having their families torn apart because of it."* (Participant #18)
No Mention of Race, Racism or Whiteness (*n* = 36)	Students did not mention or grapple with themes related to race, racism or whiteness in their response to the vignette.	*The initial case workers seemed to have jumped to conclusions about Ms. L's ability to care for her children. Did they seem neglected? Afraid of their mother or her boyfriend? How were they performing in school? Without looking deeper into the state of their wellbeing, the initial case workers set Ms. L impossible standards. The cumbersome assignment of the family service plan appears to be the cause of her separation from her children, not possible neglect of my occasional marijuana smoking.* (Participant #136)
Positioning Race/Racism (*n* = 103)		
One-Off Comment	Students made seemingly surface level references to race or racism, by mentioning it once but not elaborating on its connection to their broader response or explanation.	*I feel frustrated that she is being treated so unfairly. People shouldn't feel like they need to lie about their experiences because there is a real possibility it will be taken out of context and turned against them. Though it made me feel frustrated it isn't a surprising story. It is a good example of what the cyclical racism within supposedly supportive institutions so often leads to.* (Participant #181)

Theme	Definition	Example
Individual Traits/Actions	Students situated race and racism as individual level traits and action.	*I think that Ms. L was unfairly treated by the criminal system. I think because of her gender and race she was given a harsher sentence than someone who wasn't a single mom or black. I think it is sad that this happens because the children were much better off with their mother than in the system.* (Participant #255)
Connecting Individual Racial Positionality to Group Position	Students situated their analysis of race and racism by connecting individuals to group level treatment.	*I feel shocked and enraged that a parent could loose their rights over their children for an admission of smoking marijuana. Why was a CPS case worker even brought to Ms. L? This action sounds racist at its core, destroying a Black mother's life because she had an argument with her boyfriend and smoked marijuana - how often does this occur and does this occur at the same rate as white mothers? How does taking about Ms. L's parental rights help her children or society?* (Participant #331)
Race and Racism as Systems	Students situated their analysis of race and racism within a structural or systemic context.	*I think this is a classic example of the way various systems interact to specifically target Black women in this country. Young, wealthy white people (especially men) are more likely to use drugs, and far less likely to ever face the consequences. Having to QUIT her job to keep up with the demands of proving to the state that she's able to be a good provider (aka keep a job) and having her children taken away so she can prove she's a good mother? These things are hypocritical and unjust. One of the great devastations caused by slavery was the destruction of the Black family- pulling parents apart and away from their children- because you can diminish a person's power by isolating them. This is continuing in the way Black families are targeted by mass incarceration, CPS policies, school to prison pipeline, surveillance, and more. Ms. L should be reunited with her family as quickly as possible and compensated for the losses she suffered as a result of this unjust treatment.* (Participant #33)
Multiple Frames	Students utilized multiple of these framings to position their analysis of race and racism.	*Reading through the details of the case affirms to me that Black people, especially Black women, are judged more harshly than white women or white people more generally. There are plenty of television shows today about young white women who smoke pot and have children and it's seen as trendy. These racist prejudices set into motion the racist policies meant to uphold institutionalized racism and criminalize and punish Black people. The reaction to Ms. L's honest answer was harsh and severe, and instead should have been met with further questioning and investigation. This case is an example of how racism is pervasive even within the social work field. The caseworker clearly had racist prejudice within her that then changed the course of Ms. L's life.* (Participant #235)
Situations, Systems, Self (*n = 1*)	Students reflected on their own positionality in relationship to the vignette.	*It makes my blood boil that such injustice is possible and that such a tragedy can befall someone trying to do the right thing. It also makes me reflect on whether or to what extent I am complicit in this and similar injustices being facilitated by the civil structures I am working within. My immediate question now is what steps I can take to resolve this injustice and improve the lives of Ms. L and her family. I also want to be very cognizant of any aspect of my role in her case that may unintentionally further perpetuate injustice, despite my best efforts and goals. I also can imagine how wary Ms. L must be to yet another government representative involving myself in her life without her invitation.* (Participant #195)

Neutral Critiquer

Another analytical response that emerged from students was the theme of *Neutral Critiquer* ($n = 61$). These students spoke with clarity about themselves having a definitive understanding of the situation but refrained from speaking explicitly about what they would do as the social worker in this situation. One student responded:

> *This is blatant and disgusting discrimination, and illustrates perfectly how one seemingly "well meaning" or "concerned" neighbor's prejudice can start a chain reaction. It demonstrates how microaggressions are not just annoying, small detours in a day, but rather legitimately damaging actions that have long-term consequences for the wellbeing of ethnic and racial minorities. This situation is blatantly hypocritical, as countless white people smoke marijuana and parent their children and are never questioned for it. Some of them now are even making millions of dollars profiting off of the relatively new marijuana industry, while Black individuals are still having their families torn apart because of it."* (Participant #18)

At the end of the vignette, students were prompted to communicate their thoughts as if they were a social worker in the case. Within this theme, students offered elaborate critiques of various actors within the vignette without identifying any definitive actions. Meaningful reflection on the actions one would take as a social worker should involve careful consideration of the problem being addressed as well as reflection about one's own positionality (Frey et al., 2021).

No Mention of Race, Racism, or Whiteness. Even in responses providing assessments that identified structural or system issues, it was common for students to not mention or grapple with themes related to race, racism, or whiteness ($n = 36$) in their responses to the vignette. Notably, these students did not mention race or racism but offered otherwise thoughtful inquiry regarding the mandated family services plan created for Ms. L. One student noted:

> *The initial case workers seemed to have jumped to conclusions about Ms. L's ability to care for her children. Did they seem neglected? Afraid of their mother or her boyfriend? How were they performing in school? Without looking deeper into the state of their wellbeing, the initial case workers set Ms. L impossible standards.* (Participant #136)

The consistent avoidance of naming racism or whiteness is a typical characteristic of *neoliberal* (Giroux, 2003; Martin, 2013) and *colorblindness* (Bonilla-Silva, 2015) frames. Namely, rendering racism and whiteness invisible or ambiguous sustains both denial and the functioning of racially oppressive systems (Feagin, 2013). This pattern in our data is also consistent with previous research documenting the tendency for white students to dismiss the central importance of race and whiteness (Blauner, 1994; Rucker et al., 2019).

Even in the few instances when students explicitly identify whiteness ($n = 46$), none ($n = 0$) of the student responses offered an analysis that considered their own positionality as white social workers. On the contrary, several student responses suggested attempts to

distance or failing to include oneself in whiteness (e.g., see Participant #18's example in the Neutral Critiquer category: "countless white people" "their children" "some of them"). This suggests that white social work students can employ racial frames that seemingly acknowledge structural inequity, allude to anti-Blackness and the function of whiteness all while completely ignoring their role as white social work students in upholding whiteness and racist systems (Abrams & Gibson, 2007; Frey et al., 2021).

Positioning Race and Racism

When responding to the vignette, most students ($n = 103$) offered explicit assessments of how they were situating and understanding race, anti-Blackness, and systemic racism but clearly varied in their understanding and application of these constructs. For example, some students characterized race as an individual-level trait, while other students discussed how an individual's race might relate to group-level treatment. Other students situated race and racism within systemic structures, while others identify systems without mentioning race at all. Our analysis was explicitly interested in the ways students analyze and position concepts of race and racism in relation to the vignette, if at all.

One-Off Comment. In some responses, students would reference race or racism but not elaborate on its connection to their broader response or their understanding of the circumstances of the case. One student commented:

> *Though it made me feel frustrated, it isn't a surprising story. It is a good example of what the cyclical racism within supposedly supportive institutions so often leads to.* (Participant #181)

In this example, the student comments that the vignette is an example of "cyclical racism" but does not elaborate on what is meant by this phrase and how this manifested within the vignette. This example is also demonstrative of a broader pattern of what might be described as performative language in which white students use phrases to signal an understanding that may be superficial or not actually possessed at all or to position themselves as a "good" white person (Frey et al., 2021).

Individual Traits and Actions. Several of the responses emphasized individual-level traits and actions when identifying racism in relation to the vignette. This type of response is consistent with neoliberal frames (Giroux, 2003; Martin, 2013) and empirical evidence of white adults relying on interpersonal beliefs about racism (e.g., Rucker et al., 2019). Responses in this category often describe race as something a person has that can lead to "negative experiences" (i.e., being Black is associated with the negative outcome as opposed to identifying systems of racism as leading to negative outcomes). Similarly, racism was also a characteristic attributed to individual-level actors in the vignette such as the police officer, caseworker, or her neighbor. A participant responded:

> *I think that Ms. L was unfairly treated by the criminal system. I think because of her gender and race she was given a harsher sentence than someone who wasn't a single mom or black.* (Participant #255)

In this example, the student is positioning race as an individual trait but does not provide an analysis that suggests an understanding of the structural context that constructs race, racial meaning, and value and in turn renders racial positions so highly consequential to life outcomes.

Connecting Individual Racial Positionality to Group Positions. There were also some examples of students focusing not only on Ms. L and ways her racial position contributed to the outcomes in the case but also reflected on white positionality. A frequently employed phrase used by students was "if she were white..." to describe how Ms. L might have been treated differently if she were not a Black woman. One student stated:

> *I have a hard time believing that Ms. L's family service plan would have been so extensive if she were white.* (Participant #39)

Another participant commented:

> *I feel shocked and enraged that a parent could lose their rights over their children for an admission of smoking marijuana. Why was a CPS case worker even brought to Ms. L? This action sounds racist at its core, destroying a Black mother's life because she had an argument with her boyfriend and smoked marijuana - how often does this occur and does this occur at the same rate as white mothers?* (Participant #331)

In these examples, students identify how individual-level characteristics, like race and social position, can impact group-level treatment by reflecting that a white person likely would have not faced the same consequences in this case. This type of response is notable because the analysis does not imply something essential about Ms. L's race (e.g., being Black) that contributes to the case outcomes. By identifying whiteness or being white as a possible factor in the case, these responses suggest some understanding of race as a group level factor rather than individual characteristic.

Race and Racism as Systems. Some students situated their analysis of race and racism within a structural or systemic context. In some instances, the role of systems was not only named but the response also included applications of intersectional frameworks by identifying intersecting positionalities (e.g., young, wealthy, white) and systems (e.g., criminal systems and social services). The following example also considered the historical context in relation to contemporary racial subjugation:

> *I think this is a classic example of the way various systems interact to specifically target Black women in this country. Young, wealthy white people (especially men) are more likely to use drugs, and far less likely to ever face the consequences... One of the great devastations caused by slavery was the destruction of the Black family- pulling parents apart and away from their children- because you can diminish a person's power by isolating them. This is continuing in the way Black families are targeted by mass incarceration, CPS policies, school to prison pipeline, surveillance, and more. Ms. L should be reunited with her family as quickly as possible and compensated for the losses she suffered as a result of this unjust treatment.* (Participant #33)

In this response, the participant identifies the influence of race and racism within various governing bodies. Specifically, the participant identifies the historic relationship between slavery and the present-day surveillance and separation of Black families by CPS. Further, the participant notes the criminalization of marijuana within Black communities and its relationship to policing and mass incarceration. While the student employs an anti-racist frame in identifying anti-Blackness and calling for reparations, the student does not address the prompt asking what *they* would do as a social worker or otherwise offer reflections on their own positionality in relation to the themes of the vignette.

Multiple Frames. Lastly, a few students integrated multiple frames to position their analysis of race and racism. In these responses, students characterized race and racism as individual traits and actions but also positioned race and racism in a structural or systemic context. For example, one participant reflected:

> *Reading through the details of the case affirms to me that Black people, especially Black women, are judged more harshly than white women or white people more generally. There are plenty of television shows today about young white women who smoke pot and have children and it's seen as trendy. These racist prejudices set into motion the racist policies meant to uphold institutionalized racism and criminalize and punish Black people. The reaction to Ms. L's honest answer was harsh and severe, and instead should have been met with further questioning and investigation. This case is an example of how racism is pervasive even within the social work field. The caseworker clearly had racist prejudice within her that then changed the course of Ms. L's life.* (Participant #235)

In this response, the student names the caseworkers "racist prejudice" as well as structural characteristics (intersectional positionality of race and gender, racism in social work, "racist policies") as key factors in the outcomes of Ms. L's case. It is not clear from the response, however, if the student is simply naming multiple factors or if they also understand how individual and structural factors intersect to patterns of racial inequity. The student also does not identify their own positionality in relation to the vignette, which is consistent with the student responses overall. Many of these students exhibit an understanding of the "right" words or phrases but consistently fall short of demonstrating an understanding of how structures function or the relevance of their whiteness to the systems and events being identified.

Situations, Systems, and Self

Rather than proposing action directed toward actors in the vignette, markedly only one student (*n* = 1) reflected on their own positionality in relation to this situation. This student seemed to be thinking about the present case, the systems involved in that case, and how they may be positioned in relation to those systems. This student often expressed concerns about further perpetuating harm:

> *It makes my blood boil that such injustice is possible and that such a tragedy can befall someone trying to do the right thing. It also makes me reflect on whether or to what extent I am complicit in this and similar injustices being facilitated by the*

civil structures I am working within. My immediate question now is what steps I can take to resolve this injustice and improve the lives of Ms. L and her family. I also want to be very cognizant of any aspect of my role in her case that may unintentionally further perpetuate injustice, despite my best efforts and goals. I also can imagine how wary Ms. L must be to yet another government representative involving myself in her life without her invitation. (Participant #195)

In this example, the participant not only acknowledges that they may be in a position to further perpetuate injustice but recognizes that they will likely work within systems and organizations that commonly perpetuate harm against Black communities. This response provides a clear example of a participant grappling with positionality in relation to the vignette. Which positionalities, however, are being deemed most relevant? Again, whiteness is never explicitly identified by any student as a self-position relevant to the analysis being provided. In the above example, the student is notably aware that they may be "complicit" but references the role as a worker and "government representative" and does not demonstrate any understanding of their influence as a white social worker.

Action Themes

In this final set of themes, *Action* responses focused on proposing actions or behaviors in response to the case presented in the vignette. The action roles that students proposed were *investigator*, *advocate*, *educator*, *compliance officer*, *counselor*, *service provider*, and a mixture of many roles. Most commonly, students proposed behaviors that focused on individual-level solutions and again, did not include any references to their own white positionality. The responses in this theme typically engaged three frames: neoliberalism, white saviorism and paternalism. See Table 4.

Investigator

A common action theme was that of the *Investigator*. These students commented on the need for more information to make an appropriate decision or to move forward with Ms. L's case. These students proposed actions that would allow them to access further information. One student noted:

There are many missing pieces to the information given- and without them, the precautions taken by CPS seem rash. Marijuana and a fight with a boyfriend are being treated as related and dealt with as so, as opposed to each isolated incident being investigated. It seems at first glance that the emotional toll of separating a family could have been easily avoided through proper investigation and counseling if found necessary. (Participant #161)

In this example, the participant notes that they need further information to make an accurate assessment of Ms. L's case, and without this information, CPS' response was unwarranted.

Table 4. *Action Responses*

Theme	Definition	Example
Investigator	Students were analytically focused and commented on the need for more information.	*There are many missing pieces to the information given- and without them, the precautions taken by CPS seem rash. Marijuana and a fight with a boyfriend are being treated as related and dealt with as so, as opposed to each isolated incident being investigated. It seems at first glance that the emotional toll of separating a family could have been easily avoided through proper investigation and counseling if found necessary. (Participant #161)*
Advocate	Students frequently noted the need or desire to advocate on behalf of Ms. L to CPS.	*Ms. L's case is heartbreakingly common. Too often, African American families face separation and subsequent overreach of government programs that tear loved ones apart and introduce trauma. While social work services we provide are extremely necessary in confirmed cases of abuse and neglect in order for families to heal, the system is far from perfect. Bias from on-lookers - surrounding members in the community - too often feeds into creating cases like Ms. L's that inflict unnecessary pain and trauma on minority families. It is our responsibility as advocates for social justice to continue cultivating positive, constructive conservations about today's racial divides and educate society on the dangers of stereotypes and prejudice. Only then can we ensure the services we provide do exactly as they are intended: to heal. (Participant #162)*
Fantasy Advocate	Students who employed this lens situated themselves to have the power and ability to influence Ms. L's circumstances.	*My thoughts are that Ms. L's situation is horrific and completely unacceptable. I'd work on helping her launch a combination legal and public pressure campaign immediately and try to get Ms. L and her attorney to work with a community and/or racial/gender justice organization to get full custody of her children restored as soon as possible. I would also suggest individual counseling for her children in addition to the family counseling to try to mitigate as much of this trauma as possible. Finally, I would like to insist the caseworker that began proceedings against her take an unpaid leave in order to take unconscious bias and racial justice trainings. (Participant #189)*
Educator	Students described the need to educate individual actors in the vignette; these might include Ms. L or the CPS worker.	*The criminalization of marijuana use has created a downward spiral that has unfairly punished and separated a Black family. Ms. L is likely feeling anger at the system treating her unfairly, which would interfere with her ultimate goal of challenging the system in order to get her children back. I would advise her through an REBT lens, if she demonstrated beliefs that were counterproductive to this goal. This would entail encouraging a support network and coping skills, including breathing techniques to help her maintain calm in the face of the racist system. (Participant #142)*
Compliance Officer	Students proposed actions with the goal of supporting Ms. L maintain compliance with Child Protective Services demands.	*Based on the information provided, I do not believe that Ms.L had realistic expectations set forth by the state. It is understandable that she could not meet all the requirements set forth while also caring for her children and working full time. As an alternative, I would recommend giving her one last to complete at a time so that she has a more feasible schedule. This would still require her to complete all classes and requirements set forth by the state, but also gives her time to work and care for her children. (Participant #19)*
Case Manager	Students were mainly focused on technical or procedural aspects of the case.	*Ms. L had been asked to comply with a great deal of services by ACS. As a CPS who works in the Family Services Unit, many of these services could have been combined (individual therapy with an anger management component, one parenting course instead of two) and the services plan should have been discussed with her to make it manageable for her with her work schedule to ensure family reunification or to prevent the removal of her children. If Ms. L was*

Theme	Definition	Example
		trying her hardest to keep her kids in her care, testing negative on drug screenings and there were no further incidents, a TPR would not be necessary or appropriate." (Participant #213)
Counselor	Students described their primary response would be to serve as an emotional support to various actors in the vignette.	*As a social worker I would want to attend to Ms L's mental health including how she may perceive her own agency or lack there of in the situation. It seems important that Ms. L feel empowered to take actions to get her family back on its feet- regain full custody of her children and her own employment. This might start with making sure she has an understanding of how/why this situation snowballed and then working on tools for her- both psychological and practical- to start rebuilding her life.* (Participant #156)
Service Provider	Students described their primary role would be to connect the client to appropriate services.	*I feel as though the reference to drug use was influenced heavily by Ms. L's race. There is no reason to believe that an argument with her boyfriend has a direct link to validating that Ms. L is a neglectful mother. When Ms. L believed she was complying, she was actually giving CPS exactly what they needed to place her on this downward path. While counseling services and family plans can be useful for those who need the support, such programs must ensure that the individual is able to keep a job, care for children, and maintain a level of freedom that is relative to the offense committed. In this case, the required classes did not properly reflect the offense committed, an offense that has no real basis as CPS did not actually witness Ms. L smoking marijuana. Ms. L has been complying and it is unfortunate that aspects of her ascribed status have created this current reality for her. As a social worker, I would work with Ms. L to secure new employment, inspect her housing, and support her in receiving back her children from CPS. I would offer counseling for the emotional and mental stress accompanying Ms. L, working together to execute a plan to effectively complete all required service demands.* (Participant #296)
Multi-Pronged Response	Students proposed they would serve, in not one, but several of the previously described themes.	*This is an example of system failure. Ms. L and her children's lives have been overturned and hurt by too much organizational involvement. The social worker took an extreme approach to a minor concern. Children's health, safety, and happiness should be a social worker's first priority. The social worker setting up so many classes and programs took away time and effort Ms. L could have spent with her family or providing for her family. I would try to get Ms. L back on track to be able to work again. I would lessen if not completely remove the classes and programs she has been assigned to. The only one that seems applicable is a drug treatment program. I would start the efforts to put her children back in her care and figure out if I could provide her with any compensations for the difficult situations herself and her children have been put through. I would try to provide them with therapeutic assistance and spend time asking her (and her children) what she believed she and her children needed.* (Participant #178)
Unsure or Does Not Know	Students expressed that they did not know or were unsure of what to do in order to address the situation or assist Ms. L.	*This case seems to be racially biased. Ms. L seems to be forced into worsening conditions by unrealistic expectations the court system has forced on to her. I am unsure where to start with assisting her.* (Participant #111)

Advocate

In response to the vignette, many students proposed actions related to advocacy. These students frequently noted the need or desire to advocate on behalf of Ms. L or her family, to CPS. For example:

> *I would act as an advocate for Ms. L in order to help her appeal her case, get visitation with her children, and argue that her family service plan is not only a disproportionate response to her honesty about recreational drug use, but is breaking up a family that may be more successful together.* (Participant #326)

Another student commented:

> *As a social worker, I think the correct thing to do is to advocate for a timely reunification plan, and to advocate that any additional parenting requirements be made with consideration to Ms. L's work schedule, because taking away the family's income is not a good outcome for any member of the family, and especially not the children.* (Participant #239)

In both of these responses, participants situate their primary role as Ms. L's social worker as that of an advocate for some more desirable outcome.

Fantasy Advocate. An important sub-theme that emerged under *Advocate* is the notion of a *Fantasy Advocate*. Students who employed this theme seemed to have an outsized sense of power to influence Ms. L's circumstances. For example:

> *I'd work on helping her launch a combination legal and public pressure campaign immediately and try to get Ms. L and her attorney to work with a community and/or racial/gender justice organization to get full custody of her children restored as soon as possible…Finally, I would like to insist the caseworker that began proceedings against her take unpaid leave in order to take unconscious bias and racial justice training.* (Participant #189)

Another participant commented:

> *As the social worker on this case, I would want to work closely with Ms. L to prove she is not a neglectful parent so her children could be returned home. I would recommend that the children are returned, and that the family participates in in-home counseling if it's available. I would also want to work with Ms. L to find another job or perhaps rejoin her previous employer.* (Participant #186)

Notably, both participants propose actions that would not likely be possible given their limited power and influence as social workers in this case. These actions include partnering with a racial justice organization to legally act on behalf of Ms. L, forcing Ms. L's social worker to undergo unpaid leave and racial justice training, as well as, helping her get her old job back. Although these actions are amicable and seek to support Ms. L and her family, they are not realistic or practical expectations of their abilities and influence. While we should encourage social workers to be bold and creative advocates, these responses may be more indicative of the *white saviorism* frame (Sondel et al., 2019). In order to effectively advocate for equity, white social workers must have a clear sense of their own whiteness

and the implications for their social position and social work (Helms, 1996; Sondel et al., 2019; Spanierman & Smith, 2017). In these response categories, students seem to be positioning themselves as heroes or saviors (e.g., launching campaigns, insisting on particular actions) and do not pair their grandiose visions of advocacy with any expressed understanding of whiteness and one's own positionality. Helms (1996) argues that white allies cannot be motivated by guilt or self-aggrandizing but rather by an understanding and commitment to equity. White social workers cannot hope to fix problems when they fail to acknowledge their own proximity to those problems.

Educator

Other students characterized themselves as *Educators*. These students believed their role was to educate individual actors in the vignette (e.g., Ms. L, the case worker, or large groups of people). One student suggested:

> *As a social worker, it would be my calling and my duty to educate and raise consciousness when implicit bias is a used claim in child welfare, such as in Ms. L's case.* (Participant #65)

Another student commented:

> *I would advise her through an REBT lens, if she demonstrated beliefs that were counterproductive to this goal. This would entail encouraging a support network and coping skills, including breathing techniques to help her maintain calm in the face of the racist system.* (Participant #142)

In both examples, participants propose actions that involve teaching various actors in the vignette some sort of skills. In the first example, this involves education around implicit bias; while in the second example, this involves education regarding coping strategies. Each of these responses exemplify ideological frames that characterize white racial projects. *Paternalism* manifests as both students propose actions that require compliance by Ms. L or other individual actors within the vignette. Further, fashioning individual interventions, like education, to address systemic issues like those reflected in this vignette highlight *neoliberal* notions that individualize racial issues, while minimizing systemic causes. Lastly, both of these responses reflect ideals of *white saviorism*. In each response, students assume that they have knowledge that Ms. L does not already have or have access to. Further, each student implies that by providing this knowledge to Ms. L, they can somehow affect Ms. L's status as an oppressed individual.

Compliance Officer

Several students situated their role in Ms. L's case as a *Compliance Officer* whose responses suggested a more passive and non-critical acceptance of Ms. L's circumstances and factors contributing to the outcomes. Some of the responses in this category focused on actions they would take to help or support Ms. L in maintaining compliance with CPS' demands, frequently the family services plan. Although these students also made critiques

of the proposed family services plan, they ultimately focused on ensuring Ms. L remained compliant. One student described:

> *As an alternative, I would recommend giving her one task to complete at a time so that she has a more feasible schedule. This would still require her to complete all classes and requirements set forth by the state, but also gives her time to work and care for her children.* (Participant #19)

In this example, the participant acknowledges that that family services plan is unrealistic considering Ms. L's role as a mother and full-time employee. Although they propose limiting the plan requirements to ensure the demands are "more feasible" for Ms. L's schedule, their ultimate goal is ensuring she can continue to maintain compliance with the family services plan. This action theme most strongly reflects ideological frames like *paternalism*. Through positioning themselves as *Compliance Officers* students are suggesting actions that continue to restrict Ms. L's personal agency and maintain authoritative control on behalf of a state-sanctioned agency.

Case Manager. In another example emphasizing compliance, the student mainly focused on technical or procedural aspects of the case:

> *As a CPS who works in the Family Services Unit, many of these services could have been combined (individual therapy with an anger management component, one parenting course instead of two) and the services plan should have been discussed with her to make it manageable for her with her work schedule to ensure family reunification or to prevent the removal of her children.* (Participant #213)

This participant proposed the need to restructure Ms. L's family service plan through combining therapeutic services and collaborative consultation with Ms. L. They suggest several procedural steps that could have been taken to ensure Ms. L has better success in meeting the demands of the family services plan.

Counselor. In some instances, students emphasized their primary responsibility to serve as emotional support to various actors in the vignette. These students focused on the emotional states of actors like Ms. L, "the family", or her children. These students prioritized therapeutic services and ensuring emotional well-being. One student noted:

> *As a social worker, I would want to attend to Ms L's mental health including how she may perceive her own agency or lack thereof in the situation. It seems important that Ms. L feel empowered to take actions to get her family back on its feet- regain full custody of her children and her own employment. This might start with making sure she has an understanding of how/why this situation snowballed and then working on tools for her- both psychological and practical- to start rebuilding her life.* (Participant #156)

In this example, the participant suggests they would first focus on Ms. L's mental health. They propose that their ongoing goal would be to provide both "psychological and practical" tools to help Ms. L get her life back on track.

Service Provider. Similarly, some students expressed their primary role would be to connect the client to appropriate services. One student described:

As a social worker, I would work with Ms. L to secure new employment, inspect her housing, and support her in receiving back her children from CPS. I would offer counseling for the emotional and mental stress accompanying Ms. L, working together to execute a plan to effectively complete all required service demands. (Participant #296)

In this example, the participant suggests that their "primary role" is to connect Ms. L to multiple services including employment, housing, and counselor. In each of these examples, the student responses emphasize following the rules and positioning Ms. L as the critical point of intervention rather than proposing system-level changes. Responses in this category reflect a combination of *paternalism*, *white saviorism* and *neo-liberalism* given the non-critical emphasis on personality responsibility and fixing Ms. L while seemingly ignoring structural culpability in any form.

Multi-Pronged Response

Several students provided a multi-pronged action response that combined characteristics of the previously identified categories. One student commented:

I would try to get Ms. L back on track to be able to work again. I would lesson if not completely remove the classes and programs she has been assigned to. The only one that seems applicable is a drug treatment program. I would start the efforts to put her children back in her care and figure out if I could provide her with any compensations for the difficult situations herself and her children have been put through. I would try to provide them with therapeutic assistance and spend time asking her (and her children) what she believed she and her children needed. (Participant #178)

The participant suggested actions consistent with the *Advocate, Service Provider, and Compliance Officer* categories. The student proposed working to limit Ms. L's family service plan to include only substance abuse treatment services, suggesting some disagreement or criticism with the original response. They also propose that they would like to help Ms. L seek compensation during this difficult time as well as therapeutic services. Similar to the previous themes discussed, this action theme reflected some criticism of the system without explicitly identifying any racial inequities. These responses also included advocacy for Ms. L within the existing system and largely focused on adhering to the authority and protocols subscribed by CPS.

Unsure or Does Not Know

Lastly, a small group of students expressed that they did not know, or were unsure of, what to do to assist Ms. L. One student expressed:

This case seems to be racially biased. Ms. L seems to be forced into worsening conditions by unrealistic expectations the court system has forced onto her. I am unsure where to start with assisting her. (Participant #111)

In this example the student described the outcome of the case as racially biased and honestly communicated their hesitancy to intervene. Interpreting this hesitancy is tricky

given the typical brevity and lack of specificity of responses in this category. The hesitation to specify action could be interpreted as an unwillingness to take a clear stance, perhaps especially in response to a case involving racism. Alternatively, these responses may reflect a thoughtful and practical position given that a) the student respondents in this category may not yet have any academic or professional training in social work or b) there are details missing from the case that needed to determine an effective course of action. Unlike the *Investigator* category, however, responses in this category do not offer reflections on information needed to make an informed decision.

Discussion

The present study used racial projects (Omi & Winant, 2014) as a conceptual and analytical frame to examine language and meaning-making that white social work students employ at the beginning of their graduate training. We contend that social workers' racialized positionalities, ideologies, and histories vary widely and should be considered when developing social work curricula aiming to support racial project development. We focus on white social work students following the premise that they may practice and conceptualize social work, race, and racism differently than people who experience the brunt of that social domination. These differences in social position and the types of racial projects that are employed should inform the specific educational and training tasks that need to be engaged (Dyer, 1997; Frey et al., 2021; Morrison, 1992; Roediger, 1998). The phrase *white racial projects* is used to emphasize ways in which whiteness functions independently as a racial project and the use of related racial frames in the study sample.

Our analysis revealed that in response to a vignette focused on a Black mother's experience with CPS, white students in this sample consistently employed white racial projects or racial frames such as *neoliberalism* and *colorblindness* in their analysis. Most students in the sample were explicit in identifying the possibility of race being a factor in how the vignette events unfold. Fewer students, however, directly identify racism as a key factor or meaningfully engaged in an analysis of structural racism. No one in the sample identified their own positionality as white social workers as a factor in how they interpreted and responded to the vignette scenario.

White Racial Projects. A common feature of white racial projects is an emphasis on individual traits and actions as key factors in shaping life outcomes. The reliance of individual frames emerged in several ways, including descriptions of race as an individual trait rather than as a structurally grounded social position, attributing outcomes to race as an individual trait and notions that Ms. L could have received different treatment if she had acted or performed differently. *Saviorism* and *paternalism*, which fundamentally rely on white supremacy or whiteness as the metric for "good" or the ideal source of being rescued, were also evident in many of the responses. In making recommendations (e.g., "breathing techniques") for how Ms. L should cope with the systemic racism being faced, students are implying that they understand something about Ms. L's position and experience and are thus in a position to suggest ways to effectively cope. It is not evident, however, that most students in this sample understand how structural racism and whiteness are functioning in relation to Ms. L's experience or their own whiteness and white positionality—thus, they

are certainly not in a position to offer insight, advocacy or support for how Ms. L should or should not respond. Additionally, by emphasizing an individual frame in their analysis, many students chose to center the point of accountability on Ms. L as opposed to the systems she encountered. Even when identifying structural racism, Ms. L commonly remained the focus of intervention.

Naming Versus Knowing. It is noteworthy that there were also several students who used the language of frames) that reflect aspects of racial conscious projects. These students used language and terminology that may signal a level of competency in response to the vignette that is not necessarily grounded in a substantive understanding. It appeared that students were using language, phrases and constructs that they did not necessarily know how to apply to an analysis of the vignette. Many of these statements read as performances of "good" responses rather than exhibiting a substantive understanding of the issues being raised. This is evident, for instance, in naming structural racism and then focusing on individual level interventions and in general avoidance of addressing whiteness as both a social and personally relevant construct. Identifying the subtle indicators that students have learned to use particular codes to signal socio-political preferences or being "woke" as opposed to possessing a meaningful understanding of how systems of racial oppression function, is critical to effective critical race pedagogy in social work.

Good White People. Perhaps one of the more striking findings in our analysis is the complete absence of white positionality being identified or interrogated. The practice of white liberalism is often guilty of observing the atrocities of racial oppression while failing to accept culpability, specifically the role of whiteness and white people in designing, upholding and benefiting from the very systems of oppression being identified as harmful. The option for whiteness to remain invisible or unclaimed is a mechanism of privilege (Dyer, 1997) and a signal of flawed understandings of systems of racial oppression. Instead of holding whiteness accountable, white liberals are often deeply invested in seeing themselves as "good white people" who exist as observers outside of and separate from racist systems while actively resisting the reality that they are completely embedded within and uphold these systems (e.g., Frey et al., 2021).

Implications for Social Work Research, Pedagogy, and Practice

Our research suggests several potential directions for the development of pedagogical interventions that propel students from reflecting the white racial project to embodying racial projects more closely aligned with racially-conscious and anti-racist frames. Social work programs may benefit from providing students with historical knowledge about race and racism and its impact on current socio-political issues. In addition to developing content knowledge, it is important to employ a pedagogical approach that centers whiteness, anti-racism and structural analysis as core competencies. The ability to critically analyze structural dimensions of racial inequality will support transferable skills and knowledge. For white social work students specifically, there is a need for them to establish the ability to interrogate whiteness in terms of their own positionality (within social work, structures, and intuitions) as well as challenge their use of whiteness as an analytical frame (white racial projects). The Space for Uprooting Whiteness (Frey et al., 2021), for instance,

employs critical intra-group dialogue for white social workers to engage whiteness, their relationships to whiteness and to others who are positioned as white.

There are also numerous methodological considerations that would promote empirical research aiming to establish a deeper understanding of the ways racial projects are developed and employed. In particular, methods that allow for differentiation between a student's ability to "know the right answer" versus their ability to engage in a deeper level of analysis would be valuable. This is exemplified in the *One-Off Comment* sub-theme in which students are able to mention race or racism but do not elaborate on its significance. This pattern may indicate manifestations of neoliberalism which aim to individualize understandings of race and racism while ignoring the need for structural level analysis (Giroux, 2003; Martin, 2013). Further, future research efforts should consider the impact of the rapidly shifting sociopolitical context and public discourse surrounding race and racism (Blitz, 2008). Particularly within the United States, national attention has turned to focus on issues such as police brutality within Black communities, historic disparities in marijuana legislation and policing, and even, the utility of teaching Critical Race Theory in elementary school classrooms. Future research efforts should account for how shifts in sociopolitical context will likely influence incoming social work students' understandings of race and racism before they enter their graduate program.

In addition to these considerations, future research should also explore the longitudinal impact of graduate school education on students' racial projects. Specifically, future analyses might explore the impact of graduate-level coursework, such as a first-year, social work course covering issues related to power, racism, oppression, and privilege. Technological innovations like virtual reality, designed to immerse individuals in the experiences of others, may also be used to support the development of empathy, structural competency and more complex social analysis for students' responses over time (Cogburn et al., 2018; Roswell et al., 2020). Lastly, manifestations of the white racial project do not just exist within White-identifying students but permeate every level of society including those who occupy minoritized social positions (Cogburn, 2019; Feagin, 2020; Fields & Fields, 2014; Mills, 1997/2014). Considering that students of dominant and marginalized populations will likely begin their graduate social programs carrying differential racial ideologies and understanding of racial positionality, a comparable analysis with minoritized students will be necessary to inform educational tasks that may be specific to these groups. Research efforts like those proposed have the potential to directly inform how we educate social work students around racial and social oppression. This analysis may inform pedagogical innovations aimed at designing social work curriculum and training, as it relates to the ability to engage in anti-racist and anti-oppressive social work practice.

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