

Racism: The Challenge for Social Workers

Contributed by Barbara Trainin Blank

Despite the decades that have passed since the beginning of the civil rights movement, racism is still a major issue in America. We still see organized hate groups, news stories of racial slurs and attacks, and examples that we observe in our everyday lives. So, what should social workers and the profession as a whole do about it?

First, a definition is in order. According to the National Association of Social Workers Web site, racism is "the ideology or practice through demonstrated power or perceived superiority of one group over others by reasons of race, color, ethnicity, or cultural heritage...." The definition further goes on to note that "racism is manifested at the individual, group, and institutional level." The social workers and social work educators we interviewed indicated that while there has been some progress, the problem still exists—albeit in changed ways. They feel that reduced vigilance and a sense of satisfaction are premature.

Racism in 2006

"Two-thousand-and-six is not 1952," states Michael Melendez, associate professor and former director of the Urban Leadership Program at Simmons College Graduate School of Social Work in Boston. "It would be disingenuous to say we haven't seen considerable gains. I remember the level of violence, of lynching and dogs being set on people. But some entrenched aspects of racism have not changed, such as criminal sentencing. Blacks consistently get higher and more severe penalties than whites. And there are areas of health: doctors are less likely to give pain medication to blacks, and blacks get more invasive procedures around cardiovascular conditions. Racism is alive and well in the United States, despite what many neoconservative thinkers would have us believe. Its form and expression have simply become more subtle."

"We all know persons of color are disproportionately represented in prison populations and in welfare systems," says Stephanie Jo Light, interim director of NASW's Pennsylvania chapter. "Our systems need a lot of work. We haven't made enough progress since the start of the civil rights movement. We have to do more than pay lip service to cultural competency."

Denial still remains one of the challenges, according to Melendez, such as the "neoconservative" stance of speaking not in terms of "structural inequalities" but as "individual acts of meanness." "But we're extraordinarily segregated when it comes to such areas as health and housing," he says. "I believe the school voucher program is thinly veiled racism, designed to help the white middle class."

Sandra Starks, professor of social work at Western Kentucky University, agrees that a lot has changed, in literature, research, and training in the field. But, she emphasizes, racism is still prominent "and isn't going away any time soon." One of the challenges, Starks continues, is a "conservative movement" among some students and faculty, growing out of the "general national political climate that is attempting to devalue the assertion that racism exists."

This movement discounts studies about ongoing racism in America and the belief that classes and programs to combat racism are still needed. On the contrary, she says, they are more necessary than ever. "The world is becoming smaller and more international," Starks asserts. "Something doesn't have to be right for you, but we have to understand and value differences."

Social Workers Strive to Address Racism

Certainly, the subject of race and racism figures prominently in NASW's priorities. The organization's Code of Ethics includes the principle that social workers should challenge social injustice—focusing primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other manifestations—and that their activities should promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity. Further, the Code states, social workers should strive to "ensure access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in decision-making for all people."

Among the Social Work Imperatives passed by the NASW 2005 Social Work Congress are a few that directly relate to this issue: address the impact of racism, other forms of oppression, social injustice, and other human rights violations through social work education and practice

continuously acknowledge, recognize, confront, and address pervasive racism within social work practice at the individual, agency, and institutional level, and promote culturally competent social work interventions and research methodologies in the areas of social justice, well-being, and cost-benefit outcomes.

A policy statement approved by the NASW Delegate Assembly in 2005, superseding earlier pronouncements, emphasized that the United States is far from free of prejudice and discrimination: "Racism is pervasive in U.S. society and remains a silent code that systematically closes the doors of opportunity to many individuals. Contextually, racism is the belief or practice through demonstrated power of perceived superiority of one group over others by reason of race, color, ethnicity, or cultural heritage. This perceived power or right is part of the cultural inheritance of the United States...."

NASW also subscribes to Standards of Cultural Competence (2002), the "process by which individuals and systems respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions, and other diversity factors in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the worth of individuals, families, and communities and protects and preserves the dignity of each." Cultural competence also means the ability to recognize the convergence and disparity between the values of the dominant society and those of historically oppressed, underrepresented, and underserved populations.

In response to lack of equal access and opportunity in education, employment, housing, health and mental health care and services, social services and criminal justice, among other areas, NASW supports "an inclusive, multicultural society in which racial, ethnic, class, sexual orientation, age, physical and mental ability, religion and spirituality, gender and other cultural and social identities are valued and respected" and in which "racism will not be tolerated at any level."

"There was a debate concerning whether the social work profession was responsible to issues around people of color," says Rebecca Myers, special assistant to the executive director of the national office of NASW in Washington, D.C. "A benchmark study of social work [see http://workforce.socialworkers.org/studies/nasw_06_execsummary.pdf] showed that the profession is not as diverse as the client base. We have to recruit a more diverse population. Hurricanes Katrina and Rita really put the issue in your face. A lot of things about poverty and race converged."

Despite the increase in population of so-called "minority groups," such as Asian Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, and African Americans, whiteness still "conveys an ideology of privilege and power," Myers says.

In challenging racism, NASW calls for "education programs, deconstruction of social workers' own biases and stereotypes," a number of specific measures in employment and housing, and political activity, among others. How are the profession-specific goals to be achieved?

Undoing Racism

One methodology that has grown in strength nationally and even internationally is the Undoing Racism workshop, which provides anti-racism training for social work practitioners and educators. Sponsored by NASW-NY and other chapters of the organization, the workshops offer participants the opportunity to engage in a comprehensive exploration of how racism shapes American institutions—an awareness they can then take back to their colleagues, institutions, and wider communities to continue the conversation and work toward institutional change.

The two-and-a-half-day workshops, which focus on understanding the sources of racism and how it can be undone, are offered by the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, a national, multiracial, antiracist network based in New Orleans now in its 25th year. The workshops emphasize history, developing leadership, maintaining accountability to people of color, creating networks, undoing internalized oppression, and understanding the role of organizations in perpetuating racism. So far, the Institute has provided training, consultation, and leadership development to more than 110,000 people in organizations internationally.

Sandy Bernabei, a social worker in practice for almost 25 years in New York, is deeply committed to combatting racism in the field. About 10 years ago, she says, a friend asked her to attend an Undoing Racism workshop, with the promise of making her a "more effective" social worker. That experience changed Bernabei permanently.

"All of a sudden, there was clarity," she says. "I started to see an 'Apartheid America.'"

The workshop underscored that we're in a race-constructed society, and that everything is based on that--that if we don't look through the lens of racism, we end up perpetuating the disparities. These workshops give us a common language and understanding. It's not about the individual but the institution. To Bernabei, social workers are supposed to be agents for social change. "Once you have an analysis, white privilege is seen in a much larger context," she says. "It's about a power differential."

The Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services is one of the organizations that has sent personnel to take part in the workshops. Its executive vice president and chief executive officer, Alan B. Siskind, who chairs the Human Services Council in New York City, is quoted on the NASW-NY Web site as saying: "The Undoing Racism Workshop put many years of thinking about racism in a perspective that clarified much of what I have seen, heard, and felt over many years. The workshop was transformational and moving."

Students from Hunter College, Columbia University, and Fordham University Schools of Social Work are now participating in these workshops on a regular basis in an attempt by these schools and NASW-NYC to reach new social workers, according to Bernabei. "A movement has started," she says. "People from different areas come together for follow-up meetings and discussion about the issues covered in the workshops. For the past four years, I've been attending such a group."

Educating for Cultural Competence

Educating social work students before they enter the field is achieved in various ways. "Social workers are really uncomfortable talking about this," says Starks. They'll say: "Isn't it all over? By bringing it up, aren't you making a problem?" They're just as uncomfortable as 10 years ago. But part of the mission of social work is social justice. Social workers should have clarity. We're starting a social work movement to transform the way our students are being educated. This will be part of their core training.

That is the case at the MSW program at WKU, which now has diverse faculty and stresses NASW's Standards and Code of Ethics as part of the curriculum. One of the core courses in the program is cultural competency, which emphasizes what's happening on a macro level nationally and internationally. The new program was constructed to be "culturally sensitive and responsive" according to NASW standards, says Starks. "It's very critical that all students are given a Code of Ethics and NASW Standards and that these are built into the curriculum. One of the core courses of the MSW program is cultural competency. We try to monitor tough issues, in part through role-playing and experiential learning."

Social work schools are increasingly incorporating courses on racism into the curriculum or revising existing ones. The University of Washington offers the course "Poverty and Inequality: An Analysis of Poverty and Inequality in the United States," including socioeconomic dimensions of stratification, including race, ethnicity, class, gender, immigration status, disability, age, sexual orientation, and family structure. Another course is "Social Work for Social Justice: Developing a Personal-Professional Stance." It uses critically self-reflective, experiential, and dialogue learning processes to engage students to explore personal meaning systems and narratives in the context of professional values of social justice, multiculturalism, empowerment, and globalization.

What about when racism is coming from the clients, rather than from the social worker or the society at large toward the client?

One of the components of the WKU MSW program on the micro level is to "understand boundaries," says Starks. "If clients are racist, you have to remember that that's not why the client is there. It's really tough for a new social worker to maintain boundaries, and the client doesn't need to address antiracism." In order to inculcate that lesson, Starks uses role playing and encourages the practice of consultation and supervision, especially for new social workers, who "need someone to process it with, to learn how to self-monitor," she says. "Often, people of color don't have that power of racism, though they can be bitter. You have to validate their experiences as part of a system that creates that and help them move to healing on a micro level."

In facing a racist client, says Melendez, the therapist has to "have a tough skin."

"Don't allow yourself to be abused," he says, "but the question is, how do you intervene on a case-by-case basis? You can take the self-righteous stand of, 'Don't use the N-word,' but it's better to ask questions, such as 'how did you come to know and use that word?' In a situation that's mandated, you can say that either the client has to work with you or tell the

judge he or she isn't going to...."

The need to be sensitive to the language one uses is also an important micro consideration. "Oppressed language is so socially engrained in American culture," says Starks. "We grow up with things we don't question. As just two examples, we speak of 'Indian giver' and 'jewing people down.'"

Social workers are obligated to understand clients. The curriculum at Simmons College's Urban Leadership Program emphasizes taking into account what Melendez calls "social location."

"Social work is an applied discipline," he says. "I don't understand how anyone practicing social work wouldn't take social location, including race, into account."

Nor does Melendez understand a persistence in using "universal principles" without taking cultural and other differences into account. "We have always had the notion of universal psychological principles," he says, "but even these theories were developed from people who are race-, gender-, and class-specific. Even if there are universal principles, they're interpreted and mediated by people's experience. We are a race-conscious society. We've spent a lot of time denying it despite our history—genocide against the Native American, slavery, the tremendous reaction to Affirmative Action, and xenophobia in the current immigration debate. We're polarized into black and white."

Black Men at Penn

Another example of a program to combat racism within academia and beyond is the Black Men at Penn School of Social Work, Inc., composed of African Americans who have had a relationship with the school from the 1950s to the present. The group's purpose is to strengthen the university's awareness and sensitivities to the continuing issues and challenges that face black men in America—racism as members of a race and class within a race.

Penn offers a course in "American Racism and Social Work Practice," which explores the complexity of racism in America, says Chad Dion Lassiter II, a social worker, behavioral interventionist, and researcher at the Division of Endocrinology/Diabetes of the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and one of the founders of Black Men at Penn. The course addresses the construction of racial and ethnic categories, the impact of racism and the discrimination of individuals and social institutions, and the influence of oppressive policies and practices on social welfare systems and clients.

Penn was the first school of social work in the country to make such a course mandatory, back in 1961, says Lassiter, who graduated in 2001 and this year is teaching it for the first time. In 2002, some then-current students began an effort to reengage alumni to strengthen the course. Lassiter got together with other graduates to serve as a support group that would recruit males into the social work profession and to serve as a conduit for "race talks." Black Men at Penn also launched a book scholarship award for African American students who help combat racism for all races and ethnicities.

"Social workers a lot of times are just social workers, and don't like to engage in social change stuff, be they black or white," says Lassiter. "But it's a state of emergency when you have 234 deaths in Philadelphia, mostly by handguns and mostly of young African American males. They're living in impoverished conditions, suffering from abandonment, structural inequalities. All social workers should have a mindset of eradicating racism."

Lassiter illustrates the intersection of structural inequality and personal responsibility in his professional career. "We do want you to eat healthy," he says of his research of diabetes. "We have to accept responsibility for our actions. But where are there healthy eating places in black neighborhoods? That's the structural stuff."

Beyond the Classroom—The Ongoing Challenge

When social workers are already in the field, there are conferences and other educational programs aside from the Undoing Racism workshops they can take advantage of to try to understand racism and their own responses better. Next

spring, NASW-PA will be sponsoring such a conference entirely devoted to undoing racism. The keynote speaker will be Monica Walker, a trainer for the People's Institute and visiting professor at Guilford University in Greensboro, N.C.

The emphasis for social work education and the profession has to be not an anthropological one explaining differences, but an "openness to difference," Melendez of Simmons adds. "We have to be able to bear witness to someone else's pain without being defensive, like when a client told me the history of violence against her by men, and I'm a man." "I'm an optimist by nature," says Lassiter of Black Men at Penn. "But I think we can never eradicate racism. We can educate ourselves about the inequities. Social workers can play a primary role and look at the structural inequalities. The purpose of social work is to enhance social functioning, remediate social ills, and alleviate oppression. I don't think you can change the world, but you can change one person at a time."

Moreover, says Lassiter, social workers have an obligation because their profession is "genuinely a calling. Special persons do this."

The battle against racism has to go beyond the classroom, these experts agreed, whether through workshops, discussion groups, or political action. "This is a profession that's 80 percent white treating 80 percent people of color or in poverty, mostly black," says Starks. "We have to do political things to change racism. Social workers need a commitment and a passion for social justice and equality for all people."

Anti-Racism Web Sites

Affirmative Action and Diversity Project
<http://aad.english.ucsb.edu/>

American Civil Liberties Union
<http://www.aclu-wi.org/index.shtml>

The Anti-Defamation League
<http://www.adl.org>

Black Men at Penn
<http://www.blackmenatpenn.org>

Center for Healing of Racism
<http://www.centerhealingracism.org/>

Challenging White Supremacy Workshop
<http://www.cswworkshop.org/>

Code Pink
<http://www.codepink4peace.org/>

Communities United
<http://www.madison.com/communities/cu/index.php>

Community Alliance for Diversity
<http://www.alliancefordiversity.org>

Crosspoint Anti Racism U.S.A.
<http://www.magenta.nl/crosspoint/us.html>

Democracy Now!
<http://www.democracynow.org/>

End Racism.org
<http://www.endracism.org/exhibits.asp>

Equal Opportunities Office
<http://www.cityofmadison.com/eoc/>

The Foundation for Ethnic Understanding

<http://www.ffeu.org>

Hate on Display

http://www.adl.org/hate_symbols/default_graphics.asp

Institute on Race and Ethnicity

<http://www.uwm.edu/Dept/IRE/>

Institute on Race and Justice

<http://www.irj.neu.edu/>

National Association of Social Workers

Code of Ethics: <http://www.socialworkers.org/pubs/code/code.asp>

Social Work Imperatives: <http://www.socialworkers.org/congress/imperatives0605.pdf>

Standards on Cultural Competence:

<http://www.socialworkers.org/practice/standards/NASWCulturalStandards.pdf>

National Conference on Race and Ethnicity

<http://www.ncore.ou.edu/about.html>

The People's Institute

<http://www.thepeoplesinstitute.org/>

Positive-Youth Foundation

<http://www.antiracistaction.net/>

Publications from ARC (Applied Research Center)

<http://www.arc.org/Pages/ArcPub.html>

Racial Profiling Data Collection

<http://www.racialprofilinganalysis.neu.edu/>

Stereotypes and Prejudices

<http://www.remember.org/guide/History.root.stereotypes.html>

Southern Poverty Law Center

<http://www.splcenter.org>

<http://www.tolerance.org/>

Undoing Racism

<http://www.antiracistalliance.com>

<http://www.socialworkgatherings.com>

White Privilege.com

<http://www.whiteprivilege.com/>

Woman of Color Policy Network

<http://www.wagner.nyu.edu/wocpn/>

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