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The Revival of Anti-Racism: Considerations for Social Work Education

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Abstract

The declining prominence of anti-racist practice in social work education is a cause for concern in a profession premised upon pursuing social justice and serving humanity. This need calls for a revival of anti-racism education within the curriculum of social work education. This paper begins with an exploration of anti-racism discourse and guiding theory and examines the shift from anti-racism to anti-oppressive practice (AOP) in social work education and associated critiques and implications. Challenges to pursuing anti-racism education are identified as it pertains to implementing anti-racism education standards, and the teaching and learning of anti-racism from the perspectives of both educators and students. Finally, recommendations for policy revision and opportunities to engage faculty and students in anti-racism practice in social work education programs are proposed. Though predominately focused on the Canadian context, this exploration holds relevant and critical implications for the wider global context.

Keywords: anti-racism, critical race theory, social work education, anti-oppressive practice

Introduction

Recent events across Canadian university campuses have demonstrated that overt racism is pervasive in our higher education institutions (Henry et al., 2017). The rise of anti-immigrant, Islamophobic and racist narratives pose critical challenges for social work educators and students committed to anti-racism and social justice. Anti-racism educators, scholars, and students alike confirm the existence of racism in its explicit and subtle forms that contribute to and perpetuate institutional and structural racism (McMahon, 2007; Yee & Wagner, 2013). In recent decades, the presence of anti-racist practice in social work education has lost its prominence, a cause for concern in a profession whose practice is premised upon the values of pursuing social justice and serving humanity. In an increasingly globalized society where the reach and scope of social work practice continues to extend and evolve, there is a need for social work education to prepare future practitioners to effectively deal with structural issues of racism in a changing

society. This need calls for a revival of anti-racism education within the curriculum of social work education.

This article begins with an exploration of anti-racism discourse and guiding theory, examining the shift from anti-racism to anti-oppressive practice (AOP) in social work education and the associated critiques and implications. The challenges of anti-racism education are identified, specifically as it pertains to implementing anti-racism education standards and the teaching and learning of anti-racism from the perspectives of both educators and students. Finally, recommendations for policy revision and opportunities to engage faculty and students in anti-racism practice in social work education programs are proposed.

Anti-Racism: Definitions and Theory

Within the literature, definitions of anti-racism demonstrate a common aim to expose and confront the myriad of ways that racism may be embodied or embedded within relations, institutions, systems, and structures (Butler, Elliott, & Stopard, 2002; Corneau & Stergiopoulos, 2012). Anti-racism can take the form of movements, practices, knowledge, and thoughts that attend to privilege and relations of power (Corneau & Stergiopoulos, 2012). Integral to several definitions of anti-racism is the notion that awareness of anti-racism without action is insufficient to be considered anti-racist, as an active commitment to interrupting systems of racism is required (Butler et al., 2002; Corneau & Stergiopoulos, 2012; Deepak & Biggs, 2011). Butler et al. (2003) and Wainwright (2009) ascribe to a more fluid and evolving understanding of anti-racism, suggesting that the difficulty in defining anti-racism stems from the complex and changing conceptualization of race across time, space, and socio-political conditions. Thus, definitions and approaches to anti-racism should attend to this complexity intentionally and seek to engage with local knowledge, discourses, and experience (Nelson & Dunn, 2017).

Anti-racism has its theoretical foundations in neo-Marxist and critical theories, specifically critical race theory (CRT), a radical approach by way of theory and its history (Gillborn, 2006; Pon, 2007). The focus of CRT begins with race and racism, and their operation and implications in society. Both within Britain and Canada, anti-racism has its roots in Black activism against the racist nature of the state and liberal multiculturalism (Gillborn, 2006; Pon, 2007). As anti-racism has evolved over time, it has come to be understood by some as an eclectic theory that can and has incorporated feminism, structural, post-colonial, post-racial, and post-structural understandings (Pon, 2007).

Anti-Racism Education

In line with the above definitions, anti-racism education has been described as a continually evolving, action-oriented strategy that focuses on “race and the intersections of social difference (class, gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity) to question power relations in school and society” (Naseem, 2011, p. 11). Anti-racism education is explicit in identifying and addressing race as a matter of power and equity, acknowledging the importance of lived experience, and politicizing education to uncover and dismantle the structural roots of inequality (Corneau & Stergiopoulos, 2012; Naseem, 2011).

There is agreement among authors that anti-racism education should be grounded in theoretical frameworks of transformational learning and adult education theory (Basham,

Donner, & Everett, 2001; Deepak & Biggs, 2011; Lavoie, 2001). The concepts of praxis and consciousness-raising, in addition to life experience, have been cited as important to supporting learning environments that promote reflection, action, and dialogue between learners to humanize, liberate, and collectively empower (Basham et al., 2001; Lavoie, 2001). Many have cited Dei's (1995) integrative anti-racism theory as an approach to education that explores the dynamics and intersections of social difference and oppression within the daily lived experience of peoples within anti-racism discourse (Dei, 1995; Pon, 2007; Samuel, 2005). Samuel (2005) clearly outlines the elements of this framework to include: articulating social difference through race gender and class, experiential knowledge, differential power and privilege, questioning white privilege, critiquing Eurocentric knowledge, shifting identities of minority group(s), and inclusivity and holism. Dei (1995) asserts this approach has implications for transformative learning because an understanding of how social differences and identities are implicated in knowledge construction is critical to anti-racism and social change.

It is important to note that much of the anti-racism discourse is closely tied to Black perspectives as one would expect, suggesting further research is necessary to understand how Indigenous peoples and other marginalized groups see themselves and their experiences fitting within the discourse. Such consideration may prompt meaningful dialogue to foster alliances within and across groups as opposed to fragmentation.

The Shift to AOP: Critiques and Implications

The shift from anti-racism to AOP within social work can be gleaned from both scholarly critique and the general decline in the use of anti-racism terminology within the literature. Collins, Gutridge, James, Lynn, and Williams (2000) and Heron (2004) have described this trend as induced by the backlash anti-racism as a concept experienced in the mid to late 1990s. Justification for this shift was based upon critiques of anti-racism as ambiguous, lacking a conceptual foundation, challenging to implement and teach, and narrowly focused on racial oppression (Basham et al., 2001; Butler et al., 2003; Schick & St Denis, 2003). Thus, the shift to anti-racism to fit under the umbrella of AOP was pursued as a means of avoiding the creation of a hierarchy of oppressions (McLaughlin, 2005). Keating (2010) counters this by pointing out that the idea of race as a privileged oppression is debateable, suggesting that the choice of practitioners and educators to engage with race as a key oppression is more indicative of the reactionary nature of social work. With the increase in overt expressions of racism it may be important to consider whether anti-racism might be better received within a broader framework or whether this is a conflicting notion given that a reformist approach is at odds with the inherent radical stance of anti-racism.

The shift has had implications for the language used to attend to race/racism/anti-racism, such that education policy and social work curriculum have come to embed these concepts within the language of diversity, multiculturalism, cross-cultural, sensitivity, and discrimination (Chinnery, 2008; Heron, 2004; Schick & St Denis, 2005; Yee & Wagner, 2013). Some conceive this shift promotes empty rhetoric for the sake of political correctness (Butler et al., 2003; McLaughlin, 2005). Critics contend that it has become unpopular to refer outright to anti-racist practice in education in absence of a connection to AOP, which may be insufficient in attending to the complexities of race due to its broadness (Heron, 2004; Schick & St Denis, 2005; Yee & Wagner, 2013). However, others consider that unsettling anti-racism from formal education may

be a positive shift and an opportunity to reunite anti-racism with its radical roots (Gillborn, 2006; Friedel, 2010). Tensions around the most effective way to approach and respond to racism within social work education are apparent. These tensions will continue to surface moving into the discussion of education policy, and in teaching and learning anti-racism.

Challenges in Anti-Racism Education Policy

Prior to the shift to AOP, social work in the late 1980s received criticism for inadequately preparing students to attend to multicultural and multiracial issues (Lavoie, 2001). In response, the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work (CASSW) formed a task force to support schools in the development of anti-racist training initiatives (Lavoie, 2001). Similar efforts were undertaken in Britain to develop minimum standards for anti-racism practice within the Diploma of Social Work (DipSW) program (Butler et al., 2003). Since the shift to AOP, the lack of explicit visibility of anti-racism within social work education and institutional policy has been noted, as has the increased use diversity and equity terminology (Jeffery, 2005). This is apparent should one attempt to look for any reference to anti-racism within the Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE) Standards for Accreditation (CASWE, 2014). Removing anti-racism from the vernacular has implications for our understanding of racism as a construct, causing one to question if racism can be well understood in the absence of its opposite. Many suggest the aim of using diversity management and competency language may be a means to construct a positive institutional image, and reflects hesitation to acknowledge the existence of structural racism within Canada, which would damage Canada's image as a fair nation that celebrates diversity (McMahon, 2007; Yee & Wagner, 2013).

Friedel (2010) asserts there is sufficient evidence of a learning gap in Canada and equally sufficient rationale for anti-racism education to fill it. Some institutions have sought to fill gaps by offering optional courses focused on Indigenous issues or immigrant and refugee populations, however this is somewhat illusory as it continues to position the experiences of racialized groups as low priority and outside of the mandatory curriculum. Though inclusion of anti-racism in education and institutional policy may help to facilitate implementation in curriculum, meaningful and intentional implementation requires an examination of institutional culture, curriculum development, feasibility, as well as the ability and desire of administration, educators, and students to engage with anti-racism education and practice.

Challenges in Anti-Racism Education in Practice

Educators

While offering students the opportunity to expand and hone their skills to challenge racism in their future practice is essential, the challenges for educators to introduce anti-racism practice within the classroom are plenty and laborious. The challenges and tensions experienced by educators have been well described in both social work education and culturally responsive teacher education. Anti-racism practice in education requires educators to achieve a balance between reflection and action, challenging and supporting students, and managing tensions that emerge between students, while also facilitating growth (Basham et al., 2001; Chand, Clare, & Dolton, 2002; Collins et al., 2000). Education and teaching have long focused on outcomes over practice, whereas anti-racism education requires that process be encouraged, which may in itself

be a challenge for educators whose students feel security in skill competency and mastery (Jeffery, 2005). Racialized and non-racialized faculty members alike may experience resistance within the classroom as students may perceive faculty as ill-equipped to facilitate anti-racism teachings, though racialized and Indigenous teachers may be more likely to have their identity and credibility questioned, or be treated as an informant able to speak to the experiences of an entire race/ethnic group (Jeffery, 2005; Schick & St Denis, 2003; Yee & Wagner, 2013). To engage in anti-racism practice requires faculty and students to implicate themselves and unsettle their own privileges, which may prove difficult.

While instructors who have minimal experience with the implementation of anti-racism practice may feel ill prepared to teach anti-racism conceptually and practically, challenges also exist for those who identify themselves as anti-racism educators (Collins et al., 2000). Pon (2007) examines the ethical responsibility instructors feel to prepare students to understand and actively confront racism, noting that student resistance to this learning poses a real challenge that can rattle even experienced anti-racism educators. There is pressure for educators to respond to horrifying situations and comments while being careful not to label white students as perpetrators or innocent bystanders, or create classroom dichotomies between those who understand and those who do not, all while keeping the course track. Anti-racism education assumes rationality, that awareness and action will be taken up, however, instructors cannot and should not be unduly tasked with the burden of responsibility. Onus is also placed on students to take up the responsibility anti-racism education asks of them.

Students

The challenges posed and faced by students when tasked with learning about anti-racism are well documented in social work and education literature. Anti-racism learning asks a lot of students. It asks them to be vulnerable, examine power relations, confront privilege, and implicate themselves within the process. Schick and St Denis (2003) identify some common ideological assumptions that feed student resistance including race blindness, equal opportunity, and the notion that good intentions allow one to secure innocence as well as superiority. Affolter (2017) adds to this that the lack of buy-in and the need to feel equal and safe proves to be a barrier for anti-racism education. For non-racialized students, this may evoke feelings of resistance, anxiety, discomfort, and guilt, because it causes them to question their identity and intentions, and to find linkages between themselves and the inequity in society (Deepak & Biggs, 2011; Jeffery, 2005; Macey & Moxon, 1996). This fear may present itself in various forms from anger to silence, cautiousness to speak for fear they may be perceived as racist or innately racist, and facing that they are innately racist (Chand et al., 2002; Nelson, Dunn, & Paradies, 2011). For those who come to this realization, they must acknowledge and forsake the privileges and ideologies that have served them well.

As for racialized students, similar feelings may arise from engaging in the challenging work anti-racism requires. Many racialized students may have lived experience with overt and covert racism, thus the classroom may be a space where they feel silenced, discriminated against, made to relive or disclose personal experiences, and expected to represent the experiences of entire racial groups (Deepak & Biggs, 2011). These students may choose or inadvertently be forced into silence, or choose to speak up, running the risk of humiliation or being perceived as

angry and confrontational (Chinnery, 2008). This is an isolating job for those attempting to resist further marginalization who carry the burden of bridging racial and cultural understanding. It creates an unequal and unjust experience for racialized students, who act as “bridge builders”, guiding the privileged into the uncharted world of racism, where the privileged gain understanding while the “bridge builders” carry the weight.

The concepts taught in anti-racism education are difficult realities to come to terms with. If successful in engaging students in the process of consciousness-raising, this heightened awareness may unearth feelings of powerlessness when asked to act. Awakening to the extent and embeddedness of racism and racial realities can be overwhelming. There is opportunity for anti-racism education to work with these feelings, and move forward to meaningful actions that work with, for, and in service of those who experience the impacts of living in a world where racism permeates social, political, and economic life.

Opportunities for Anti-Racism in Social Work Education

Within the academy, specifically predominately white institutions within the Western context, hegemonic discourses continue to subjugate, negate and render invisible the histories, contributions, and experiences of racialized peoples (Dei, 1999). The western or Eurocentric epistemological tradition continues to operate as the standard for knowledge production within our institutions of higher education. The implications of this are far-reaching beyond the Canadian context, and demonstrate how colonial constructions of humanity and knowledge insulate our institutions. The profession of social work is not immune from this hegemonic discourse, one must simply look to the roots of the profession to see how eurocentrism, colonialism, and dominance evolve and manifest over time and have become embedded within our educational institutions. Notions of neutrality in education must be disrupted and while education has and continues to perpetuate hegemonic values, it also holds the potential to promote critical change and transformation (Lopez-Littleton, 2016).

Many of the themes and findings from this literature review have evidenced that there is a need for anti-racism to be explicit within social work education. The profession of social work transcends discipline and geographical boundaries; therefore, it is even more pertinent that social work education sufficiently prepares future professionals to identify and confront the reality of racialized oppression in their own practice. The following recommendations propose the revival of anti-racism education within social work education policy and within the classroom.

Institutional Environment and Policy

There was a time when anti-racism was at the forefront of social work education in Canada. Cognizant of the optics and implications of proposing such a return, I propose that the CASWE and schools of social work within Canada explicitly include anti-racism terminology and language into institutional policy. This would acknowledge the prevalence and impact of racial oppression within the fabric of Canadian society, and commit to confronting and dismantling structures, discourses, and practices that perpetuate it. Further, I propose that minimum standards of practice include anti-racism education in required course curricula be developed. These standards will aim to ensure all students of social work have the opportunity

to develop a conceptual understanding of anti-racism and gain practice skills that will enable them to serve as skillful allies and advocates for individuals, groups, and communities who may have or continue to experience racism in their daily lived experience.

It is clear that policy is not a sufficient stand-alone solution to ensure anti-racism education is integrated into curriculum learnings. Therefore, it will be of equal importance to create an environment conducive to implementing policies and standards. This will require an in-depth investigation of institutional culture, policy, and practice to identify opportunities for growth and understanding. This assessment should consider the input of all stakeholders (e.g. administration, faculty, students, community members, and partners) in assessing the need for and/or opportunities for organizational change and power sharing.

Anti-Racism Education in Practice

One of the many objectives of social work education is to convey knowledge of the nature of oppression through supporting students to engage in critical self-reflection and understanding of relations of power. Anti-racism education offers educators and students a means to do so in an intentional, though challenging way. The challenge for educators will be to communicate and demonstrate the connection between anti-racism theory and practice in a manner that it can be taken up by students tangibly. As educators come to explore anti-racism education, it is critical that educators also engage in self-reflexive practice, un-learning, as well as, difficult and progressive dialogue about race and racial ideology (Lopez-Littleton, 2016; Love, Gaynor, & Blessett, 2016). Further, it will be necessary to examine one's own pedagogical practices, and thoughtfully consider opportunities to incorporate theories, perspectives and, approaches that interrupt traditional learning practices to facilitate spaces where critical dialogue can take place. Reflexivity, alliance building, advocacy, knowledge sharing, and empowerment are essential components of social work education and practice (Corneau & Stergiopoulos, 2012). Anti-racism practice within the course curriculum is a viable option to support students in developing these skills to enhance future professional practice. I propose a number of strategies to integrate anti-racism practice into course assignments applicable to all students. These proposed strategies are intended to help facilitate self-reflection and consciousness-raising practices already expected of social work students. I caution that such strategies must be implemented with critical awareness and intentionality. Moreover, the following practices offer students tools and strategies that can be used within the context of their own professional community practice.

Racial storytelling. Johnson (2017) introduces the use of racial storytelling as a tool to engage with past experiences in the present and begin to reimagine our future. This entails assessing the intricacies of our social identities and the way in which we are all involved in the complexity. Johnson (2017) is clear in attending to the fact that racial storytelling is not only for racialized people, it is for everyone to tackle their own experiences and encounters of racism through story. For racialized people, racial storytelling is the sharing of story devoid of the dominant narrative (Johnson, 2017). The process of racial storytelling must include everyone, to ensure that the stories of racialized peoples are not shared for the consumption of others. Anti-racism education implicates everyone within the process, so should the methodology that is employed to relay this message.

Critical autoethnography. Critical autoethnography offers an opportunity for students to engage in, and demonstrate their understanding of, anti-racism practice within required assignments. This methodology that can be employed within research as a means of challenging traditional notions of research practice by attending to the relationships and power between researchers and participants (Johnson, 2017). Ashlee, Zamora, and Karikari (2017) employ what they refer to as critical collaborative ethnography as a practice that challenges the boundaries between researchers and participants with the aim of generating social change. Though race is not necessarily central to either method, it can be a lens for both racialized and non-racialized persons as they engage with research in a personal and political manner.

Racial identity caucusing. Racial identity caucusing is an organizing strategy that allows participants to confront and dismantle institutional and cultural racism, internalized racist oppression, and internalized racist superiority (Crossroads Antiracism Organizing and Training [CAOT], 2009). For both racialized and non-racialized persons, caucusing creates a space whereby participants can explore the way in which racism operates, shapes, and impacts individuals and the collective as a whole, reducing the need for self-monitoring for fear of judgement. This allows for groups to seek greater clarity of how power and privilege shape identity and consciously attend to its manifestations while building collective accountability. While this strategy involves risk and requires courage, it has been noted to enhance understanding and facilitate authentic anti-racist partnerships between racialized and non-racialized groups (CAOT, 2009). Though classroom demographics may influence its feasibility, caucusing invites participants to engage in critical dialogue of the dynamics of racism through an anti-racism approach.

Conclusion

Though anti-racism may not be the quintessential approach for all of social work education, it is a viable option to support schools of social work in purposefully attending to the reality of racial oppression. Having considered the historical, theoretical, and practical dimensions of anti-racism education, several recommendations have been proposed in an effort to revive anti-racism in both education policy and practice. The proposed recommendations aim to skillfully prepare social work students for community practice, where they can then continue to confront systemic racism by supporting and standing with those whom they serve.

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