Racisms and Microaggressions in Social Work: The Experience of Racialized Practitioners in Canada

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Merlinda Weinberg
Professor
School of Social Work
Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada
Merlinda.weinberg@dal.ca

Marshall Fine
Professor Emeritus
Faculty of Social Work
Wilfrid Laurier University, Kitchener, Ontario, Canada
mfine@wlu.ca
Abstract

Rather than racism targeted towards service users, this paper adds to the sparse corpus of articles that reports on racism and microaggressions experienced by racialized social work practitioners. Based on two qualitative exploratory research studies in Canada, the findings suggest that racism continues to be a significant problem for racialized social workers. In addition to the oft-mentioned category of individual racism, four other ‘modern’ forms of racism are explored: cultural racism, institutional racism, epistemological racism, and aversive racism. The importance of broadening the categories of racism is that these other forms are less familiar and thus are more likely to be unnoticed yet have profound effects on practitioners.

Utilizing quotations from research participants, the article addresses the impact on racialized practitioners such as psychological distress, reduced access to job opportunities and benefits, and being caught between discrepant professional and personal values, leading workers to be viewed at times by racialized service users as voices of the oppressive white system. The paper examines workers’ responses to these challenges.

The authors ask, “How is it possible in a profession such as social work that prides itself on an anti-oppression orientation and the values of social justice that racism remains so deep-seated?” Explanations for this discrepancy are discussed. The paper ends with some beginning suggestions on how to move forward to eradicate racism perpetrated towards social work practitioners.

Keywords: Racisms, racialized practitioners, impacts, aversive racism, qualitative research
Social work prides itself as being a values-based profession. In the helping fields, it has been at the forefront of work on anti-racist and culturally appropriate practice, recognizing the importance of diversity, and the specific concerns and needs of diverse service users. In codes of ethics such as the Canadian Association Code of Ethics (2005), the dignity and worth of individuals is primary, and respect for the diversity of individuals is articulated (p.4). However, there has been scant literature on racism in social work (Corely & Young, 2018). Moreover, with the exception of a few studies spanning over 45 years (e.g. Bennett, 2015; Brockmann, Butt, & Fisher, 2001; Chukwuemeka, 2013; Davis & Gelsomino, 1994; Goldstein, 2002; Gosine & Pon, 2011; Mbarushimana & Robbins, 2015; Sanders, 1972) there has been even less literature on racism experienced by racialized practitioners rather than service users. In two of the authors’ research studies, for racialized social workers, incidents of racism were rife. This paper adds to this sparse corpus, outlining their experiences and highlighting the need to directly address the racism in the profession of social work.

We are defining race as “an ideologic construct, a socially powerful signifier, an important contributor to identity formation and an ever present, ever changing social reality that structures people’s lives” (Gustafson, 2007, p.154). Physical markers such as skin tone and accent have been used to delineate individuals but the scientific basis for this concept has been hotly disputed and largely roundly rejected. It is a fluid conception, constructed through ideology and material processes, regularly being reshaped through historical events, political struggle, and power relations (Harvey, 2007). Through these mechanisms, certain characteristics are attributed to particular groups, with groups being
viewed differentially as either dominant or subordinate (Harvey, 2007). We perceive this to be a misinformed socially constructed notion without a biological foundation.

By *racialized*, we are referring to social processes by which an individual is perceived to be non-White (Gosine & Pon, 2011). No designation for this population seems totally adequate. When participants used a particular term, we followed suit. In one research study we used the appellation ‘minority’ but generally in this paper we will rely on ‘racialized.’ We are attempting to focus on processes of dominance and power, and have chosen this word as the most accurate.

Emphasizing race to the exclusion of other social categories is contestable since it essentializes an individual to one trait when one’s gender or class, for example, may be of equal significance. Also, it is important to recognize the heterogeneity within groups. Moreover, some populations, for instance Indigenous peoples, may not see themselves as a race at all, but rather as forming distinct worldviews and political affiliations. Furthermore, the import of a particular social category neglects the consequence of the intersectionality of social location and the fluid nature of one’s subjectivity.

Nonetheless, despite its social construction and these complexities, there is no question that race has significant material effects for individuals based on perceived race (e.g. Mouzon, Taylor, Woodward, & Chatters, 2017; Sue, 2010; Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2003). Thus, for this paper, we are focusing on race, given its salience in the

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1 For instance, ‘minority’ is often erroneous since individuals may make up a majority in a group and this term would be statistically inaccurate. Also, some people may not appear to be of a different colour from white settlers (for example Indigenous people) yet they are discriminated against on the basis of their race, so ‘people of colour’ does not seem to be the best label. Additionally, our rationale is that the term ‘racialized’ implies processes of social construction rather than fixed essentialized categories.
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lives of the practitioners in social work and the impacts that it had on their practice and themselves. Moreover, the social construction of identification of groups by race can be used for anti-oppressive purposes. Social construction allows the power dynamics of processes to be unmasked and for possibilities of agentic change (Harvey, 2007).

Racism refers to “the practice of discrimination or prejudice based on racial classification supported by the power to enforce that prejudice” (NASW, 2007, p. 6.). It refers to discourses, beliefs, and assumptions that certain groups (in Euro-Western societies - usually white individuals of European descent) are superior to others, allowing for the discrimination of those marginalized categories on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, or some essentialized characteristic. It results in actions in which one group dominates and oppresses another, often embedded and negotiated in unmarked daily interactions (Dominelli, 2008), as well as in systems and institutions. Racism is a set of complex social interactional patterns that maintain relationships of domination, discrimination and disadvantage.

We, the authors of this paper are white settlers. One could contend that as white people, the authors should not be speaking for racialized individuals. However, Alcoff (2006) has suggested that avoiding contentious material such as race is one more aspect of privilege that white settlers hold. The authors eschew that privilege, hoping to be allies by writing of this article. We subscribe to the perspective that knowledge production is always partial and is best accomplished through partnerships with diverse others through dialogue (Yuval-Davis, 2012), which in this paper occurred in part through racialized academics giving feedback. The goal for this piece is the disruption of oppressive
practices and work towards more liberatory processes through illustrating the insidious, often invisible but highly egregious nature of all forms of racism.

The research projects

The data for this paper came from two research projects with quite distinct foci. The first was a three-year qualitative study to investigate how social workers, in attempts to act ethically, experienced and addressed the constraints and paradoxes in their day-to-day practice. The research was conducted in two provinces of Canada, Nova Scotia and Ontario. Sampling occurred through letters of invitation to provincial professional bodies, followed by a limited snowball technique. Individual face-to-face interviews were conducted with direct service practitioners. Of these, 10 were racialized individuals (2 African-descent, 5 Indigenous, and 3 “other”). One to four interviews were held for a total of 20 interviews with the racialized participants. Racism emerged as a substantive theme in the overall findings, resulting in narrowed attention through the use of the focus groups. For this paper, we used data from four focus groups of racialized participants comprising 11 participants: African descent (n=9) and Indigenous social workers (n=2). Two of the focus groups were face-to-face and two by phone.

The second study concerned processes of inclusion and exclusion of professionals who self-identified as being a ‘minority’ on some social category such as race, class, ethnicity, Indigeneity, disability, gender identity, or sexual orientation. Sampling was done through a snowball technique. Three professions were investigated, but for this paper we only drew on the data from the racialized social workers for a total of 16
participants. Participants came from across Canada. One interview was conducted with each participant, some face-to-face, some by phone.

In both studies, participants represented professionals in a range of social work settings including but not limited to health, child welfare, mental health, addictions, education and for-profit sectors. All participants had at least one formal social work degree. For both studies, exploratory semi-structured interviews lasting 1 to 2 hours were conducted. Ethics approval was obtained through university ethics boards. Data was managed through Atlas-ti software and was coded to obtain major themes. Coding was informed by discourse analysis and post-structural theorizing in the first study and interpretative phenomenology in the second. As member checks, in the first study, participants were given their transcripts; in the second, they were provided with a summary of their interview. Pseudonyms are provided throughout.

A framework of critical theory was used for analysis in both studies. By critical theory we are referring to an umbrella term that covers a variety of theoretical approaches, including critical race theory, feminist, and queer theory, as examples. The commonalities are a concern for social transformation, an exploration of power, and the importance of historical context, while recognizing person-in-environment.

These studies had very different intentions, goals, methodologies and methods. ThGus it was a surprise and, from our perspective important, that the theme of racism directed towards racialized practitioners arose powerfully in both studies. We think it is especially consequential precisely because it was not a planned goal, particularly for the first study. For this reason, the object of this paper is to explore that motif, rather than concentrate on the studies themselves with the possibility of replicating these results.
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One of the limitations of these studies is that the data was only collected from Canadian institutions. Another limitation is since qualitative research examines a small sample in depth, results are rich and contextualized, but not intended to be generalizable.

Findings

Various forms of racism emerged in the interview data. Individual racism is the most commonly understood type of racism. The meanings of race and racism have evolved in social work (Cramer & McElveen, 2003) but in recent years there has been an explosion in more ‘modern’ classifications of racism (modern racism) (Fleras, 2014) including cultural racism, institutional or structural racism, epistemological racism, and aversive racism, which we will elaborate on below. Thus we have referred to “racisms,” rather than using the singular. These different typologies can be intertwined. In the material that follows, we will outline definitions of these forms, as well as microaggressions, and how the participants experienced these in their work.

Individual Racism and Microaggressions

One form of racism is individual, based on the overt and covert acts of individuals whose biases, stereotypes, and acts of discrimination deny others their dignity and humanity. This is a widely accepted definition and this form is viewed by the general public as unacceptable, but it allows alternate forms of racism to go unnoticed.

Microaggressions are “brief and common place daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional,” (Sue, 2010, p. 5) that are hostile or derogatory towards a marginalized group. They may overlap with other
definitions of racism but the usefulness of the notion of microaggressions is to draw attention to what could be perceived as relatively minor subtle incidents that commonly arise that nonetheless have deleterious effects on those targeted. For instance, a frequent occurrence for a racialized individual is to be asked where they are from. Implicit in that question is that, even when they are living in the land of their birth, they do not belong and are alien to that country (Sue, 2010).

Let us turn to incidents of these types of racism and microaggression now.

**Racism Directed towards Racialized Clients**

Racialized participants witnessed racism directed towards service users. These incidents raised concerns about how to protect their clients, as well triggering their own experiences of racism. Ruth, a Muslim, related the following incident in a hospital setting with a patient’s mother who was “wearing head coverings.” The baby had “trisomy … which means it's incompatible with life.” Ruth was distressed because her manager said to her, “You know how those people are; they just put the baby in the cold room and let it die.” Expressions of “those people” are a form of othering, distancing oneself from the group in question and treating them as less human. Her manager was implying that Muslims are hardhearted and insensitive to their dying child, a racial slur.

**Racism by Service Users Directed at Racialized Practitioners**

Participants spoke about the racism they experienced from service users towards themselves. Many identified clients refusing the racialized social worker as their practitioner. Ruth, a black practitioner, shared that a client had said “he didn't want the
Black girls looking after him.” Ashley, a child welfare worker, said when there is “conflict with a client … the client immediately uses racial comments or connotations … to say they did not want to work with me.”

**Individual Racism by Co-workers and Managers**

When racialized workers supported clients, at times that support was perceived as inappropriate bias by others. Marie declared, “They [managers or colleagues] questioned… my professional ability to address whatever the issue was … because I was black and he was black.” On a particular case where Marie disagreed with her co-worker on an assessment of a client, it was stated that Marie “was being racist and that I was supporting this family because they were black.” What is left unmarked in this exchange is the possibility that whites can also be biased in their work and that a racialized worker might have more empathy and understanding given their own positioning as racialized.

Occurrences of overt individual racism towards the workers themselves were also reported. Zainab shared an incident that ensued when she became a new manager. The response to her was, “oh, you're the new AO [Anti-Oppression] leader.' 'Yeah'. 'Oh, I heard you're Muslim.’ … Does that mean you have terrorists in your family?’” The intended message was to say that Muslims are criminals. She elaborated: “I'm in senior management. So this person is like three levels below me…. I could never, as a racialized person, get away with that…. their full white privilege … to feel that they can ask it… The purpose was to jab and put you in your place, and then go tell your five friends, 'Look, that's what I asked her and she couldn't even answer the question.’” This is an example of reducing Zainab’s credibility, undermining her power and leadership.
Cultural racism

*Cultural racism* occurs when a person’s cultural values are perceived as different from that of the dominant group and consequently problematic (Dominelli, 2008; Graham, 2007). Workers shared stories of clashes between those of the dominant culture of their agencies, and those of their racialized clients and their own cultural needs. Julia provided an example from her Indigenous tradition. Smudging is an important ritual in the healing process. It involves burning plants such as sage or thyme and gently waving the smoke over the client. Julia stated, “when I first got there [to her new job she was told] … ‘you can smudge.’ … And the big boss was actually one of my professors when I was … in university. And she was…always talking about the Indigenous approach…. A lot of the clients would come in and they’d be crying and …[Julia would say], ‘do you want to smudge?’ … ‘yes, I want to smudge.’” However, when Julia actually attempted to initiate a smudge she was told by the same individual, that she “wasn’t allowed to smudge … and I’d get in trouble for that.” Well ‘no, you can’t … no smoking.’” This exemplifies a microaggression and a law or organizational policy that could be considered racist, an incident of institutional racism, a concept elaborated on below.

At times racialized participants found themselves favouring cultural matching against the perspective of their white peers and supervisors. Marie claimed, “We have information that tells us that if a child is able to attach by eighteen months … they’ll be able to healthily attach again…[But] if you’re in a foreign place culturally, you are not going to be able to.” Yet Marie needed to fight for the perspective that being in a foreign environment complicates attachment.
Institutional Racism/Environmental Microaggressions

A third form of racism is *institutional* or *structural* racism. Institutional racism are processes whereby a society and its organizations and institutions reinforce the advantages of some groups through laws, policies, and procedures that seem normative while maintaining the structural disadvantage of other groups.

Sarah, a participant, in speaking about Indigenous clients like herself, stated, “it’s a marginalized group that [doesn’t] have access … to a lawyer or… [isn’t] aware of their rights. Then some of those steps could go missing… We know that Aboriginal women at prison for women had … harsher sentences and longer sentences than … their non-Aboriginal counterparts. You know that’s the same as … our Aboriginal males.”

Institutional racism also disadvantages racialized professionals who find that they do not have the same access to work opportunities as the dominant group. Many of the participants spoke about difficulty getting work; only finding work that was precarious; or being by-passed for promotions. Joyce put in a cover letter that she was Aboriginal. “I applied five times to the same … child welfare place and each time they said … we don’t need anyone or… you don’t have that qualification. Then when I applied … I did not put [Aboriginal tribe] … on my application, they invited me in for an interview.”

When racialized workers did get employment, other problems arose such as having one’s expertise diminished. A comment made to Sarah was “you only got that because you were Aboriginal.” And when “she had passed a competition, she was told she ‘would never be made … a supervisor at the institution’” because she was “Aboriginal and … a woman.” A further illustration of a microaggression and institutional racism occurred
when Marie applied for a position that she had been doing. She was informed by her supervisor, “so-and-so’s going to apply as well and … would you be willing to take her position if you didn’t get it?” Marie’s response was “I’m not sure what you’re talking about because I’m doing the job… it requires a master’s, I’m doing a master’s, she’s doing a BSW… if I don’t get it you need to tell me why I didn’t get it because I can’t imagine not getting the job.” Marie perceived this as racially driven since despite the fact that she had the required degree which the other candidate did not have and she had been doing the actual position she was applying for, she was asked if she would take the other candidate’s lower position. She “questioned whether or not [her supervisor] still wanted [Marie] working at the agency.”

Pay and benefits were not equitably handled. Marie identified not having access to professional development that met her specific needs of attending a conference explicitly for racialized social workers. Sarah argued, “I’m paid less than my… non-Aboriginal counterparts. And I have a clinical background where many of them don’t.” Marie declared, “you need to understand why people would much rather go … [to an] African Canadian employment centre than come here because this [discrimination] is part of the issue … I would not trust the system.”

**Lack of support and sanctions.** Often colleagues or managers did not treat incidents of racism by service users seriously, nor were the practitioners supported. Moreover, white staff and management repeatedly did not recognize cultural insensitivity nor accommodate when participants raised concerns about institutional inequities.

In response to Julia pinpointing the need to increase culturally appropriate services, she was told, “well we can’t always bend over backwards for them [racialized
clients].” In response to talking about Aboriginal history, she was asked, “why do you keep bringing up the history? What does that have to do with today?” Her response: “intergenerational trauma,” the intrapersonal trauma that is transmitted across generations due to historical oppression.

Even more troubling, seven participants had serious work sanctions directed at them and at times found that management themselves took racist stands. They all believed these penalties were the result of discrimination. Leslie was let go because “I was perhaps identifying too much with [Black] families.”

**Epistemological racism**

*Epistemological racism* is a fourth classification. All knowledge is situated and political in its ideological underpinnings, shaped by the social histories of a society, and reflecting the values and interests of those who produce its epistemologies whilst excluding that of subjugated knowledges (Scheurich & Young, 1997). Knowledges that are non-Western or non-white are either denigrated or appropriated, according to the racialized participants. Julia, in discussing the approaches to knowledge in social work stated, “we’re going to take your perspectives and your theories of life … and turn it into a theory that is validated by non-Native scholars … Like the ecological theory in particular… it’s Indigenous…we’ve been doing that since time immemorial… it’s … almost cultural appropriation.” Claudia, a participant of African descent, sarcastically asked, “the co-optation of First Nations communities’ spiritual healing practices, we’ve done that… Why don’t we try co-opting African ways of doing things?”
Responses to Racisms: Effects, Coping Strategies and Resistance

Racialized workers have to decide whether or not to fight the egregious behaviour they see. One of the complexities is not always being clear if an incident is an instance of racism, a psychologically fraught aspect of being a marginalized person. This is especially the case with microaggressions. Amanda stated: “I’ve had patients … say, no, I don’t want a social worker. Now it might have been they didn’t want a social worker but because I’m black … I thought to myself do they mean they don’t [want] any social worker, or do they mean they don’t want a black social worker?”

Thus, at times, workers chose not to take on the battle. Anya maintained, “I’m not going to waste my time … fighting for … the fact that … maybe there was some racism involved.” There are risks to being seen as angry or a troublemaker and participants needed to weigh the potential of sanctions, which we have seen are very real and present for racialized workers. Sarah: “you have to deal with the whole issue of, do I rock the boat and raise that in the… larger organization and then risk the whole program being cut….? I’ve seen the direct experience of… someone with close to thirty years experience raising an issue about being bullied and then losing their job as a result.”

Even with the perceived minimal impact of microaggressions, like a water torture in which the small drips eventually become a major torment, “It's the little things that wear you down, that are constant,” according to Ruth. Moreover, witnessing racism perpetrated towards one’s service users also has a psychological effect. Marie stated, “We’re talking about … vicarious trauma.” Whether racism was intended was not always clear, adding psychological complexity for workers, as Amanda earlier suggested. Colin
questioned, “you kind of go through giving people the benefit of the doubt … And sometimes you say 'Wait a minute though. What just happened there?'”

It is beyond our scope to outline the many ways that participants responded forcefully and actively to racist situations, showing resilience and strength, despite the perils. Therefore, just two examples will have to suffice. These battles were both waged for themselves and their clients. Anya described a case of a Black client with a disability. Her “child was actually apprehended. She was screaming … 'No, I want my baby.' … I thought, 'Oh my god. You know, one doctor's letter, and Children's Aid has to act against this child.' And I know the girl. … I know she was able. And a very caring person.” In this situation, Anya “went to a lawyer, because I thought maybe there was … racism there” both directed towards the client and herself. Challenging institutional racism when Sarah was told she would never be made a supervisor, she “took it to Human Rights and we filed a complaint and … we won.”

**Discussion**

As reported in other studies (Brockmann, Butt, & Fisher, 2001; Chukwuemeka, 2013; Davis & Gelsomino, 1994; Mbarushimana & Robbins, 2015), we found that racism in the profession of social work, as Jen categorically stated, was “alive and well.”

At the level of individual racism, participants experienced discrimination from co-workers, managers and service users.

The subtle but pernicious effects of cultural racism, institutional racism, and epistemological racism were strongly supported in our findings. In most of the Euro-Western world, White Anglo-Saxon culture has been viewed as superior, resulting in the
development of norms that disparage other cultural standards. In the neoliberal environment in which social work is currently functioning with the cutbacks in resources and a victim-blaming attitude to those marginalized, there is significant pathologizing of particular communities that works to justify their exclusions or restrictions to entitlements. These procedures may seem appropriate and taken-for-granted, reinforcing an insidious form of cultural racism. Under these circumstances, social workers may participate in maintaining racism at macro levels. Participants were aware of structural racism that led to over-representation of marginalized groups in social services and corrections, also found in other studies (Hennessy, 2013; Livingstone & Weinfeld, 2015; Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015).

Cultural racism is a particularly problematic issue in social work, since social workers must evaluate the ‘acceptability’ of people’s cultural practices, such as mothering. For professionals from racialized groups, this is complex, since they may personally subscribe to different cultural values and norms, but may need to support white policies and cultural practices, given their positioning as professionals in white-dominated settings. If the knowledge on which those decisions are based discriminates against those who are racialized, both services users’ and practitioners’ marginalization and material disadvantage endure. For instance, ethno-cultural matching in adoption was identified as problematic. Gosine and Pon (2011), also addressed this problem. White workers may not have a similar sensitivity to or belief in the risks for racialized children being placed in white homes, a situation that racialized workers consistently identified. These workers might be hired as bridges for racialized clients, but then accused of bias. Institutional expectations present a catch-22 for racialized practitioners; namely, being a
“race expert when needed, and a difficult black woman when challenging their racism” (Butt, cited in Goldstein, 2002, p.770, italics in the original). They must walk a fine line, in ‘damned if you do, damned if you don’t’ scenarios; backing up policies of dominant institutions while supporting potentially antithetical needs of racialized clients, leading to loyalty conflicts (Mbarushimana & Robbins, 2015).

Institutional racism was rife in both studies, as well as being reported in other research (Chukwuemeka, 2013; Goldstein, 2002; Gosine & Pon, 2011; Mbarushimana & Robbins, 2015). Participants did not trust the broader professional structures to support them, findings consistent with other studies (Bennett 2015; Sanders, 1972). Miller and Garran (2007, p. 61) suggest, “The web [of institutional racism] shapes who works in organizations, what qualifications they have, how they enter the organization, what capital they bring with them, and how quickly or slowly they progress once they arrive.” Brockmann et al. (2001) also described instances of managers’ unfair treatment. Modern forms of bias are often manifested in failures to act (Fleras, 2014; Sue, 2010) as we found in our studies. Social work has been on a path to bring more individuals into the profession who represent those at the margins. But if, due to institutional racism, those professionals do not have the same opportunities, the enterprise is a sham.

Epistemological racism distorts understanding of oppressed groups, often pathologizing those Others. These historical trends contribute to the development of a racial hierarchy (including what counts as knowledge) that persists today.

Whether overt, or more covert forms of racism, the detrimental health and psychological effects of continually living with racism have been widely reported (e.g. Mouzon, Taylor, Woodward & Chatters, 2017; Pascoe & Richman, 2009), as our
participants identified. Part of the power of modern racism is often the unclear intent. Attributional ambiguity, (Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, & Major, 1991) refers to the difficulty that stigmatized groups have in interpreting the intention of feedback from dominant individuals. A marginalized individual questions whether negative feedback was bias, or whether the feedback was a legitimate response to their behaviour. Three psychological mechanisms are activated: a need to determine the truth of what happened, protecting oneself against racist attacks, and sorting out how to respond (Sue, 2010).

Currently, we have entered a period of entrenchment where prejudicial ways of thinking and acting have gained credence. Some countries, such as the USA, have shifted towards more nativist positions with added overt permission in the expression of prejudice, and where the Other is viewed with suspicion or worse. These findings are consistent with the current appalling trends, resulting in potential jeopardy for those who are racialized, despite being legitimate members of their profession.

The literature outlines a lack of attention by those who were from dominant groups and the invisibility of racism for many whites (Collins, Gutridge, James, Lynn & Williams, 2000; Fleras, 2014; Miller & Garran, 2007). There is an enormous discrepancy between the way that whites and those who are racialized perceive situations that occur in the workplace, as we discovered and supported by other researchers (e.g. Davis & Gelsomino, 1994), with whites often seeing racism as essentially conquered (Miller & Garran, 2007). But for racialized individuals, racism is a constant struggle with significant effects on multiple levels in their lives, “imprinting itself on individual bodies and psyches” (Miller & Garran, 2007, p. 34) Our findings suggest that this disparity in perception denies the intransigence of racism and needs correcting.
How is it possible in a profession such as social work that prides itself on an anti-oppression orientation and the values of social justice that racism remains so deep-seated? One wonders how much this discrepancy can be accounted for by the need on the part of white social workers to inure themselves to their own racism, particularly those who articulate a philosophy of social justice? Researchers are elaborating on a “new racism” in which emphasis on biological traits has receded but other manifestations of othering, such as a prominence on cultural differences, takes precedence (Fleras, 2014; Romm, 2010). While there are many cultural, psychological and cognitive explanations for racism (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986; Rasmussen & Salhani, 2010), one explanation of particular importance in understanding its prevalence in social work is aversive racism; racism on the part of white liberals who regard themselves as non-discriminating towards racialized people (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986, 1998; Romm, 2010; Rodenburg & Boisen, 2013). Due to a belief in one’s egalitarian orientation towards others, those who practice aversive racism are unaware of their racist behaviours but hold ambivalent or latent negative, often unconscious, views towards racialized others. Aversive racists support just treatment of everyone, but still harbour racist viewpoints of other groups, and may feel anxious, uncomfortable, or fearful around those unlike themselves, despite their intentions and beliefs to the contrary (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1998). They may defensively avow their lack of bias, engaging in tokenistic behaviour (Henry & Tator, 2006).

Those holding aversive racist sentiments may not be intentionally racist, but are imbued with the same dominant perspectives that infiltrate every aspect of society. Aversive racism may be particularly salient in social work practitioners who pride themselves on their anti-oppressive stances and would understandably be disinclined to
perceive themselves as biased, despite the oftentimes articulation that we are all biased. 

Dovidio and Gaertner (2000, p.315) presume that aversive racism characterizes a “substantial portion of well-educated and liberal whites in the United States.” We speculate the same statement could be made for Canadian social workers whom we assume would generally be liberal in their orientation, given the social justice and ethical values of the profession.

Categorization into in-groups and out-groups is a known psychological process that can lead to prejudice. There is a tendency to support our own needs and those of our own group over those who are outside our group (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1998; 2000). Whites benefit from maintaining cultural supremacy and having institutions that privilege them over their racialized colleagues.

What needs to be done? Anti-racist social work must interrogate power relations and push for the investigation of those personal attitudes and biases that continue to keep racism active in our society and disadvantage racialized colleagues, the focus of this paper. Keeping discomfort and chagrin from consciousness may play a role in the denial of racism on the part of whites. Acknowledgement of the fact that we are all racist, considering the environments in which we are socialized, requires confronting shame (Jacobs, 2014) and is a first step to tackle discrepancies in thinking and behaviour (Fisher, Moore, Simmons & Allen, 2017).

Changes in policy and social work education (e.g. Baskin, 2006; Varghese, 2016) must occur. Organizations, including schools of social work, must examine whiteness, power and privilege, making racism visible, and recognizing the impact of racism in organizations at the structural, cultural and epistemological levels. Schools need to set the
conditions for risk rather than safety in the classroom. Seeking the subordinated perspectives through curricular material, encouraging the voices of the marginalized in the classroom, as well as identifying the dominance of particular perspectives are important components. Analysis must include the relevance of colonial history and context for racialized individuals. Teachers need to employ critical reflection, examine standpoints, and explore counter-transference reactions for students and themselves.

At policy levels, our definitions of racism need to be broadened beyond that of individual acts, to analyze and understand the systemic, subtle, and covert nature of racism at cultural, structural, institutional and epistemological levels. One advantage of an emphasis on macro levels is to reduce the blame and shame that interfere with whites accepting the reality of on-going racism. The ideology of liberalism, which stresses individualism and limited government intervention, ultimately support racist policies and must be tackled (Gainous, 2012; Kolivoski, Weaver & Constance-Huggins, 2014). Using the lens of assumed societal racism in the analysis of current social service policies is required. This entails assessing what agendas are set and by whom; how issues are framed (Came & Griffith, 2018); how resources are allocated and to whom. Accountability by maintaining data and tracking progress in areas such as under-representation of racialized workers in organizations is also needed.

Whites have a particular responsibility. They must start from the premise that racism is real and that racialized people are not just being ‘paranoid’ or overly sensitive. Like the “#Me, Too” movement where there has been some shift in a belief in the narratives of those victimized; the same approach is needed with the identification of racism. Part of the power of racism is its frequent invisibility. White individuals need to
recognize the benefits accrued from unearned privilege and dominance. In this era of
reconciliation, white settlers must move from denial to acceptance, from silence to
dialogue, from arrogance to humility, from shame to alliance, and from inaction to action.

Marie wished that “everyone was black for a week.” Imagine if that really occurred.
Imsak, stated, “everyone discriminates in their own way.” We believe that this
recognition is the stance we all must take. No one is immune. We have all been steeped
in a vat of racism which colours (literally and figuratively) how we view those who are
Other, as well as the cultural expectations and social institutions that shape social
services. “The solution to racism lies in our ability to see its ubiquity but not to concede

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References


