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From social justice to abolition: living up to social work's grand challenge of eliminating racism

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ABSTRACT

How can social work live up to the 13th Grand Challenge of Eliminating Racism? In this article we argue for the replacement of the predominant social justice paradigm with a framework for anti-racist social work praxis informed by abolitionist principles. The primary aim of anti-racist social work praxis needs to be the building of power in Black, Indigenous, or Brown and poor communities. We define additional praxis principles, including engaging with critical theories, advancing macro-approaches, targeting racism at the source, and developing interventions to eliminate and address the effects of racism. We end by sharing concrete anti-racist praxis tools.

KEYWORDS

Social justice; social work; abolition; racism; anti-racism

Recently the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare adopted its 13th Grand Challenge: Eliminating Racism (Stevenson & Blakey, 2021). The Grand Challenges serve as visionary yet practical goals to guide all social welfare practice and research (Barth et al., 2019). They set social welfare apart as a discipline by emphasizing that we are not content simply building knowledge. Rather, we use scientific knowledge to change the conditions of society.

For many years, social work scholars and practitioners advocated that one of the grand challenges be the elimination of racism. The academy's initial response was that such a goal cut across all the grand challenges and could simply be incorporated throughout (Grand Challenges for Social Work, 2020). In light of the uprisings and renewed public conversations about racism that occurred following George Floyd and Breonna Taylor's murders in 2020, the Academy changed course and announced Eliminating Racism as its 13th Grand Challenge.

The adoption of this grand challenge also occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has demonstrated the impact of racism on Black, Indigenous, or Brown and marginalized communities (Tai et al., 2021). Black and Latinx people have been hospitalized at 5-times the rate of white people (Reyes, 2020). Poverty and healthcare access are interconnected and significantly influence people's health and their quality of life––with those who live in more densely populated areas and households being at greater risk of virus transmission. The unemployment rate skyrocketed and small businesses serving low-income communities faced huge losses. Black, Indigenous, and Brown workers were also disproportionately represented among essential workers unable to social distance, thus being put at higher risk of virus exposure (Reyes, 2020). This global pandemic has once again made it clear how essential it is for Social Welfare to work toward the elimination of racism.

The adoption of this grand challenge is a step in the right direction and begs the question: How can social work live up to the grand challenge of eliminating racism? We begin by making explicit our conceptualization of racism and assess the limitations of social work's use of the social justice

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framework as a guide for anti-racist work. Next, we review the history and principles of abolition and explore how they can be applied to the new grand challenge. We argue that the central aim of anti-racist social work praxis needs to be the building of power in Black, Indigenous, or Brown and poor and/or marginalized communities. We offer specific principles as part of a broader framework of anti-racist social work praxis, each leading to further questions to guide and assess social work education, practice, and research. This paper then concludes with tools that can be utilized toward the actualization of anti-racist praxis.

Conceptualizing racism

Developing strategies to eliminate racism requires first understanding what racism is, how it functions, and what its effects are. Racial capitalism describes the interlocking global systems and practices that produce social and economic profit through the exploitation of people of color, especially Black and Indigenous people (Robinson, 2000). Through the theoretical framework of racial capitalism, we must understand racism materially, that it functions to produce wealth and poverty. We must understand racism ideologically, that power is maintained by making logics that serve ruling class interests into the "common sense" of the people. We must also understand racism historically, that contemporary social forces are extensions of historical processes of slavery, settler colonialism, and colonization (Pulido, 2017). Racial capitalism as a framework puts economic, political, and ideological power at the center of understanding structural racism.

Structural racism consists of "the macro level systems, social forces, institutions, ideologies, and processes that interact with one another to generate and reinforce inequities among racial and ethnic groups" (Gee & Ford, 2011, p. 116; powell, 2008). In the United States, structural racism is continuously reproduced through group-differentiated relationships to poverty, displacement and dispossession, policing and incarceration, and immigration policy; segregation in housing, education, employment, and healthcare; voter disenfranchisement; vulnerability to community and state violence; and exposure to environmental pollutants (Omi & Winant, 2015). It is through systems, social forces, institutions, and ideologies that race itself is constructed.

These frameworks of racial capitalism and structural racism make clear that those targeted by racism are Black, Indigenous, or Brown communities that are poor and/or marginalized based on ethnicity, religion, sexuality, gender, ability, age, nationality, or geography. Structures of oppression are interlocking and anti-oppressive practice must be intersectional. Throughout this paper we refer specifically to Black, Indigenous, or Brown communities that are poor and/or marginalized and use the terms interchangeably.

Racial formation––the sociohistorical process through which racial categories are formed––is not static across time or place (Omi & Winant, 2015). Rather, the institutions and ideologies that structure racism and construct race itself are continuously adapted by political actors in response to macro-level forces such as changing laws and social norms, emerging technologies, and social movements. This process of racial formation involves a pattern of conflict and accommodation, repression and incorporation between social movements and the state. Over time, these processes lead to a rearticulation of ideology and changes to institutions to appease movements and dilute their power, altering the particular mechanisms that structure racism and construct race. Changes following the Civil Rights movement––from overtly racist to colorblind ideology and from explicit racial segregation to nondiscrimination policies that require proof of racist intent––exemplify the patterns described in racial formation theory (Omi & Winant, 2015). Institutions are continuously being remade.

The institutions that structure racism––schools, prisons, social service agencies, and banks, for example––are heavily shaped by policies. The amount of funding a school has, whether there are mental health professionals or police on staff, or whether Ethnic Studies is taught, for example, are decisions all dictated by policy. In moving away from framing racism solely as prejudice or racial animus, individual racism can be understood to include support for structurally racist policies (Kendi, 2019; Lipsitz, 2006).

Colorblind ideology, which downplays the salience of racism and focuses on having "good intentions," is often used to justify an individual's support for structurally racist policies (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). At the level of individuals, social work can be examined through this understanding of racism––support for structurally racist policies that is often bolstered by colorblind ideology.

Hegemonic constructions of social justice and anti-racism

A social justice paradigm often encompasses social work's efforts to address racism. As one of our core professional values, social justice broadly asserts that we need to challenge injustice and pursue social change (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017). Social justice frameworks are often enmeshed with or co-opted by liberalism, a framing of justice that focuses on hopes and aspirations while lacking critical and structural analysis of problems (Roy, 2006). Within social work, the definition of injustice, the methods for challenging it, and the type of social change we are pursuing are often left ambiguous. Social justice frameworks can be used for a variety of contradictory purposes: to call for transformation or to justify the status quo, to promote collective liberation or push for individual responsibility, and to center a top-down advocacy approach or a bottom-up organizing approach to achieving justice (Reisch, 2014). Nearly anything a typical social worker does could be framed as promoting social justice, particularly if working with communities of color. Much of social work practice, however, actively strengthens structural racism or passively reinforces it through lack of anti-racist action (Miller & Garran, 2017).

The history of social work is rooted in active racism. White social workers operated the boarding schools and child welfare system responsible for the forced removal and assimilation of Indigenous children from their families and nations. The United Nations defines these colonial practices as elements of genocide, resulting in lost languages, cultural traditions, and religious practices of entire generations and nations (Thibeault & Spencer, 2019). Black settlement house workers and the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) have long challenged the dominant ideologies of the social work profession, advocating for the inclusion of communities of color in the settlement house agenda, more Black social workers on staff and in positions of power, support for Black Power movements, and divestment from oppressive systems (Bell, 2014). There are numerous examples of social work's active racism through the present day––including our role in operating Japanese Internment Camps, prisons and jails, and migrant family detention centers. White people continue to dominate most positions of power within the social work profession, even under the contemporary social justice paradigm.

The social justice framework is often hegemonic. Hegemony is the maintenance of power by ruling people (white elites in the United States) by turning the dominant ideology that supports structural oppression into the "common sense" of the public (Gramsci, 1971). The beliefs, perceptions, values, morals, and explanations of those in power are taken on by large numbers of the broader population despite occupying a very different material reality from those in power. In the context of social work, social justice becomes hegemonic when carceral logics are extended in service provision, when diversity or work with people of color satisfy the optics of anti-racism without requiring deeper interrogation of the work's substance, and when we lack the imagination and practices to actually work toward the elimination of racism.

Social work has defined anti-racist practice with similar ambiguity as social justice, leaving it vulnerable to becoming hegemonic through liberalism. Until recently the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS), the standards that guide all social work education, lacked any mention of racism or anti-racist practice altogether (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015).[1] In a report from the National Association of Social Work (NASW) specifically on action to address institutional racism, anti-racist action was described mostly on the levels of personal awareness, education, and organizational change. The one mention of addressing broader structural racism simply described "promote change" and "use the available resources to challenge racist policies, practices and behaviors" (Craig de Silva & Clark, 2007, p. 21). What is absent speaks volumes: there

is no theory of change, no suggestion of tactics such as community organizing, no naming of goals such as building power in Black, Indigenous, or Brown and poor communities, and no defining of targets such as white communities or political actors. Specificity about anti-racist social work practice is critical; without it, hegemonic notions of racism and anti-racist practice will flourish and social work will fall prey to bolstering structural racism rather than eliminating it (Richie & Martensen, 2020). Abolition, because of its specificity in theory, goals, and practices, offers a stronger conceptualization of anti-racist social work practice.

Abolition praxis

Abolition is a vision and organizing practice intellectually rooted in the multiracial, Black-led Abolitionist Movement of the 18th and 19th centuries that overthrew the institution of slavery. The contemporary abolitionist movement is an extension of this radical Black tradition and seeks to eliminate the use of policing, imprisonment, punishment, and surveillance as institutions and practices that oppress Black, Indigenous, Brown and marginalized communities (Kelley, 2002). Historical and contemporary abolitionist movements understand that full abolition requires a dismantling of racial capitalism––interlocking global systems and practices that produce social and economic profit through the exploitation of people of color, especially Black and Indigenous people (Robinson, 2000; Sinha, 2017).

Both W.E.B. DuBois and Angela Davis studied that particular period of the Abolitionist Movement to further refine a conception of abolition. As Davis asserts, the primary project of abolition is not "a negative process of tearing down" but rather one of collectively "re-imagining institutions, ideas, and strategies, and creating new institutions . . . that render prisons obsolete" (Davis, 2005, p. 75). Neither just theory nor practice, abolition is often discussed as praxis––the ongoing process of using critical theory to inform strategy and practice, then reflecting on that work to further refine theory. Abolition implores us not only to dismantle oppressive institutions but also to build new ways to prevent and respond to harm, create justice, and build truly democratic political power (Du Bois, 1935; Davis, 2005). It is through this realization of self-determination, this building of political and economic power in Black, Indigenous, or Brown and poor communities, that abolition-democracy takes root.

While academic and organizing literatures on abolition consist of different perspectives and nuances, abolitionists converge on three core tenets. First, abolition takes seriously the power of and damage caused by the carceral state. Carcerality is understood to be about social regulation and the maintenance of political power more than it is about addressing crime or enhancing public safety. The expansion of carceral institutions is directly related to divestment from community resources that would enhance health, expand opportunities, and create equity (Richie & Martensen, 2020). The carceral state is understood as an extension of settler colonialism and slavery, oppressing Black, Indigenous, or Brown and marginalized communities (Hernandez, 2017). It is upheld through dominant ideology, the ways our hearts and minds are saturated with carceral logics of control, punishment, and disposal (Kaba, 2021).

A second tenet of abolition is the need to be vigilant about the ways in which advocated changes to carceral institutions can indirectly rely on punishment, sometimes leading to even further expansion or entrenchment with the legal punishment system. Reform efforts can easily be co-opted by the state, even parroting abolitionist language in referencing restorative justice, for example. Rigorous assessment of the impact of any attempted changes to carceral systems is essential, regardless of the stated intention. Approaches to address the host of social issues communities deal with must be developed in ways that do not fall prey to logics of punishment and control (Critical Resistance, 2020; Jacobs et al., 2021; Richie & Martensen, 2020).

A third tenet of abolition is the importance of centering those directly targeted by the carceral state. Organizing centers Black, Indigenous, or Brown and poor people who have been incarcerated, their families, and their broader neighborhoods and communities. The practice of abolition includes community self-determination, collective decision-making, and the building of power in communities targeted by the carceral state (Richie & Martensen, 2020).

In the wake of George Floyd's murder by Minneapolis Police, over 1,700 protests occurred in all 50 U.S. states and 40 countries – pushing the world to imagine abolitionist futures (Smith et al., 2020). The defunding, disbanding, or abolition of law enforcement is being publicly wrestled with in ways previously unimagined. The Minneapolis City Council voted to disband their police department (The Associated Press, 2020). San Francisco's mayor called for all non-emergency 911 calls to be dispatched to non-police officers (Dolan, 2020). New York City proposed a $1 billion cut to their police department, for a reduction of 17% (Rubinstein & Mays, 2020). Los Angeles County voters passed a ballot initiative that will divert 10% of unrestricted funds away from law enforcement and into community services and programs (Cosgrove, 2020). These public conversations and policy debates bring to light several core tensions between abolition praxis and a more liberal version of the social justice paradigm.

Both abolition and liberal social justice paradigms acknowledge the problems of racism and the carceral state, are outraged by police murders (at least of people without a weapon), and want to see changes to carceral systems. When detailed solutions are proposed, however, the distinctions between liberal social justice and abolition frameworks become more pronounced. Abolitionist policies are characterized as those that reduce the funding and scale of carceral institutions, challenge the notion that policing, surveillance, and incarceration increase safety, and reduce the tools, tactics, and technology available to carceral institutions (Critical Resistance, 2020). In this framework, which is widely used by abolition organizers, community policing, body cameras, and more training are "reformist reforms," while reducing the size of the police force, increasing funding for community health, education, housing, and services, and withdrawing police participation in militarization programs are abolitionist policies, even if their impacts are incremental. Abolition requires specificity in assessing policy impacts, preventing social justice frames from bolstering further expansion of carceral state expansion.

These tensions between abolitionist and "reformist reform" social change efforts became clear within social work during the summer 2020 Black Lives Matter uprisings. NASW put out a statement calling for improved training of the police and greater collaboration between social workers and law enforcement. Many social workers were outraged by this hegemonic stance and publicly critiqued the association for suggesting changes that would ultimately strengthen carceral institutions (Dettlaff & Abrams, 2020; Rasmussen & James, 2020). NASW saw themselves as promoting social justice through their approach of becoming more entrenched with law enforcement, demonstrating a clear failure of the social justice paradigm to necessitate anti-racism.

Anti-racist social work praxis

In contrast to the social justice paradigm, abolition would require that social welfare examine and reconceptualize our strategies, theories, practice methods, and research approaches with much greater specificity toward eliminating structural racism. Abolition calls on us to situate our work in its broader historical context and to engage in praxis. It also requires us to take seriously the power and damage caused by white supremacy, to be vigilant about the ways well-intentioned change efforts can reinforce structural racism, and to center those targeted by white supremacy. These core tenets lead to a vision for anti-racist social work praxis that builds power in Black, Indigenous, or Brown and marginalized communities––the embodiment of abolition democracy and social work's value of self-determination. Additional principles further support this primary aim and include the following: 1) engage critical theories to inform education, practice, and research 2) advance macro-level approaches of organizing, advocacy, and social movement mobilization, 3) target racism in dominant communities and institutions, and 4) develop interventions to eliminate and address the effects of racism. Our conceptual model is shown in Figure 1.

Build power in black, indigenous, or brown and poor communities

The relationship between social work and Black, Indigenous, or Brown and poor communities lies within a context of disfigured relationships chiefly created by chattel slavery and settler colonialism in the United States (Wilkerson, 2020). These disfigured relationships have caused white people to be

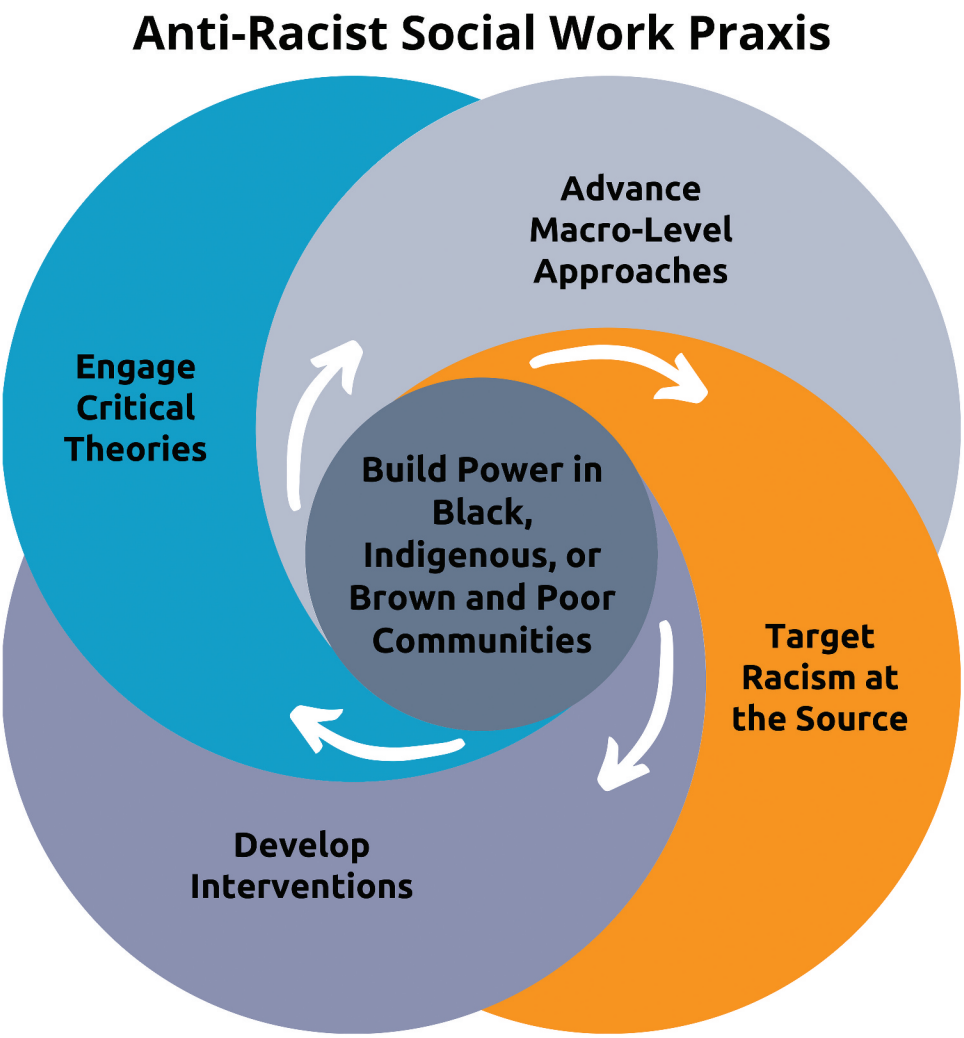

Figure 1. Anti-racist social work praxis is a non-linear process with a central aim of building power in Black, Indigenous, or Brown and poor communities. Additional, interconnected principles are engaging critical theories to inform education, practice, and research; advancing macro-level approaches of organizing, advocacy, and social movement mobilization; targeting racism in dominant communities and institutions; and developing interventions to eliminate and address the effects of racism.

"accustomed to the unearned deference from the subjugated group" (Wilkerson, 2020, p. 51). All other groups in the United States are pushed to survive by aligning their interests with the subjugator and distancing themselves from the most subjugated. Social workers as a profession often operate in the buffer zone of these relations, enacting the agenda of white elites by providing services that manage and prevent rebellion of the subjugated (Kivel, 2017). Social work operates within, perpetuates, and benefits from a social value system that grants those who are white and hold resources the right to make decisions on behalf of all other communities. This results in what Freire refers to as false charity, generosity that is nourished by and therefore can never be the solution to injustice, death, despair, and poverty (Freire, 1970).

The social work profession must work to dismantle disfigured relationships, false charity models, and social justice practices that continually undercut power-building efforts within Black, Indigenous or Brown and marginalized communities. Power, defined in its most simple form, is the ability of a community to make decisions about the things that affect them (Magill &

Clark, 1975). Centering communities directly targeted by structural racism––which requires social work to take seriously issues of grassroots political power––helps ensure that our efforts do not become well-intentioned extensions of white supremacy. It is through this central aim of building decision-making power in Black, Indigenous, or Brown and poor communities that anti-racist social work praxis becomes possible.

Anti-racist social work praxis, as informed by abolition, calls on us to both dismantle and build. We must use all the economic, political, and practice-based resources we hold to dismantle policies, practices, cultural norms, and institutions that disempower and commit violence against Black, Indigenous, or Brown and marginalized communities. We must also support efforts to build political and economic power in Black, Indigenous, or Brown and poor communities. These commitments require social work as a field to rebuild its workforce composition and pipeline, agency level practices, and engagement with community-based practices.

Social work needs to prioritize the development and leadership of social workers from Black, Indigenous, or Brown and marginalized communities. As a starting point, this requires reconsidering how social work education and professionalization are financed and implemented, including addressing curriculum requirements and credentialing processes. This shift in the workforce does not mean there is no role for social workers from the dominant group or that shifting social workers' demographics alone will make anti-racist social work praxis possible. Many of the normative forms of social work practice must end. Social workers can no longer hold the power to shape the conditions of Black, Indigenous, or Brown and poor communities. This power must belong to these communities even if our jobs as we know them must end.

Building power in Black, Indigenous, or Brown and marginalized communities means changing power structures within our organizations. This requires not just transparency but organizational honesty, a high level of openness that includes the sharing of organizational operating information and the context of how resources are acquired and decisions are made (Carruthers, 2018). Comprehensive information must be accessible to all individuals impacted by the organization's work and centering access to Black, Indigenous, or Brown and poor community members. Organizational honesty would serve as the starting point for experiments in creating truly democratic, community-led decision-making practices. Practically, this is no easy task. There is no blueprint for determining who should be included in community-led processes or what practices should be used through disagreements and conflicts. As Miriame Kaba encourages us, "We need a million experiments, A bunch will fail. That's good because we'll have learned a lot that we can apply to the next ones" (Hooks, 2020). Abolition praxis requires evolving reflection and action with the communities we aim to work with toward liberation––prioritizing dialogue, reflection, and communication and ultimately trusting Black, Indigenous, or Brown and marginalized communities and their abilities to reason and make decisions.

Building power includes the creation of new institutions and practices for community healing, accountability, and resource-sharing. Indigenous, Black, and Brown communities and abolitionist healers and organizers have already been leading the way. Healing justice efforts aim to holistically address the consequences of oppression and trauma on our bodies, minds, and spirit, supporting us in dismantling the causes of these harms without recreating them with each other (Carruthers, 2018). Transformative justice involves collective, community-based accountability and responses to harm that center healing for survivors and behavioral change for those that have done harm (Kim, 2019). Mutual aid is social movement work that includes the building of community networks to ensure people have the resources needed to survive––including reappropriating vacant, publicly owned homes for housing or organizing medical care and disaster relief (Spade, 2020). These practices can build power in Black, Indigenous, or Brown and poor communities through the collective creation of solutions to social problems that don't rely on dominant institutions.

Engage critical theories to inform education, practice, and research

Scientific theories from psychology and public health are commonly used in social work. While useful in developing individual-level interventions, they are often devoid of a more critical understanding of the broader historical context and social processes in which social problems are situated. Critical theories addressing race, racism, and anti-racism provoke a deeper wrestling with questions necessary for social work practice to be more effective (Constance-Huggins, 2012). These theories have largely been developed in ethnic and social science disciplines and include but are not exclusive to Critical Race Theory. Some of the theories discussed in this paper, for example, – racial capitalism, hegemony, racial formation, and abolition – are critical theories about racism but are not part of the specific legal and educational canon of Critical Race Theory, per se. Anti-racist social work praxis necessitates a deeper engagement with critical theories to inform our understanding of social problems and assist communities in developing solutions.

Critical theory, if applied as part of anti-racist praxis, would be particularly helpful in safeguarding against social work education, practice, and research directly or indirectly reinforcing structural racism. In the classroom, curricula would be rooted in understanding how systems have historically and currently sanction the violence, genocide, erasure, deprivation, and dispossession of Black and Indigenous peoples' lands, resources, and histories (Abdulle & Obeyesekere, 2017). Learning approaches would center the liberatory visions and learning desires of Black, Indigenous, or Brown and marginalized communities. In practice, the underlying ideologies and logics that inform intervention aims and theories of change would be made explicit. Many interventions would be assessed as harmful or dangerous, such as the separation of children from their families through the child welfare system. Interventions would address aims that have historically been marginalized in social work, such as the building of political and economic power in Black, Indigenous, or Brown and poor communities. In research, it would be required that inquiry aim to change structural conditions, not just study problems, and that studies be conducted through accountable community collaboration. Scholars would be questioned about their connections and commitment to communities they study.

Advance macro-level approaches

Direct services are an essential component of social work and "service is not liberation" (Richie & Martensen, 2020, p. 15). Any individual-level work must also include a macro-level component that aims to eliminate structural racism through policy change. These policies directly impact the individuals, communities, and organizations we serve and can either further enhance structural racism or work toward its elimination. Macro-level interventions such as community organizing, policy advocacy, and social movement participation must become central to the field of social work. Social work can play a role in advancing abolitionist policy agendas––including reducing the power and funding of carceral institutions, expanding voting rights, and transferring wealth back to individuals and communities who have been dispossessed, displaced, and exploited. By engaging in organizing and social movements, social workers can serve as part of a social force much broader than any discipline or institution.

As discussed earlier, we must address power dynamics by engaging and sharing power with those directly impacted by the particular policies we are aiming to address. For example, organizing and advocacy to weaken carceral institutions needs to center the leadership of and be accountable to Black, Indigenous, or Brown and marginalized people and families who have been or are under control of the carceral state. Efforts to abolish the child welfare system need to center the leadership of and be accountable to Black, Indigenous, or Brown and poor youth and families who have been or are under its control. The goal of any macro-level approach needs to be understood as radical policy and culture change to undermine structural racism, not simply liberal reforms that result in softer forms of racism.

Target racism at the source

Eliminating racism requires not only building power in Black, Indigenous, or Brown and poor communities, but also targeting racism at its source––white communities, political actors, and others who support status quo structural racism and dominant institutions. Without this approach, many social work interventions––if focused solely on the targets of structural racism––are simply developing band-aid solutions. Civil Rights and Black Liberation movement leaders have recognized this need as well, calling on white people serious about ending white supremacy to organize white communities for racial justice (American Radio Works, 1966). We have to move beyond people and also explicitly target structurally racist policies. White people must do the individual and collective work to dismantle white supremacy and hold other white people accountable to do the same. More broadly, those of us who are not the targets of anti-Blackness, settler colonialism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, colorism, classism, ableism, homophobia, and transphobia need to organize to end these forms of oppression in our own communities. By owning white supremacy as a problem of dominant communities, social work can more strategically attack racism at the source.

To attack racism at its source, we need skilled, accountable leaders willing to take risks to make systematic changes––not complacent people in power doing the bare minimum and hiding behind performative initiatives like most trainings on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Social work can play a role in training and developing leaders equipped to tackle structural racism, which will then have impact both within and beyond our field. Leaders must target structurally racist, caste-like systems that keep white people at the top and people of color at the bottom. Organizing, critical theory, and internal work are essential for white people to explicitly target structurally racist policies, practices, and ideologies at the level of broader communities.

Develop interventions to eliminate and address the effects of racism

Anti-racist praxis informed by abolition also pushes us further in our discipline's unique goal within the social sciences to transform social structures, not just understand how they work. To this end, our field needs to become focused on developing, implementing, and evaluating interventions to weaken and ultimately eliminate racism. Senator Elizabeth Warren called for such an approach by stating, "It is time we start treating structural racism like we would treat any other public health problem or disease: investing in research into its symptoms and causes and finding ways to mitigate its effects" (Major, 2020). NASW recently called on the Biden-Harris administration to create a task force and establish government funding to address racism as a public health crisis (2021). Social work can apply the scientific rigor we use to address other social problems to the grand challenge of eliminating racism.

Much of social work efforts to address racism focus on understanding and mitigating the effects of racism on health outcomes in communities of color. Improving community health is an important intervention to address racism, but it cannot be the only approach. Additional interventions need to focus on building political and economic power in Black, Indigenous, or Brown and marginalized communities. Social work can play a role in voter mobilization, community organizing, and social movements and in the practices of collective decision-making, healing justice, and transformative justice. Social work can support the building of community wealth through the expansion of affordable housing, government-funded healthcare, education, and caregiving programs; attempting new economic forms outside the domains of capitalism such as mutual aid, cooperative economics, and guaranteed minimum incomes; and redressing historical harms through reparations of money and land to Black, Indigenous, or Brown and marginalized communities.

As described earlier, any efforts to address the effects of racism without focusing on the source of the problem function as band-aids. Social work also needs to develop interventions focused on addressing racism in white communities. Anti-racist interventions could include organizing strategies to mobilize white people into action as part of broader multiracial movements and to increase support

Table 1. Guiding questions for anti-racist social work praxis.

Central aim: Build power in Black, Indigenous, or Brown and poor communities
• How does this praxis dismantle policies, practices, systems, or structures that restrict the power of Black, Indigenous, or Brown and marginalized communities? How does this work strengthen power and accountability within and to communities?
• Are Black, Indigenous, or Brown and poor community members represented at all decision-making levels, including setting goals, managing resources, and assessing progress?
• Are truly collective, democratic decision-making practices being strengthened through this praxis?
Principle 1. Engage critical theories to inform education, practice, and research
• What is the racialized impact of this praxis, regardless of intention?
• What logic and theory of change does this praxis suggest, even implicitly?
• How can we anticipate attempts by dominant institutions to co-opt, repress, or contain this work?
Principle 2. Advance macro-approaches of organizing, advocacy, and movement mobilization
• How does this praxis engage micro and macro-level social workers to advance systems change through policy?
• How do we center the individuals, families, and communities directly impacted by the systems we seek to change in our organizing and advocacy?
• How do we share power, resources, and compensate community stakeholders for their engagement?
Principle 3. Target racism at the source
• How does this praxis move us from just imagining a world that is anti-racist to taking action to achieve this goal?
• What strategies, interventions, and research does this praxis develop to eliminate racism in white communities and dominant institutions?
• What does accountability to Black, Indigenous, or Brown and marginalized communities look like in this praxis?
Principle 4. Develop interventions to eliminate and address the effects of racism
• How does this praxis develop interventions to strengthen political power, economic resources, and health outcomes in Black, Indigenous, or Brown and poor communities? Who is making these assessments and decisions?
• How does this praxis develop interventions to move white people and other dominant group members to stop racist behaviors, move from passive support for the status quo into anti-racist action, and increase support for racial equity policies and power-building in Black, Indigenous, or Brown and marginalized communities?
• Does this praxis reflect bold imagining and not simply the type of work that is funded or valued by dominant institutions?

for racial equity policies. Anti-racist interventions could also take the form of therapeutic work to develop individual and collective competencies for stopping racist behaviors and engaging in anti-racist action as well as organizational development work to enhance anti-racist structures, policies, and practices. Additional interventions could focus on addressing anti-Blackness, settler colonialism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, colorism, classism, ableism, homophobia, and transphobia in communities not targeted by these specific forms of oppression.

Taken together, the central aim and further principles of anti-racist social praxis provoke further questions. These guiding questions can be used to assess the extent to which our praxis––the ongoing process of action and reflection––furthers the elimination of structural racism. These guiding questions are found in Table 1.

Tools for anti-racist praxis

As social workers, we know anti-racist work is challenging! However, we unequivocally believe that this work must happen for any of our work to be effective. Social work's grand challenge of eliminating racism has implications for all of us regardless of racial identification and economic stratification. *Humanity* has been divided, subjugated, and controlled by racism. Furthermore, our collective future––or it's possibility, very much depends on our willingness to individually and collectively acknowledge, heal, and dismantle the vestiges of racism in our ideologies, institutions, interpersonal ways of being, and internalized self. Here we share a praxis framework centered around bias, intention setting, and ground rules (B.I.G.) that has been beneficial to us on our journey to eliminate racism and other vestiges of oppression from within our practice.

Social work often posits that we must see people (including ourselves) within their environment––yet what does that mean when discussing and actualizing the work to become anti-racist practitioners? Activist Adrienne Maree Brown similarly ponders that question and concludes that the systems we seek to transform are "peopled, in part, by the same flawed complex individuals that

I [we] love" (Brown, 2020, p. 68). In her acknowledgment and reflection, brown discusses the necessity of humility in how anti-racist practitioners see themselves, each other, and the tools of transformation.

In understanding that we all have unlearning to do, we must critically examine our formal and informal educational systems for conscious and unconscious bias. Education can be utilized to maintain the status quo or as a tool of liberation (Freire, 1970). Most of us are taught to absorb knowledge without critical engagement, the banking system of education that maintains the ideologies and practices of oppression. The first tool we can utilize in anti-racist work is thus a recognition that we all come to it with various lived experiences often convoluted with some degree of Bias––whether racial, gender, sexual, cultural, or political.

It is through recognition and action toward dismantling bias (including our own) that we can show up with the humility necessary to engage in liberatory practices. bell hooks cautions that this unpacking is not going to be easy and asks that we commit to "brave space" (hooks, 1994). Brave space is a process that must be operationalized and co-created by participants and involve as a primary component Intention setting. This can be something as simple as asking each member to declare their intentions or values before engaging in anti-racist work. Clearly expressed and co-created intentions allow us to create *accountability* toward brave space.

Recognizing *bias* and *intention* setting are precursory steps to creating brave space, given that it is not a matter of "if" but "when" conflict will occur (hooks, 1994). The final tool we will share is called Ground rules––a living document co-created by practitioners committed to anti-racist praxis. Ground rules outline how committed anti-racist practitioners will engage as we collectively seek to understand varied lived experiences and responses to harm while taking steps toward collective healing and liberation from oppressive systems. Examples of co-created ground rules are as follows: 1) Committing to call in vs. call out, 2) Using human-centered language, 3) Seeking understanding, 4) Committing to critical, reflective, and vulnerable communication, and 5) Honoring our collective healing process.

The last ground rule is of particular importance for social workers seeking to eliminate racism––a sickness weaved into the very fabric of the United States. Tackling racism at the root will trigger, provoke, and create immense tension within our communities. However, tension is not a bad thing and is often a prelude to growth. The tension can only be held when we consider our individual and collective trauma from centuries of oppression. Healing must be a priority as we work toward actualizing a society in which every human being can self-actualize and be free from harm.

Discussion

Embracing anti-racist social work praxis would require significant changes in how our discipline operates. Manifesting such changes would be far from simplistic as the gap between who we are as a discipline and who we would like to become is vast; however, a few challenges we must immediately grapple with include the significant gap in preparation of our current workforce, the misalignment between the current roles of many social workers and anti-racist social work praxis, and lack of will.

Social work professionals must be prepared to engage critical theories to embrace an anti-racist social work praxis; however, a large number of current professionals may be unfamiliar with these theories (Constance-Huggins, 2012). Those unfamiliar may include social work professionals we typically rely on to educate our larger workforce, including social work educators and professional leaders. Similarly, embracing anti-racist social work praxis requires our professionals to advance macro-level approaches to eliminate structural racism but many social workers' initial education may not have included adequate development of macro-social work practices (McBeath, 2016). In order to move anti-racist social work praxis forward, continuing education must include universal exposure and embracement of critical race theories and macro-practice skills, this content must be incorporated into degree programs' coursework, and training on how to effectively teach this content must be provided to social work educators and leaders. A variety of different entities would need to

coordinate efforts to shift social work educational practices in these manners. Which institutions in our profession will ultimately be responsible for developing, funding, implementing, and holding the profession accountable to such a revamp of our educational foundations?

As social workers begin to embrace anti-racist social work praxis, they may conclude that their current roles do not allow them to practice in a manner that aligns with its foundational principles. While we do not entirely dismiss the idea that social workers can be agents of change within organizations that do not embrace anti-racist social work praxis, we also believe it essential for social workers to refuse to continue to support racist practices and policies. Dismantling white supremacy requires divesting from it, including divesting our labor (Stevenson & Blakey, 2021). As some social workers begin to divest from working in immigrant detention centers, police departments, jails, prisons, and child welfare services, they may need support to find and prepare for new positions. In addition, funding and additional supports must exist to encourage the creation of organizations committed to anti-racist social work praxis and positions in which social workers can practice in such a fashion. Our current racial capitalist systems will not adequately fund work that aims to eliminate structural racism (Incite! Women of Color Against Violence (Ed.), 2017), meaning much of the work necessary to live up to the grand challenge may not be fund-able or carried out as part of our formal employment roles. How do we hold this tension of needing adequate compensation to live and have our work valued while also recognizing that much of the deeper structural change work required of us may not be compensated? In this sense, efforts to eliminate racism may be at odds with the hyper-professionalization of social work itself.

While inadequate preparation and misalignment in current roles are significant challenges to the profession-wide embracement of anti-racist social work praxis, the most daunting barrier is will. As members of a society that has embraced white supremacy so fully, untangling ourselves from its grips is a daunting task that requires constant attention. While current events have turned many members of our profession's attention to racial justice issues, only long-term commitment could lead to the implementation of anti-racist social work praxis as we have proposed in this paper. Additionally, social workers have benefited from white supremacy shaping our profession to fit within its bounds; thus challenging white supremacy will undoubtedly require members of our profession to forfeit power and privileges to which they have become accustomed. Social workers must develop the will to begin and sustain anti-racist praxis even through the challenges, risks, punishments, and danger that often accompany racist backlash. How do we build the political, psychological, and spiritual will to eliminate racism across the multiracial, white-dominant, and geographically diverse profession of social workers in the United States?

Conclusion

The adoption of Eliminating Racism as the 13th Grand Challenge of Social Work presents us all with important opportunities in our efforts to address structural racism. As we contend throughout this paper, our discipline's ability to live up to this grand challenge would be greatly enhanced by replacing the predominant social justice paradigm with principles informed by abolition praxis. Abolition requires us to situate our work in its broader historical context, to constantly engage in the praxis of critical reflection and action, and to center those targeted by white supremacy. Abolition calls on us to reconceptualize our anti-racist efforts with more specificity and to be vigilant about the ways well-intentioned change efforts can reinforce structural racism.

In this paper, we offer a conceptual framework, principles, and guiding questions to inform anti-racist social work praxis, as informed by abolition. All anti-racist social work praxis needs to take as its central aim the building of power in Black, Indigenous, or Brown and poor communities. The additional principles of engaging critical theories, advancing macro-level approaches, targeting racism at the source, and developing anti-racist interventions are also critical components of comprehensively working toward the elimination of racism. Racism is everywhere; to work toward its elimination we must build specific, proactive strategies.

The work ahead of us will not be easy. While Black, Indigenous, or Brown and marginalized communities continue to lead resistance to white supremacy and efforts to eliminate structural racism, none of us entirely know the answers. In addition to the framework and guiding questions offered here, we provide tools for groups to engage in anti-racist praxis through a framework of B.I.G., recognizing our [B]ias, setting Intentions, and co-creating Ground rules. This tool can be utilized to support groups in working through the various challenges and resistances we will encounter as part of our active participation in the generations-long struggle to eliminate white supremacy. We offer this work in honor of the racial justice, liberation movements before us and in service to the anti-racist work we hope to see social work authentically, accountably practice in the years to come.

Note

1. After pushback from faculty and students around the country, in August 2020 CSWE launched a taskforce to Advance Anti-Racism in Social Work Education. Drafts of the upcoming EPAS may address the unacceptable absence of anti-racist practice in the standards.

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