

Two Scenarios

The purpose of this section is for you to reflect on two different hypothetical examples of interactions between white social workers and clients of color. We have created these examples as a way to highlight how white social workers can bring an anti-racist perspective to our work.

This first scenario was slightly adapted from Paul Kivel's book *Uprooting Racism* (2002) in a chapter about how to be a white ally to a person of color. In the following interaction, Roberto is a young Latino man just coming out of an interview with a job placement worker. Roberto is angry, not sure what to do next. He walks down the hall and meets his white social worker, Alan, who wants to help.

Alan: *Roberto, How's it going?*

Roberto: *What a racist! He wasn't going to give me a job. That was really messed up.*

Alan: *Hold on there, don't be so angry. It was probably a mistake or something.*

Roberto: *There was not mistake. He is racist, that's all there is to it. He wants to keep me from getting a good job. Rather have us all on welfare or doing maintenance work.*

Alan: *Calm down now or you'll get yourself in more trouble. Don't go digging a hole for yourself. Maybe I could help you if you weren't so angry.*

Roberto: *That's easy for you to say. This man was discriminating against me. White folks are all the same They talk about equal opportunity, but it's the same old shit.*

Alan: *Wait a minute. I didn't have anything to do with this. Don't blame me, I'm not responsible. I'm trying to help you! I'm not a racist. If you wouldn't be so angry, maybe I could help you. You probably took what he said the wrong way. Maybe you were too sensitive.*

Roberto: *I could tell he was racist. That's all. (he storms off).*

What did you notice about this scene? Alan is concerned and is trying to help, but his intervention is not very effective. He immediately downplays the incident discounting Roberto's feelings and doubting the possibility of racism. He seems to think that racism is unlikely, that it was just a misunderstanding, or that Roberto was being too sensitive. Alan was uncomfortable with Roberto's anger. He ends up feeling attacked for being white. He focuses on Roberto's anger and his generalizations about white people. He threatens to get Roberto in trouble himself if Roberto doesn't calm down. As he walks away, he may be thinking it's no wonder Roberto didn't get hired for the job. In criticizing the way Roberto expresses his anger, Alan deflects attention and action away from the injustice that was committed.

Here is another way that Alan could have responded to Roberto:

Alan: *Hi Roberto, what's happening?*

Roberto: *What a racist!! He wasn't going to give me a job. He was messing with me.*

Alan: *You're really upset. Tell me what happened.*

Roberto: *He was discriminating against me. Wasn't going to hire me because I'm Latino. White folks are all alike. Always playing games.*

Alan: *This sounds very serious. Why don't you come into my office and tell me exactly what happened.*

Roberto: *Okay, this company is advertising for computer programmers and I'm qualified for the job. But this man tells me there aren't any computer jobs, and then he tries to steer me toward a janitor job. He is a racist bastard.*

Alan: *That's tough. I know you would be good in that job. This sounds like a possible case of job discrimination. Let's write down exactly what happened, and then you can decide what you want to do about it*

Roberto: *I want to get that job.*

Alan: *If you want to challenge it, I'll help you. Maybe there's something we can do together.*

This time Alan listened to Roberto, and acted as an ally.

In this next hypothetical scenario, we look at what often happens when white social workers do a home visit.

A white social worker, Susan, does a home visit to evaluate a child protection case involving a nine year old African American boy named Kevin. School personnel reported the situation to CWS because Kevin had missed many days of school or come late. Sometimes, his clothing was too big or he was not dressed for winter. Multiple times an adult failed to pick Kevin up from school. In addition, Kevin had asthma that was not being managed.

The house is in a poor African American neighborhood that the social worker has only visited to investigate child protection cases. Kevin is living with his grandmother, Carol, who is also caring for four other grandchildren ages 2 to 15. She has diabetes and has difficulty walking. They live in a home with two bedrooms, one bathroom, and an unfinished attic space that is also used as a bedroom. Kevin's mother also lives there. The social worker does not know anything about Kevin's father.

When Susan arrives at the house she observes a lot of commotion. An older child appears to be in charge of making dinner and caring for the younger children. The attic space where Kevin sleeps is not properly heated, and feels very cold to Susan. When asked about the issues that initiated the case, the grandmother responds that Kevin's mother is responsible for taking him to school and getting him home, however, his mother has just been assigned a midnight to 9 am work shift at the hospital janitorial services where she works full-time. It is also quite a distance from their home and she has been having some problems with their old car. Kevin's grandmother says that she has been administering Kevin's asthma medication as directed. Susan asks to see the medicine, and the grandmother says that she hasn't been able to make it to the pharmacy that week.

Susan notes that Kevin's mother has not made it a priority to get Kevin to school on time or to dress him appropriately. She also notes that the grandmother apparently doesn't

care about getting Kevin's medicine or making sure his bedroom is warm enough. Susan assumes that Kevin's father is either in prison or has simply disappeared when in reality he is working in another state in order to send money home to his family. Susan reports to her supervisor that she believes that Kevin should be moved into foster care for his protection.

There are many potential questions and responses that could arise from this situation depending on from what perspective Susan views this family.

- How does Susan's comfort/discomfort in the neighborhood affect her decision making skills?
- What judgments does Susan make about a grandparent as primary caregiver to a number of children instead of the parents?
- How does Susan view the family's transportation difficulties? Does she see this as the fault of the family, or a societal/equity that the mother is working nights, likely at a low wage, as well as how accessible public transit is in the city?
- Why does Susan assume that Kevin's father is in prison?

What are other ways in which Susan's assumption might have impacted her decision?
How does race influence these decisions?