White Privilege and Racism in Child Welfare

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Background

The purpose of this module is to assist child welfare workers and other social workers in understanding white privilege and racism, and how it affects both the study of child welfare and the practices we employ as child welfare workers.

As social workers, our Code of Ethics highlights the importance of paying attention to the forces that "create, contribute to, and address problems in living…." We are called upon to promote social justice, social change and to work with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people (NASW Code of Ethics, 2008). Having an understanding of how racism and white privilege have historically impacted the child welfare system and continue to do so today is necessary in order to create a less oppressive system. In addition to providing a historical overview and a discussion of some current issues, we present a number of activities for individuals to help address racism and white privilege.

As white social work educators, we have created this module primarily for white social workers and students since we believe it is our responsibility as white people to educate each other about the damaging effects of racism and white privilege in child welfare work and not rely on people of color to do this work alone.

While racism is more commonly addressed in social work courses and trainings, frequently white privilege, the flip side of the coin, remains unaddressed. Whiteness often goes unnamed. For those of us who are white, it is important to recognize that we too have cultural norms and ways of seeing the world that affect everything we do. Many white/European-American people say, 'I don't have a culture.' It's not that we do not have a culture, we just view our culture as normative. Like fish in water, we don't have to think about the air we breathe. Our goal is to address the invisibility of white privilege for white people. Learning about our own background and culture enables us to come to all our relationships in a more authentic way.

This module is not designed to document the existence of racism, as there are many other sources for that which will be highlighted in the bibliography. Similarly, this module is not

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a research study to investigate if there is racism in the field. Lastly, this is not a 'cultural competency' training that is designed to educate us about different cultures. Rather we are providing a brief overview of the impact of and potential responses to racism and white privilege within social work and child welfare. This project is not about blaming or shaming white people! It's an educational tool for us to use to challenge institutional racism and white privilege in our everyday lives and at our workplaces.

How does racism harm white people?

As a result of white supremacy/racism, white people cannot be whole human beings. If we do not treat people of color as equals, we not only deny them their own humanity, but we deny ourselves as well. We believe that part of being fully human means treating each other with dignity, and practicing a belief that all people should have the chance to reach their full potential. White people cannot reach our full potential as humans if we treat people of color as lesser human beings.

How does racism harm people of color?

Racism harms people of color, and kills them. White supremacy affects their health, safety, educational aspirations, access to housing, economic options and psychological well-being (Kivel, 2002). Effects of racism are associated with psychiatric symptoms, physical diseases, and the general well being of people of color (Klonoff and Landrine, 1999; Miller & Garran, 2007). A study published in the American Journal of Public Health estimated that hundreds of thousands of deaths could have been prevented from 1991 to 2000 if African Americans had received the same care as whites (Woolf, 2004).

Four Interconnected Parts of Racism/White Supremacy

Systemic racism dramatically affects people of color in every aspect of their lives. Even when it is not visible, white supremacy shapes how all social institutions operate, including the child welfare system. We want to highlight four ways that white supremacy shapes institutions where we work.

Standards—the standards for appropriate behavior reflect and privilege white norms and values which represent the dominant culture.

For example, individualism is typically a Eurocentric value.   Many other cultures place more of a value/emphasis on collectivism, and communal sharing. A white social worker may unfairly assume that a child sharing a bed with his parents is unhealthy.

Decision-making—the capacity to make and enforce decisions is disproportionately or unfairly distributed along racial lines.

The vast majority of legislators are white, the majority of those making decisions on a daily basis about child welfare are white, whereas those affected by these decisions are

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predominantly people of color. The power to make decisions does not rest in the hands of those who are most affected by the decision.

Resources—People of color do not have the same access as white people to resources like money, education, and information.

For example, if a Latino family comes to the U.S. and does not speak English, it is likely that they will not be able to access the same level of information that English-speaking families can access when it comes to healthcare, social services or education. It is also likely that they may be discriminated against in the job market.

Naming Reality—"reality" is defined by naming "the problem" through the perspective of White dominant culture. Who gets to name "the problem" determines the framework for solutions

For example, defining the problem as black men are mostly criminals RATHER than impact institutional racism within the education, legal, economic systems has on black men.

Therefore, white people who have power systemically…
- Set the standards by which people of color are judged;
- Make and enforce decisions that may negatively affect people of color;
- Have access to the distribution of resources that shape the lives of people of color; and
- Define the parameters and frameworks within which conversation takes place, and policy is set.

Contemporary Effects of White Privilege and Racism on the Child Welfare System

We understand the dilemmas and contradictions of living in a system where racism remains so prevalent. We, as white people who study the impacts of racism, struggle every day as we see media stereotypes and curricula that inaccurately portray the complex lives of people of color in the U.S./st1:country-region> We know how easy it is to fall prey to simplistic characterizations of African Americans, Latina/os, Asian Americans and American Indians. Social workers are not immune to these sterotypes. No one alive today created racial injustice, but many of us inadvertently perpetuate it. We believe that white privilege and racism influence the decisions that many white social workers make. Below, we list examples of how white privilege and racism affects the child welfare system.

Racial Disparities and Disproportionality in Child Mistreatment Cases

Multiple studies have shown that child maltreatment is experienced across races at approximately the same rates, however, black children enter the system at much higher rate (Casey Family Programs, 2008; Cross, 2008; Rivaux, 2008). In addition, children of

color are less likely to receive services, and more likely to be removed from their homes (Cross, 2008; Rivaux, 2008). African American children represent 15% of the general child population, but comprise approximately 42% of the children in Child Welfare Services (Hines et al, 2004). Studies tell us that racial disparities cannot be explained by poverty and substance abuse alone (McRoy, 2004). McRoy, a social work researcher, educator, and scholar, writes, "It is time that we acknowledge that the overrepresentation of African American children in the system has been affected by racism and racial inequities in the child welfare practice and policy arena, economic system, criminal justice system, legal system, and welfare system, as well as society as a whole (p 56)." However unequivocally proving that racism is the cause of disparities is very difficult. Cross, social work educator and executive director of National Indian Child Welfare Association, writes, "The real culprit appears to be our own [social workers] desire to do good and to protect children from perceived threats and our unwillingness to come to terms with our fears, deeply ingrained prejudices, and ignorance of those who are different from us (p 11)." According to Cross, these factors result from race or culture bias (frequently unintended) that pervades the field of social work.

Frequently young, female white social workers are responsible for investigating child maltreatment in neighborhoods the are unfamiliar with and often feel unsafe in themselves. This often affects their judgment on whether the place is safe for the child. Stereotypes and prejudices by white social workers are regularly used to justify the "rescue" of children from environments they judge as unwholesome (Weinberg, 2006). In her article, Pregnant with possibility: The Paradoxes of "help" as anti-oppression and discipline with a young single mother, Weinberg describes how white social workers' passion for child safety are magnified when families are of a culture that is perceived to be of risk to the child. Social workers may believe that the child welfare system offers a better or more hopeful future for children. As a result of these factors, many communities of color view child welfare as a threat to their families' well-being rather than a support. Weinberg goes on to demonstrates how social worker definitions of 'normal' or 'dominant' determines what characteristics they see as strengths and weaknesses of their clients. For example, if there are many people living in a household, it may appear to a white social worker that there is chaos in the household, and the children are not being cared for properly. In many communities of color, having a household with many adults and children is not problematic because a larger community offers more care for children, not less care. Weinberg recommends that workers reflect on how the privilege of the social worker is recognized in a situation and how is it a barrier to connecting with the client. It is understandable that a social worker's own definitions and experiences of 'normal' would affect how the social worker judges a family.

Educational Opportunities for White Social Workers

Approximately 70% of those receiving social work degrees (BA, MA, and PhD) are white and approximately 25% of all Social Work faculty members were identified as people of color (CSWE, 2007). In the child welfare system, the majority of workers are white and the majority of those they are serving are families of color (McRoy, 2004).

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We support the efforts of Social Work schools to offer courses on "diversity" and "cultural competency." The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE)'s guidelines for social work program accreditation recommends:

Social work programs integrate content that promotes understanding, affirmation, and respect for people from diverse backgrounds. The content emphasizes the interlocking and complex nature of culture and personal identity. It ensures that social services meet the needs of groups served and are culturally relevant. Programs educate students to recognize diversity within and between groups that may influence assessment, planning, intervention, and research. Students learn how to define, design, and implement strategies for effective practice with persons from diverse backgrounds.

Social work education programs integrate content on populations-at-risk, examining the factors that contribute to and constitute being at risk. Programs educate students to identify how group membership influences access to resources, and present content on the dynamics of such risk factors and responsive and productive strategies to redress them.

Programs integrate social and economic justice content grounded in an understanding of distributive justice, human and civil rights, and the global interconnections of oppression. Programs provide content related to implementing strategies to combat discrimination, oppression, and economic deprivation and to promote social and economic justice. Programs prepare students to advocate for nondiscriminatory social and economic systems (CSWE, 2001).

However frequently this means students take one class on 'diversity,' without studying white privilege, racism and developing a self-awareness of attitudes and preconceptions about people of color. This limited preparation in working with culturally diverse populations results in using white middle-class norms as a indicator for family evaluations (McRoy, 2004).

We believe that confronting white privilege and racism is a life long journey for white people. Frequently "diversity" trainings do not address power and privilege. Many "Cultural Competency" trainings assume that we will become "competent" if we get enough information about a particular group.

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