

# The Dystopian World of Social Work Education

*by Naomi Farber*

**W**ithin the last few years, I suspected that a doctoral student who is “BIPOC” plagiarized a paper for the theory seminar I teach at the University of South Carolina College of Social Work. Per university policy, I reported the student to the Office of Academic Integrity. The student was found responsible for plagiarism and immediately appealed the decision. A second time, the OAI found the student responsible. In the meantime, at the strong urging of several faculty in my college the student filed a formal grievance against me for discrimination. According to their social justice principles, I had imposed oppressive white supremacist norms of scholarship by not sufficiently appreciating the student’s identity-based way of knowing—that apparently includes stealing other people’s ideas and words. What’s going on?

## Social Work in the Academy

Amidst openly expressed dismay over the growing dominance of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and related ideologi-

cal “theories” associated with social justice across academic and professional disciplines, there has been scant examination of whether these ideas are present in schools of social work, and if so their sources and influence.

A National Association of Scholars’ report by Professor Barry Latzer of CUNY’s John Jay College of Criminal Justice and Scott Talkington broke this near silence in 2007 and examined standards of accreditation and student assessment, mission statements, and course descriptions in ten major schools of social work. The report concluded that, “Reckoned against traditional academic ideals of open-inquiry, partisan disengagement, and intellectual pluralism, the results are scandalous.”<sup>1</sup> Unequivocal as this characterization was over fifteen years ago, the continuing abandonment of scholarly objectivity and intellectual diversity in social work renders such alarm almost quaintly understated today. Social justice doctrine has become even more widely and deeply entrenched within social work academe than what David Randall subse-

quently reported for NAS in 2019; and the application of this creed is enforced aggressively by institutionally internal and external, formal and informal sources of professional authority.<sup>2</sup>

The adoption of “antiracist” DEI ideology pervades nearly all aspects of social work education and scholarship, and ever more so actual practice. The calls to “decenter whiteness” and “decolonize” curricula are ubiquitous among schools of social work including those at the most prestigious and hence most influential universities. Here I build on Latzer’s and Randall’s findings and discuss selected means of coercing this political obeisance through academic accreditation, intellectual gatekeeping by professional organizations and their peer-reviewed journals, and the enthusiasm of schools of social work to adopt or even amplify the reach of such compulsion. The changes that have occurred already threaten the value of a once-respectable profession as successive cohorts of social workers enter the field prepared to act more as social justice warriors than trustworthy providers of important services to vulnerable people.

## The Historic Mission Betrayed

Lodging social work education within institutions of higher learning in the early twentieth century led to predictable tensions between academic and professional norms, expectations, and purposes partly because of the conflicts inherent in being an explicitly val-

ue-based profession with longstanding aspirations to be scientific. Despite assiduous and in limited respects successful efforts to develop knowledge for practice, social work always has been a weak member of the academic disciplines. The profession borrows prodigiously from other disciplines, often with superficial understanding, and frequently follows intellectual fads uncritically.<sup>3</sup>

Two such recent fads infecting the social work academy are particularly nefarious. One is the wholehearted adoption of the notion of *intersectionality*. Based on legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw’s ostensible theory, it views human experience primarily in terms of how categorical identities such as race, class, or sexual orientation intersect to determine one’s position within society in terms of privilege and oppression.<sup>4</sup> Social work students once were taught to view each person as a unique individual with the capacity for self-direction and freedom within the legal and normative bounds of our society. Now, social work students learn to parse and judge people’s location within the system of oppression—victim or perpetrator—by virtue of their identities.

The other fad is the au courant use of *antiracist*. This term was coined and tautologically defined by historian Ibram X. Kendi as, “One who is supporting an antiracist policy through their actions or expressing an antiracist idea.”<sup>5</sup> According to Kendi and his many acolytes, treating individuals as such is anathema because systemic racism must be dis-

mantled through category-based anti-racist discrimination.

Mischaracterized by devotees as actual theories rather than political opinions, these and other deeply illiberal ideas have been woven together in a vision of social justice expressed by values of antiracism, diversity, equity, and inclusion, creating havoc within social work academe remarkably quickly. The path to this ADEI utopia requires that antiracist faculty and students “do the work” of becoming self-loathing, and ashamed of their profession as a form of white supremacist oppression of the very people served.

Such ideas within the general category of CRT-informed DEI are the antithesis of the traditional mission of social work: To “enhance individual worth, to encourage each person to the full use of his powers and to active participation in our society.”<sup>6</sup> Their ascendancy in the context of widespread academic anti-intellectualism and rejection of truth and objectivity in the search for knowledge together create fertile ground for enhancing the profession’s worst and diminishing its best impulses. Despite always being receptive to left-leaning collectivist sway, thoughtful scholars in social work once wrestled with the timeless questions of how best to discharge our moral responsibility toward fellow citizens, in particular how to help clients flourish in a liberal democracy that is flawed yet provides the best protection against true oppression.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, the profession is turning against itself and the impulses that gave

it life and sustenance. Members of social work academe are well on the road to substituting ideology for the critical thinking required to engage in mature and complex reasoning about the perennial difficulties of human life, some of which can be ameliorated, even prevented, others less so.

## Accreditation: CSWE

In 1943 the American Association of Schools of Social Work developed the first “Manual of Accrediting,” identifying standards for membership. Beyond being part of a college or university accredited for graduate education, eligibility was based on a school demonstrating basic organizational and academic capacity to meet the program’s mission, changing only modestly when the AASW was replaced by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) in 1953. During the 1960s the profession became more involved in community organizing and social action. This increasingly explicit politicization was expressed in the 1971 standards requiring that schools include a statement of “non-discrimination and affirmative efforts” to “enrich its program by providing racial and cultural diversity in its student body, faculty, and staff” followed in 1979 by the demand for “equity” in all aspects of program implementation.<sup>8</sup>

CSWE joined the accreditation bandwagon in 2008 by adopting a competency-based approach assessing measurable outcomes of students rather than achievement of program objectives.<sup>9</sup> While the subsequent 2015 standards

predictably included students being competent to “*Advance human rights and social, racial, economic, and environmental Justice*,” in 2022 CSWE upped the ante considerably with an additional requirement embracing “*anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion*.” In these new standards, CSWE requires programs to demonstrate that:

Social work programs integrate anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion (ADEI) approaches across the curriculum. Programs provide the context through which students learn about their positionality, power, privilege, and difference and develop a commitment to dismantling systems of oppression, such as racism, that affect diverse populations. Programs recognize the pervasive impact of White supremacy and privilege and prepare students to have the knowledge, awareness, and skills necessary to engage in anti-racist practice . . . Faculty and administrators model anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice.<sup>10</sup>

While many schools of social work had already incorporated the ideological assumptions of the new standard, all schools now must fall into line if they want to be accredited. However, it would be wrong to imagine that many schools of social work are resisting this control by CSWE. On the contrary, the enthusiastic rapidity with which schools have integrated these mandates into the very fabric of educational practice suggests wholesale agreement and willing collaboration, often in full partnership with the DEI apparatus of their home institutions.

## CSWE in Action

While CSWE permits schools leeway in many aspects of program structure and content, for example offering specializations such as clinical or policy practice, what and how they teach must explicitly support the Council’s vision of social justice through principles of antiracism, diversity, equity, and inclusion. In many top-tier schools of social work one need look no farther than their recently revised missions and objectives for evidence of orthodoxy. At UC Berkeley, the mission of the MSW program is to educate social workers to “advance the pursuit for social and economic justice through anti-oppressive and anti-racist practices.”<sup>11</sup> Columbia University’s mission declares the intention “to interrogate racism and other systems of oppression standing in the way of social equity and justice,”<sup>12</sup> and the Brown School at Washington University is “committed to creating new knowledge to counter the effects of systemic oppression and racism to build a more just and equitable world.”<sup>13</sup> At the University of Washington, the first goal of the MSW program is: “To prepare social workers to proactively engage in life-long commitments to achieve racial, economic, and social justice, foregrounded in dismantling systems of white supremacy.”<sup>14</sup>

Even when the mission of the school of social work appears to express a more moderate vision of social justice—for example the aspiration of the University of Michigan, my MSW alma mater, to “develop a more equitable, caring, and so-

cially just society”—the curriculum tells a more troubling story.<sup>15</sup> At Michigan the required course, *Engaging Social Justice, Diversity, and Oppression in Social Work*, provides students the “opportunity to critically examine how our multiple status locations, societal constructions, and social processes shape our beliefs, assumptions, behaviors, and life experiences.” Once identified, these qualities must be interrogated and corrected by the MSW program because, as the syllabus instructs,

In the context of social injustice, education can never be politically neutral: if it does not side with the poorest and marginalized sectors—the “oppressed”—in an attempt to transform society, then it necessarily sides with the “oppressors” in maintaining the existing structures of oppression, even if by default.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to their program missions, objectives, and curricula, schools reveal their ideological fealty to ADEI by other means, typified by the University of Houston’s official “Racial Justice Principles” that include, “We believe that racial justice requires a shared understanding of structural, systemic, interpersonal, and internalized racism” that “requires striving toward solidarity in the pursuit of liberation; therefore, we commit to acknowledging that our complex and intersectional histories are shaped by White supremacy and to honoring the strengths and resilience of all Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.”<sup>17</sup>

Undergraduate and MSW students are not alone in being indoctrinated; the profession’s future teachers and scholars are also learning how to carry on the

battle for social justice in their doctoral programs.

## GADE

Social work programs granting a Ph.D. have successfully resisted formal oversight through accreditation by CSWE. However, in 1977 the Group for Advancement of Doctoral Education (GADE) was established, “To promote excellence and equity in social work doctoral education.”<sup>18</sup> In 2020 GADE, constituted by directors of doctoral programs, issued a “Statement on Anti-racism” calling for: “the dismantling of systemic racism, police brutality, and White supremacy. The system that supports White supremacy and oppresses people of color must end and make way for the just and equitable treatment of all.”

Specifying how doctoral education in social work can help achieve this vision, the 2023 recommended guidelines that “incorporate national trends that move universities toward policies and practices that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion and that honor principles of anti-racism and social justice” through eight programmatic domains. Arguably, the two most important domains of doctoral education prepare students to teach and to conduct research. According to GADE’s guidelines, doctoral graduates should be skilled in “inclusive, anti-oppressive pedagogy” and conducting “socially just, ethical, and inclusive research” with the capacity to “formulate rigorous, meaningful research questions, including questions that incorporate race/ethnicity and social justice.”<sup>19</sup>

The full responsibility to inculcate correct values and skills in doctoral students, who go on to uplift their own students, does not rest solely with educational programs; they are supported in various ways by such influential organizations as the Society for Social Work Research.

## SSWR

Each year faculty and doctoral students eagerly await to learn whether their proposals have been accepted for inclusion at the most prestigious of the social work conferences, organized by the Society for Social Work Research (SSWR). Founded in 1994 as a free-standing organization “dedicated to the advancement of social work research,”<sup>20</sup> SSWR generally has been regarded as a serious organization whose members include the profession’s leading scholars. Formerly a strong advocate for the highest standards of scientific inquiry as the basis for professional practice, SSWR now directs its efforts explicitly to supporting “Rigorous Research for Social Justice.” Accordingly, the theme of the 2024 conference is “Recentring & Democratizing Knowledge: The Next 30 Years of Social Work Science” including the challenge to “social work scholars (scientists) to think critically about how their scholarship advances decolonization and anti-oppression within their communities of practice.”<sup>21</sup>

At the conference, in addition to the papers and posters reflecting this theme, recipients of faculty and student awards

will be acknowledged. Primary criteria for awards include:

the ways in which candidates’ research represents rigorous and critical analysis of the processes of marginalization, privilege, power, colonization, or oppression that are relevant to their substantive area” because the organization is “committed to recognizing, honoring, and elevating research that engages processes and lived experiences tied to race/ethnicity, class/caste, culture, gender and gender presentation, sexuality, ability (among others) that do not reinforce colonialist or essentialist representations of these socially constructed positionalities.”<sup>22</sup>

Not only scholarly knowledge is disseminated at this and other major professional conferences such as CSWE’s Annual Program Meeting. These conferences include screening interviews for faculty positions with applicants whose DEI statements have already indicated acceptable thinking. Interviewees understand that the coveted invitation to campus for the next round of interviews depends upon giving further evidence of acculturation into the social work academy’s ideological commitments.

Another, perhaps even more important venue for enforcement of ideology is peer-reviewed journals. Here, too, the priorities of ADEI influence the very definition and dissemination of professional knowledge.

## Journal Priorities

SSWR publishes a prominent peer-reviewed journal, *JSSWR*, that furthers the profession’s scholarly interests. *JSSWR* claims to publish research that represents “a wide range of perspec-

tives, research approaches, and types of analyses,” but only if findings of such research “contribute to meaningful and actionable social change.” More specifically, the journal “prioritizes research grounded in anti-oppressive, antiracist, and intersectional frameworks that challenge existing paradigms and structures that produce and sustain social inequalities and inequities.”<sup>23</sup> A recent issue of the journal provides examples of how to use research methods that are anti-racist: “Statistics are not racist. However, our assumptions and manipulation of statistics may be racist. Researchers should interrogate their favored models and consider the possibility that they might be racist. For example, is race—a social construction designed to oppress BIPOC—a predictor of outcomes in your model? Have you included a measure of racism in your model? To ignore the role of racism in a study that includes BIPOC is unethical.”<sup>24</sup>

These principles fit neatly with other prominent academic outlets, for example the *Journal of Social Work Education* published by CSWE. A recent editorial opined that immediate professional priorities should include: social work licensure, to examine “long-suspected and disturbing racial disparities in licensing exam pass rates” presumably resulting from systemic oppression, racism, and other causes of inequity; examining how schools of social work can educate students to engage in antiracism, diversity, equity, and inclusion (A DEI) and reflect this commitment within their own school, college or department; and, “ab-

olitionist” social work, exploring strategies for teaching social work students “how to work with, within, or around existing systems, such as child welfare and criminal justice.”<sup>25</sup>

Not all professional social work journals formally require that submissions openly support the A DEI framework but scholarly norms are reinforced in various ways. Not long ago I inquired whether the CSWE Press would be interested in a book proposal centering on historical contributions of a group of deeply influential casework scholars at the University of Chicago, where I received my Ph.D. To her credit, the senior editor seemed rather abashed in replying that no one on the editorial staff was sufficiently knowledgeable about the history of the profession to advise the board but countered that they would be interested in a book proposal about the contributions of black women.

## NASW

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW), the world’s largest social work organization, formally lies outside of the social work academy but is integrally involved in setting the direction of professional education. Founded in 1955, NASW “works to enhance the professional growth and development of its members, to create and maintain professional standards, and to advance sound social policies.”<sup>26</sup> In addition to advocating for such “sound” policies, NASW defines standards of professional conduct through the Code of Ethics. The Code has been revised many times, at

each turn mirroring the increasing politicization of the profession that is also reflected in accreditation standards.

The first version of the Code of Ethics, published in 1960, began by affirming that, “Social work is based on democratic, humanitarian ideals,” a “public trust requiring of its practitioners integrity, compassion, belief in the dignity and worth of human beings, respect for individual differences, a commitment to service, and dedication to truth.”<sup>27</sup> Each subsequent revision diminished attention to equality and the worth of all individuals and increased emphasis on the ethical obligation to change the “structural” forces assumed to oppress marginalized people. The rationale for this historic arc is that, according to NASW, “social work was inherently bias [sic], racist, oppressive, and genocidal, reflecting the prevailing attitudes and norms of the caste in power at the time, which have continued well beyond the nineteenth century to present-day social work.” In light of this official revised history of social work, NASW “is committed to confronting the harm that our profession has caused and continues to perpetuate by acknowledging, apologizing, educating, and creating safer spaces for honest reflection and courageous conversations about oppression and racism” and declares its “commitment of being an anti-racist organization.”<sup>28</sup> In support of this agenda, NASW offers the following educational recommendations: Provide all social work students with a consistent anti-racist orientation to the profession; expand field placement

and course options to include community activist organizations; and ensure faculty recruitment, retention and development reflect DEI commitments. And so, the thread connecting NASW with the key members of the social work academy serves as a noose around the neck of the profession, pulling it farther and farther from the liberal humanitarian roots that animated its mission to serve the well-being of all people in need.

## Conclusion

One of the early shining lights of social work education, Charlotte Towle, characterized the profession as the conscience of a society. The academic hyper-politicization described here calls into question whether the profession still deserves public trust to act in that capacity. Graduates of social work programs who hold views reported here cannot be trusted to treat clients fairly, objectively, compassionately, with the capacity for using available knowledge wisely in the face of the complex matters of life and death that people face. So far, social work graduates entering the profession display much of the typical decency and care that draws students to social work programs; but the real measurable outcome of those programs will soon likely be their competence to work toward the dystopian vision of today’s professional education.

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