**Recognizing and Dismantling White Supremacy Culture**

**in Social Work Agencies and Nonprofits**

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**Introduction**

Being a Queer Filipinx-American with a long colonial and imperialistic history on my shoulders with the added weight of navigating predominantly US Anglo-White institutions can be difficult. In addition, constant experiences of microaggressions occurring at a workplace or in a social work graduate program can be frustrating and tiresome to combat. While researching a resource to write about for this paper, I wanted to focus on what contributes to toxic work cultures and how it develops in a social work agency setting interweaved with a decolonial perspective. Gratefully I came across a podcast that has left me enlightened, at the same time, challenged me to re-define my intentions when pursuing a career in social service and nonprofit work.

**About Podcast and Authors**

The podcast, *Decolonize Social Work,* is about oppression, liberation and social work. It is created by Ondine Quinn, MSW, CSW and Drew Bowing, MSW, CSW. Ondine is a licensed social worker, who works as a training and technical assistance specialist at Provide, Inc., a national non-profit organization centralized on improving access to reproductive healthcare in southern and rural states. She also identifies as Queer and Latinx. On the other hand, Drew is currently a shelter program manager at GreenHouse17, an advocacy agency focused on ending intimate partner violence and abuse within families and the Central Kentucky community. He is a licensed social worker who regularly facilitates workshops for social service organizations about privilege, power and white supremacy culture. Lastly, he identifies as Cisgender male and White.

**Summary of Podcast Episode**

Within the podcast, *Decolonize Social Work*, this paper focuses on their episode four discussing white supremacy culture perpetuated in social work agencies and non-profits within the U.S. The episode explains that norms and behaviors of white supremacy is deeply ingrained in the U.S. society. Since it is interweaved into the fabric of the U.S. society and workplaces, we might not be aware that we commit acts that reinforce the culture of white supremacy. Ondine and Drew discussed how we take for granted these common occurrences, and challenges social workers to recognize, resist and dismantle them in the workplace. They acquired their information from three sources, which are (a) *Are you Supporting White Supremacy?* By Reshmi Dutt-Ballerstadt; (b) *Captain Save-a-Ho: Social Work is No Ally to Marginalized People* by Laura LeMoon; and (c) *White Supremacy Culture* by Tema Okun. Due to the popularity of the episode and the content Drew and Ondine discuss, it became a workshop facilitated by them called “White Supremacy Culture at Work: Teaching Social Workers to Recognize and Disrupt”, which was hosted by the National Association of Social Work, Ohio Chapter on September 11 of 2020.

**White Supremacy Culture at Workplaces**

As stated previously, the culture of white supremacy is interweaved within U.S. society. However, the norms of this culture can show up in every workplace, whether it is in hospitals, medical clinics, nonprofit organization, social work agencies, etc. Being able to recognize white supremacy dynamics at work is significant, because it is detrimental to one’s health and perpetuates burnout in the social work profession. It is important to realize the people in charge and with power are the ones who have the capacity to write rules or change norms reinforcing white supremacy culture. Drew highlighted an interesting point where the culture of white supremacy is not singularly connected to skin color, but it most often is compared to not (“White Supremacy at Work, n.d.). U.S. Anglo-White are commonly the ones who participate in white supremacy culture; although, you do not have to be U.S. Anglo-White to play the game and reinforce its behaviors.

**Characteristics**

While white supremacy culture is problematic in social work agencies and nonprofits, it is more concerning when social workers do not take the necessary steps to dismantle it within their agency and management structure. The characteristics of white supremacy are (a) perfectionism; (b) a sense of urgency; (c) defensiveness; (d) quantity over quality; (e) worship of the written word; (f) only one right way; (g) paternalism either or thinking; (h) power hoarding; (i) fear of open conflict; (j) individualism; (k) I’m the only one; (l) progress is bigger; (m) more objectivity; and (n) the right to comfort (“White Supremacy at Work, n.d.). As these characteristics have become the norm, below here I will describe what Ondine and Drew found commonly occurring.

***Unpacking Perfectionism***

The concept of perfectionism relates to white supremacy culture because it mirrors the aspects of efficiency and capitalism. In other words, time is money. For example, this ties in well the notions of employee evaluations, where one is measured on their performance of certain characteristics and there are no alternative ways to measure one’s quality of work. There are no room for mistakes and the workplace points out more inadequacies rather than appreciate good work and foster a learning environment. This also exacerbates burnout in the social work profession, where one is expected to perform perfectly all the time, and this comes from somebody cultivating this norm. At times, perfectionism could foster a great amount of animosity between colleagues by superiors making their employees feel inadequate rather than appreciate everyone having their own work styles and approaches to completing tasks.

***Deconstructing Individualism and Delegating Tasks***

The idea of individualism comes from the ideology of picking yourself up from your bootstraps, which stems from the Protestant work ethic brought by White settlers. A martyr complex develops when a staff member believes they are the only ones to do a task “the right way,” which inhibits one to delegate work to others. This connects with the culture of white supremacy because it is partially about individual recognition, at the same time, contradicting the “social” within the social work profession.

***Problem of Power Hoarding***

Power hoarding plays out well in workplaces especially in cross training. This is also exemplified when a staff member knows how to do x, y, and z which later leads them to believe they are indispensable to the organization. Another example would be the nonprofit industrial complex, where the goal is to keep ourselves in a job and not genuinely pursue the mission of a social service agency. Thus, there is this internal debate present where current staff members ponder if they are at a mission driven agency for the paycheck or to achieve the mission.

***Re-examining the Right to Comfort***

This belief conveys those with power have the right to emotional and psychological comfort and they scape goat those who cause discomfort. A great example Ondine presented in the episode that helped me comprehend how it connects to the culture of white supremacy is when social service agencies are provided federal government funding, and they are legally obligated to provide language interpretation services to clients who do not speak English. Some nonprofits and social service agencies offer only one day a week Spanish language clinical services, which is inequitable and inaccessible for certain clients. This goes to show that agencies and staff do not want to be discomforted with the idea to provide extensive services to non-English speaking populations and go out of their comfort zone to grow and learn.

**Key Takeaways**

After listening to this podcast episode, I have taken away certain key points to challenge the culture of white supremacy in social work agencies and nonprofits in the U.S. One of them is to combat perfectionism is to develop a culture of appreciation, where the organization and staff management take the time to assure people’s work and efforts are appreciated. I like how Ondine and Drew highlighted most social service places emphasize what one is not doing well on but does not explain what one is doing right. Another is to develop a learning organization where there is room to mess up and occasionally be safe to fail. Lastly, a narrative they shared about an executive director of a nonprofit agency writing her five-year resignation letter. This tactic exemplifies anti-individualism and helps one to deconstruct their “comfort.” Welcoming ambiguity and discomfort are key to deepening our critical consciousness and political analysis of racism and oppression occurring in a workplace or management structure. By welcoming growth through discomfort, we could learn how to put together personal narratives and feelings unto the larger picture.

**References**

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