

## Colonial Encounters: Racialized Social Workers Negotiating Professional Scripts of Whiteness

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### Abstract

This article examines the ways in which racialized social workers negotiate the values and practices of a social work profession that is constituted through scripts of whiteness. In particular, I examine how social work imagines itself as a site of social justice and goodness, and the processes through which racialized workers' desires to be good collide with the racist encounters experienced in everyday sites of practice. I build upon scholarship that critiques the centralization of whiteness in social work and makes visible the liberal foundations of the profession that are implicated in constituting colonial and imperial practices of moral superiority. I argue that the professional values and practices committed to the goals of social justice are the same values and practices that reinstall whiteness and underpin incidents of racial violence. Historically, racialized bodies have been constituted as the Other—subjects to be regulated, controlled, and saved within the colonial project by white, bourgeois subjects. This article, based on interviews with racialized social workers in Canada, examines the dilemmas that emerge when racialized Others become the helpers and perform an identity that historically was never meant for them.

**Keywords:** race, racism, whiteness, colonialism, critical social work

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This paper is based on research I conducted with twenty-three racialized social workers in the Greater Toronto Area, Ontario, Canada.<sup>1</sup> I explored worker narratives about social work practice, the values of the profession, and the moments in which their commitments to the social justice ideals of the profession are compromised. Racist encounters with clients appeared as an overwhelming occurrence within workers' narratives. During these meetings, racialized workers described practice-based dilemmas in which their commitments to social work values became constrained. The participants, working in predominantly white-normed institutions, described examples of racism operating throughout their clinical work, such as white

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<sup>1</sup> The social workers interviewed for the study worked in a variety of practice settings such as shelters, hospitals, schools, and community health centres. Workers were either new graduates or had been working in the field from 5 to 30 years. Out of the 23 participants, 21 were women and 2 were men. The racial breakdown of participants was as follows: 12 South Asian, 5 Black, 2 Aboriginal, 3 Asian, 1 Middle Eastern. This article draws from chapters three and five of my doctoral thesis.

clients refusing to work with them, racist ideas being spoken during appointments, or close encounters with physical violence and death threats. Workers also described these moments as violent, shocking, and painful. The practice challenges shaping these encounters were further exacerbated by unsupportive responses from co-workers and managers, who reminded the workers to stay client-focused, empathic, and critically reflexive about their professional power. Consequently, many participants of the study described confusion and doubt about their work and questioned whether or not it is permissible for them to interrupt or challenge these sites of racism.

Their narratives offer significant clues about the modes of governance that shape workers' relationships to their identity and practices as social workers. I argue that the social justice ideals of the profession operate to govern what can be known as good practice, in addition to constituting workers as particular kinds of subjects (caring, empathic, anti-oppressive). The research reveals a complex paradox: The discursive arrangements within social work education that constitute social justice-oriented practice are the same discourses that collude with and disavow the operation of racism. In other words, when racism is named, the imperatives to be empathic and client-centered take priority over addressing the racism. The narratives of racialized workers reveal the ways in which naming racism is both incompatible with and threatening to a professional identity that is invested in constructing an image of goodness and shaped by practices to help others and address social injustice. In this way, my research unsettles social work pedagogy and reveals the ways in which white domination is reinscribed through knowledge production, validation, and dissemination. Furthermore, it illuminates how whiteness and white subjects remain at the centre of social work education and practice. Most importantly, the narratives offer critical insights into how racialized social workers negotiate white dominance and experience racism in their everyday practices.

I begin with a brief overview of the research, methodology, and my relationship with the central concerns of the research. Second, I examine the ways in which colonial continuities (Heron, 2007) shape contemporary critical social work practices, building upon the work of scholars who argue that whiteness is a central and organizing feature of social work education (Heron, 2005; Jeffery, 2002; Rossiter, 2001). Finally, drawing from worker narratives, I present situations in which racialized workers experienced racist encounters with clients and colleagues. The narratives show how critical perspectives in social work centralize whiteness and function to deny the operation of racism, leaving workers in situations where their competency and commitments to social justice are questioned. The research begins to address the lack of scholarship about the ways in which racialized social workers experience their role and practices within a white-dominated profession.

### **Research Overview**

I am presently a social work educator at York University in Toronto, Ontario. I have been a practicing social worker for over eighteen years working in the areas of anti-racist organizational change, sexual and intimate partner violence, and community organizing. The concerns of the present research were born out of my

clinical practice as a counsellor in the area of violence against women. It was during this time that I experienced a different form of work place racism—racism from clients. Following an intensely volatile appointment with a white client, in which many racist ideas were verbalized, I was left perplexed about how to respond to this client during future appointments. The client spoke about her frustrations with immigrant women at the local shelter where she was staying at the time. She made many offensive comments about immigrants and their cultures, and about the effects on her experience as a white woman. Before she left my office that day, she looked me straight in the eyes and said “It’s hard to be a woman in this country,” and then she paused for a moment and said, “No, it’s hard to be a white woman in this country,” then turned and slammed my door. I was troubled on a number of levels, and concerned about my practice with her moving forward. During our session, I had gently addressed the racist comments and I wondered if I had made matters worse. I was worried about betraying my commitments to empathy or a client-centered practice. My concerns were not alleviated by the discussions with my team members about the incident. In fact, their responses operated to mask over the racism present in the incident, and instead, I was advised to maintain a compassionate stance, to connect her anger at immigrants to some childhood trauma, or to transfer her to a white counsellor. Two significant concerns stood out for me: first, the effects of racist discourse on racialized workers; and second, the inevitable practice dilemmas that emerged. From these concerns emerged the realization that my social work education had not prepared me for this moment. When I began to talk informally with other racialized social workers, I learned that others were having similar experiences.

The research for this study utilized a qualitative analysis and was based on one-to-one, semi-structured interviews with racialized social workers in the Greater Toronto Area. The interviews were recorded and all material was destroyed following the completion of the research. I asked questions that explored racialized workers’ conceptions about good practice and their encounters with racism on the job. The questions thus explored the values of the social work profession and social work knowledge about practice. I asked questions about their institutional settings and their relationships with co-workers and managers. The names of the social workers and their organizations are not identified in the study. Due to the sensitive content of the narratives, I chose to mention only the type of social service setting (i.e., shelter, hospital, school board), without mentioning any identifying details (i.e., location, name). The numbers of racialized social workers remains low in the field, and it was important to avoid the use of any information that could potentially lead back to identifying the research participants. In this article, I refer to participants by describing their racial background (as they defined it) and a pseudonym.

My methodology used a Foucauldian discourse analysis to trace the constitution of knowledge, power, and subject-formation throughout the interviews. I drew upon the work of post-structural feminists (Britzman, 2003; Davies, 2005) to examine the ways in which language within participant narratives constructed meanings and subject-making. Critical race scholars (Carter, 2000; Goldberg, 1993; Hook, 2001) anchored my analysis by providing the lens to explore how domination operates

through various racialized discourses. I listened for particular themes within participant narratives that pointed to dominant values underpinning social work practice, in addition to the contradictions and tensions between discourses that pointed to breakdowns within the worker–client relationship. Many of the breakdowns happened when racist discourses were operating and workers’ professional practices were questioned.

Theoretically, my research was anchored in race theory (critical race scholarship, post-colonial studies), post-structural feminism, and critical race scholars who utilize Foucauldian concepts of discourse, power, subject-formation, and governmentality. These theoretical entry points enabled me to examine the racial foundations upon which social work as a profession is produced (Jeffery, 2002), in addition to exploring the experiences of social workers of colour as they negotiate both a racist profession and racist environments. My central aim was to trace the ongoing mechanisms of whiteness in social work in order to reveal the ways in which racialized bodies are regulated through discourses that re-centre whiteness within the profession. Through the use of race scholarship I examined how racism is integral to modernity and the liberal project, the formation of the state, and white dominance in social work (Goldberg, 1993, Hesse, 2004; Jeffery, 2002).

### **Colonial Continuities: Innocence and Goodness in Social Work**

Early in my research, I realized that the racist encounters being described by the participants could not be interpreted in isolation, nor divorced from historical influences. When racism occurred with clients, participants described complex dilemmas in their practice. Furthermore, their attempts to discuss these challenges with their teams often resulted in unsupportive responses that did not address racism, but instead reinforced the moral imperatives of the profession to be helpful and compassionate. To help me understand these dilemmas, I turned to scholarship that examines the colonial foundations of the profession and the moralizing discourses that continue to be integral to the identity of the profession and its workers (Margolin, 1997; Valverde, 1991). I looked at the historical production of the social worker identity as the kind, charitable helper, and examined how the discourses shaping innocence and goodness continue to circulate in present-day social work.

### **Morality, Virtue and Civility—Historical Production of Whiteness**

Social work’s early participation in practices of charity and moral reform demand an analysis of the ways in which the colonial project was a violent one and of the role played by social workers in it. However, the violent treatment of Aboriginal communities and immigrants is largely missing from dominant constructions of social work’s history (O’Connell, 2005; Park & Kemp, 2006; Sakamoto, 2003). In Canada’s history, we can point to the treatment of Aboriginal communities (and particularly Aboriginal children) and the regulation of immigrant families as two sites where social workers were enlisted in the building of a racially structured settler society (Iacovetta & Korinek, 2004; Jeffery, 2002; Valverde, 1992). Early reformers and professional social workers participated in imperial practices toward “Canadianizing immigrants and regulating the behaviour of First Nations and

the poor” (Jeffery, 2002, p. 35). Nation-building and state formation required the containment of difference to pursue a homogenous national identity as white (Thobani, 2007; Valverde, 1991). Taxonomies of difference and discourses of civility constituted the image of the national subject and dictated who could be a rightful citizen of the nation (Razack, 2002; Thobani, 2007). However, the violence done to racialized populations (Aboriginal and immigrant communities) remained concealed through discourses of helping, through which white subjects could situate themselves as not only good subjects, but also as morally superior ones (Fellows & Razack, 1998; LeFrançois, 2013).

Goldberg (1993) argued that virtues are central to the making of social identity and that being a virtuous subject means “nothing less than being a good citizen” (p. 15). The good citizen practices “temperance or self-restraint, generosity, courage, justice (lawfulness or fairness) and mildness” (Goldberg, 1993, p. 15), which are all examples of European culture and modes of governance and self-governance (Goldberg, 2002). Being virtuous can only be achieved by “following the example of virtuous citizens” (Goldberg, 1993, p. 15). The production of virtue and civility cannot be divorced from race, as being a morally sound and virtuous subject is a deeply raced identity (Fellows & Razack, 1998; Goldberg, 1993; Jeffery, 2002; Valverde, 1991).

Goldberg (1993) asserted that our understanding of social subjects takes place in “racial terms” through processes of normalization and naturalization, founded on the liberal ideals of individualism. White, liberal normativity remains the very foundation upon which civility (humanity) is defined in the nation-state (Goldberg, 1993, 2010), and state-run services serve as the “regulator of gendered and racialized systems of morality and social control” (Srivastava, 2005, p. 30). The goals of modernity constitute a subject who is “abstract and atomistic, general and universal, divorced from the contingencies of historicity” (p. 4). Consequently, racial classification excludes the racialized Other from the autonomy afforded to the liberal subject as an unmarked, universal figure; and the liberal paradox rising out of the processes of creating a universal subject is that “Race is irrelevant, but all is race” (p. 6). The liberal subject in this paradox remains raceless, unmarked, universal, and representative of all humanity (Dyer, 1997).

Dyer (1997) stated that there is no more powerful position than to be seen as “just human” (p. 2). Whiteness operates through social practices that allow white subjects to remain unmarked and unnamed or, as Frankenberg (1993) argued, racially neutral. Racial neutrality, or being seen as speaking for all of humanity, allows white subjects to be represented everywhere while their whiteness remains concealed and apparently irrelevant, even to themselves (Dyer, 1997). Whiteness attains social power through a number of complex discourses, which include its construction and its concealment as a universal and unmarked subject (Dyer, 1997; Frankenberg, 1993; Goldberg, 1993); as a subject that is formed through discourses of goodness, virtue, and morality (Heron, 1999; Schick, 2000); and as a standpoint in which particular norms shape how white subjects measure themselves and Others (Dyer, 1997; Frankenberg, 1993). Most critically, whiteness cannot operate outside of the

white subject's dependence on non-whites for their transcending superiority (Dyer, 1997).

In social work, white dominance has been shaped through colonialism, nation-building, and state formation to construct hegemonic scripts about the identity and practices of social workers (Jeffery, 2002; Valverde, 1991). Helping professions such as social work are built upon the professionalization of white femininity. Numerous technologies are exercised to shape the moral character of citizens by the state, and social workers and teachers play a critical role toward this agenda (Dehli, 1994; LeFrançois, 2013; Valverde, 1992; Walkerdine, 1990). Historically, whiteness was constituted through imperatives to help, specifically through the production of desire to aid populations in need (Heron, 1999). The feminine bourgeois subject needed to know herself as a good subject through acts of helping others who were established as underdeveloped (Heron, 1999). Heron traced the discursive production of bourgeois subjectivity and argued that today racial constructs “remain integral to the discursive production of bourgeois identity” (Heron, 2007, p. 7) in which goodness and one's desire to be good are intimately woven into an identity that wishes to help Others. Goodness is shaped through practices that signify moral superiority and civility, in relationship to populations that are constructed as less moral (Fellows & Razack 1998). In helping professions, whiteness works through practices of empathy, love, and nurturance, which are essentialized as universal human qualities of the helping professional (Heron, 2007). Practices of regulation are masked in discourses of charity, helping, and care (Heron, 2007; Iacovetta & Korinek, 2004; Margolin, 1997; Valverde, 1991). Colonial continuities “have been modified over time in respect to their particular expression and yet are recognizable for their similarity to their original colonial manifestations and effects” (Heron, 2007, p. 7).

Jeffery (2002) contended that whiteness as a series of practices resembles social work practices, and suggested that if one is to “function successfully in a profession such as social work as it has been and is organized and conceptualized, [one] requires a facility for reproducing whiteness” (p. 231). Whiteness operates through imperatives of helpfulness, diversity management, and critical reflections about the self (Jeffery, 2002). Being a good social worker and doing good social work will require that the worker participate in scripts of whiteness by performing liberal normativity (Jeffery, 2002). On a similar note, Bailey (1998) argued that the governing effects of whiteness do not require a person to be visibly white to be invested in performing whiteness. Even though carrying out scripts of whiteness will look different for differently positioned social subjects, Bailey (1998) maintained that the connective thread within racial scripts is that “in a white-centred culture, everyone is more or less expected to follow scripts that sustain white privilege” (p. 36), and status can be gained by performing whiteness (Bailey, 1998; Schick, 2000). Racialized workers are not positioned outside of these performances, as they are both governed by and invested in these practices and, as I will demonstrate, they are cast out of belonging when they name the operation of racism in their daily work.

## Contemporary Social Work

Social work imagines itself as a site of social justice (Margolin, 1997) and workers as the vehicles through which injustices can be challenged and changed. Based on their own histories and experiences of marginalization, the participants of this study shaped their desires to join social work so they could actively participate in change processes that supported social justice. However, my study demonstrates how the re-inscription of innocence and whiteness complicates how social workers of colour understand their role and effectiveness as workers. In this research, I contend that the colonial continuities of the profession are masked through notions about good practice, in particular the imperatives to be client-centred, self-reflexive, and empathic. Often, this process takes place through the naming of practices that harm, oppress, or marginalize others (Ahmed, 2005). I argue that historicized notions of whiteness (moral superiority, helping, goodness) are reproduced through these practices and restore the worker's identity to a place of innocence. As I will illustrate, when racialized workers name dilemmas in their work that are racially organized, they cannot occupy a place of innocence.

Contemporary critical social work imagines itself as a radical departure from historical, orthodox social work (Healy, 2000; Margolin, 1997). Critical approaches are intended to alleviate the negative effects of an inequitable social system and minimize the professional and social power of the social worker in relationship to the communities being served (Healy, 2005; Hick, 2005). For example, Hick and Pozzuto (2005) commented that there are two overarching beliefs within social work, "that a better social world is possible and that the achievement of a better social world requires a qualitative change in current social relations" (p. ix). In critical social work education, students are taught to be anti-oppressive, i.e., critical of relations of power in their practices, so they employ client-centred practices and critical reflections about their own social positioning. Although consensus is lacking in social work about how to define power (Tew, 2006), critical modernist social work deploys a top-down model through which macro systems of power trickle down and affect populations negatively (Healy, 2005; Tew, 2006).

The social workers' professional status automatically places them in a privileged position in relationship to the client, "even when the social worker shares certain experiences of oppression with the client (such as gender oppression)" (Healy, 2000, p. 22). The one-sided dimension of this construction is employed to redefine the working relationship so that "the helping relationship is demystified, the social worker's power is diminished, and the clients' power is increased" (Lundy, 2004, p. 114). In attempts to minimize worker power and increase client agency, discussions about professional relationships range from exploring client strengths (not deficiencies), connecting troubles to socio-political structures (not individual pathology), and increasing "people's capacity to change these realities" (Gil, 1998, p. 112).

Social workers are trained to be self-regulating subjects who critically reflect upon their participation in systems and practices of domination (Lundy, 2004; Rossiter, 2001). Engaging in critical practices serves as the road map toward more

empathetic and client-centred processes, in which the social worker can maintain a de-centred stance that focuses exclusively on the client's needs. I suggest that the emergent themes from the research (empathy, client-centred practices, and critical reflexivity) operate as governing technologies to shape hegemonic scripts within social work about the identity and practices of workers. I argue that these themes work as modes of conduct that produce "prescriptive effects regarding what is to be done (effects of 'jurisdiction'), and codifying effects regarding what is to be known (effects of 'veridiction')" (Foucault, 1991, p. 75). The regulatory effects of these practices situate them as authoritative, as they come to represent the right way of performing one's role. My concerns about social work are not related to whether or not various practice perspectives are successful at attaining the social justice goals of the profession. Nor am I implying that these approaches are unusable, as I do believe that their interventions have made possible ways of practicing social work that reduce harm to the communities we work with. I am primarily interested in what particular practice perspectives in social work do with regard to the production of the identity and practices of the social worker and how they may be used to re-install innocence and perpetuate racism.

Margolin (1997) offered an important critique of social work's investments in critical practice. His concern lay with the ways in which reflection about the discipline's shortcomings restores the profession's confidence in its perfectibility. He suggested that contemporary social work operates to produce "self-inoculations" in which social workers cure their own anxieties about their practice. He offered the following description of this process:

According to the formula, they take the established value or technique that needs restoration and support, lavishly display its inadequacies, the injustices it produces, the dangers to which it gives rise. Next they confront it with its most obvious excesses and contradictions; then, at the last moment, they save it in spite of, or rather by means of, these very contradictions and blemishes (p. 165).

In contemporary social work, the formula takes shape by naming one's power and privilege, through which the social work subject can constitute herself as a critical subject on the side of good and of anti-oppressive efforts. Heron (2005) observed that the "have/have not dualism of privilege" (p. 344) and simply naming one's social location do not unsettle the operation of privilege. Often, naming one's anxieties, feelings of guilt, and bad practices serves to restore or, as Margolin (1997) suggested, cure the social worker of their imperfectability. Margolin contended that critical practices do not challenge social work's foundations, but instead affirm them.

### **Racist Encounters: Everyday Racism in Social Work Practice**

Participants in this study foregrounded social justice as the principal and organizing commitment of the profession. Most importantly, each participant described their desire to help others and their commitments to social justice as key motivations for joining the profession. However, their commitments to the social-justice-oriented values of the profession fell apart in practice with their clients when racism took place. The specific sites of racism that I explored in my research are



face-to-face encounters between social workers of colour and their clients, co-workers, and supervisors. The workers interviewed described racist encounters with clients as a frequent occurrence in their professional work. The discussion below will focus on the racism that takes place in clinical practice and will critically examine the ways in which institutions (co-workers, managers) respond to the challenges experienced by racialized social workers. The workers' narratives offer key insights into the ways in which whiteness operates as codes and normative scripts about the profession to regulate what workers can or cannot say about the incidents of racism.

### **The Worker is Powerful: Client-Centred Practice and Empathy**

Client-centred discourses in social work pedagogy tacitly assume that the worker is a member of the dominant group. Whiteness emerges in these discourses, in which the worker maintains an identity of goodness and innocence through their acknowledgements of being more powerful, naming trespasses or bad practice, and remaining client-focused. Today's social workers redeem themselves through their commitments to a critically reflexive practice and through identifying any transgressions that they may cause as a result of their professional power and status (Healy, 2000; Tew, 2006). However, the participants described many moments when they did not experience themselves as powerful. On the contrary, many described moments in which they were on the receiving end of racial violence.

Seema, a South Asian worker who has worked largely in the area of anti-violence, raised doubts about client-centred practices and communicated the dilemmas that emerge when workers diverge from this practice:

I think it comes back to our training. I mean it is historical right, there were these do-gooders right and that our motives are very pure, clear, sort of selflessness and I think that somewhat comes into some of the teachings. And that the client is first is a big one, so that the needs of the client take priority over the therapist, counsellor, social worker. And their needs are paramount, and I don't buy that for one minute, but that is what we are taught. If the client is not first, somehow it makes you a bad social worker. Then if somehow you think about your needs or your values or how you think about the world, even within the session, you know, talk about what is meaningful and important to you—god forbid, it is seen as some sort of selfish act and then it becomes about you and not about the client... And I think that the reality is, that both are in the room, both are in the room.

Seema communicates a key critique about the limitations of a client-centred practice. Her evaluation of this approach links the practice with particular characteristics of the worker. These characteristics are constitutive of the historical and the contemporary identity of the worker, selflessness being the key. Seema's viewpoint disrupts dominant understandings about the subject-positions of the worker and the client and the ways in which the subjectivities of both the worker and the client are present in the room. I do not think that critical social work perspectives would argue against this. Yet, critical approaches such as client-centred or anti-oppressive practices invite only a particular understanding of the worker's subject-

position to be explored, i.e., as a powerful position (Healy, 2005). The fixed position of the worker as privileged and powerful requires the added practice of critical reflexivity in order to manage the ways in which the worker's power might negatively influence the client.

A recurring question evident throughout the narratives was whether or not social workers of colour compromise their practice during moments of racial injury, as Deepi, a South Asian participant stated: "Am I not doing my job? ... I don't know ... [long pause] ... everything is suspended in that moment. It's really hard to be empathetic for someone who is demonstrating racism or any form of oppression towards another group." This question is very powerful—*Am I doing my job?* As a researcher, the question was startling and, once I began to explore the worries shaping the question, it became clear that the governing scripts about good practice were in direct tension with workers' experience of racist attacks. The following example from Deepi highlights some of the main tensions that operate when racist incidents occur in client interactions. She stated:

I think that there is a moment of intense, like a moment where it feels heated, where you've strayed from the person's personal story into this grey area of social work and, like the elephant in the room, is conflict. In those moments you are sort of both looking in a different direction rather than in the direction of their story. I feel like they see you more as a person or two individuals, like any two strangers on the street who are encountering moments of racism. Whereas in that relationship when you are talking about them and their life story, you are there as their social worker, their helper, and your gaze is on their story. For a moment when that happens and you turn and are looking at something else that has come into the room, that is attached to both of us but not personally, or even if it is personally you won't say it in those moments because it's like this ... whatever construct it is, racism, classism, sexism ... it is awkward. I feel like I have never been really truly equipped to deal with it. I think that is why I sometimes feel as though I am at a loss for words.

Deepi's account powerfully describes the moments experienced by many of the participants in this research. An organizing theme within her narrative is that racism pulls the worker outside of their good practice, which is constructed as remaining focused on the client's needs. Furthermore, Deepi's account describes key ruptures in dominant constructions about the identities of the worker and the clients, as the client and the worker are no longer the helper and the helped, but rather like two strangers on the street tied up in a racist incident. The stranger metaphor is relevant here, and raises questions about whether or not social workers of colour can be recognized as helpers, since they represent something else to white clients in these moments. Similarly, is it possible to sit with a client's racism, alongside their position as a person who is vulnerable, marginalized, and in need of help? The overarching and fixed understandings of the worker-client relationship as powerful/powerless leave very little room, if any, to discuss such transgressions within the context of social work education and practice.

In another example, Tara, a black worker, shared how racist encounters invited her to question her commitments to client-centred practice. She shared the painful effects of hearing racist ideas from her clients:

Physically my body starts to shake. I feel my cheeks flame, I'm hurt, I'm flabbergasted, I'm shocked, I'm angry, I'm at a loss of what I can do with it. So then all that stuff we were talking about before ... it comes right in my face.... Being non-directive, empathy, client-focused, because what I want to do—is say, “Why do you think you can say this to me?!” You know, then I start doing my education piece, but then I start thinking—That's not what they came here for, but at the same time, do I have to listen to this? Can I not say something about it? So all this is going on in my head, as the person continues talking, right? And then I'm off, I've separated them from the clinical process. So then I'm sitting there left with anger and frustration, and I can feel the conflict coming, because when I challenge what they're saying, they come back to hang onto their point, and then it's like okay—this is not going to go anywhere, so now I've got to sit with this lump in my throat, because this person just told me there's a difference between black people and niggers. I don't know where I fit in that.

Client-centred discourses remove the possibilities to explore how power between the worker and client can travel in a number of different directions. There is an underlying assumption in Tara's narrative that clients can say whatever they choose within the counselling relationship. In this challenging moment, Tara does not experience herself as a subject who embodies more power than her client. Furthermore, it becomes difficult for her to see her client as a person in need. Complicating the whole experience are various effects of racism. Anger, pain, and confusion are not separate from how racism is produced and maintained in Western societies. Therefore, when Tara asks, “Why do you think you can say this to me?,” I argue that the *me* is not simply the individual *me*, but a *me* that has come to embody multiple histories of racial violence, histories that are shared with many other Others (Ahmed, 2000; Essed, 1991). Tara describes the multiple forms of injury present in the moment—anger, shock, and physical reactions.

Here, I am reminded of Ahmed's (2004) concerns about the ways in which words and feelings stick to particular subjects to produce various effects. Ahmed argued that emotional responses are not produced internally within the subject, but are constituted relationally through complex relations of dominance between subjects. Thus, Tara's emotional and physical reactions are generated through the exchange with her client and a history of racism in her own life. The anger, hurt, and shock are historically produced, and the “past is living rather than dead; the past lives in the very wounds that remain open in the present” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 33). Tara and her client do not enter the social work encounter as strangers to each other; their interactions are predicated both on historically produced notions of the helping encounter and on historically produced experiences of whiteness and racism. Multiple subject-positions are in tension in these moments—Tara is constructed as racial Other, black woman, helper. The client is perceived as vulnerable, in need, a racist. These competing subject-positions leave racialized workers at a loss about

how to respond to racism. Lee (2005) echoed these concerns and described the concerns that emerge when racism enters the counselling relationship:

This historical bias within our profession and in the larger context of this country reinforces our collective denial and unconsciousness around racial legacies of pain. There is no precedent for the dominant group taking responsibility for their oppressive actions. A side effect of this silent collusion is that we and our clients meet at racial fault lines where cultural templates collide and people of colour are made to hold onto their anger and helplessness, without a clue as to how to describe what is happening (p. 96).

### **Seeking Support from our Organizations**

A common theme within the narratives was the response from colleagues and managers that workers should exercise compassion and care toward clients. Incidents of racism were handled poorly in most cases. The most alarming responses came from managers who instructed workers to continue working with clients who uttered death threats and exercised physical violence toward them. In some situations, clients were temporarily suspended from the agency or transferred to white workers. I argue that these directives worked to minimize racial violence and re-install the moral imperatives to be good and helpful. Tara described a very troubling response from her colleague about the racism that was expressed by her client:

I had a colleague say, “Well just think that means you’ve made this person feel so comfortable. You’re a great social worker because this person now feels that they can be open.” I guess that I became invisible in the room, so all the racism could come flying out, right, or be verbalized because it was probably there already. I guess ... I am such a good social worker that they felt they could just ... I don’t know ... spew venom at me I guess, I don’t know, I don’t know what that means.

Although Tara ended the account uncertain about how to read her colleague’s praise, her narrative provides insights into the expectations that circulate about good practice performance. Her story points to certain expectations that shape a more positive experience for a client. For example, a comfortable and open environment requires that social workers remain quiet about themselves (stressing a de-centered positioning). However, the silence is produced in the moment through competing tensions between Tara’s experience of racial injury and the expectation to remain focused on client-centred care. Her colleague interprets this silence as evidence of care, practicing a neutral stance in which the client feels comfortable enough to be open about various views. In other words, Tara did not let her own feelings get in the way. The underlying message to Tara is that good social work practice requires being able to be fully present with anything that a client brings to the practice encounter. Full presence and attentiveness require practices of empathy, and, I will add here, an intense surveillance of the reactions and responses that social workers experience in their jobs.

Seema described a similar incident from very early in her career in which a white female client refused to work with her because she was South Asian. In one of

their first appointments together, the client called her a “paki,” a derogatory term used toward South Asian people. Although her team members were aware of the incident, they chose to move the client to a white worker. When I asked her how she understood their decision, she said “because they [clients] are a victim and they should get what they want, the agency will honour them and move them to another social worker.” In this example, the language of victimhood shapes how the client’s subject-position is formed for Seema by her team. Furthermore, social work education is an influence; Seema states that students are taught that clients’ needs are paramount over the workers’, primarily because “they are the ones who have been hurt.” The language of need, victim, and hurt shapes a dominant understanding about the subject-formation of clients.

By moving the client to a white worker, the organization maintains its commitments to serving and meeting the needs of vulnerable populations. Discourses of victimhood work to fix the identity of the client as someone in need. These discourses operate to neglect the ways in which subject-formation takes place in a number of different directions as opposed to a fixed identity of victimhood. Through ignoring the racial content of the encounter, the client’s practice of racism conspires with client-centred discourses in which the client remains a subject who is oppressed, disenfranchised, and marginal, and cannot be a subject who may participate in acts of hurting others. This point was expressed by Seema as follows:

It is this piece around victim, it’s one piece of their identity that is seen as paramount to everything else, right, so if you work with a racist victim the fact that she’s a victim, or a homophobic victim, whatever you want to say, the fact that she’s a victim trumps everything else and she’s not really responsible for all that, so it’s sort of like, she gets a free pass on all of it. It’s that piece where we look at people and dissect people in sort of these one-dimensional ways in social work, so it’s interesting to me in that everything else is sort of excused, you know.

The fact that client populations seeking services do, in fact, experience great oppression and marginality is not being refuted by my analysis. Instead, I aim to bring attention to how this understanding of client communities conspires with other forms of marginality and dominance. The underlying message to workers is that their needs are to remain de-centred and apart from the interaction; this includes their feelings, beliefs, and values. The effects of racism are treated as personal and individual to the worker. The de-centering quality of the practice, I argue, tunnels into discourses of goodness and compassion to produce the criteria against which workers measure their professional practice. In other words, effective social workers will not let their personal stress get in the way of meeting the client’s needs. In this situation, the team thought it was best for Seema that the client was moved to a white worker, to reduce her stress and anger. While this practice claims to recognize Seema’s stress (anger, feelings of betrayal), the problem is individualized and treated as belonging to her (Seema’s problem). Responsibility is deferred by maintaining the commitment of the organization to the client, while at the same her colleagues’ response to Seema suggests that they are taking care of her feelings. It is assumed through these responses that Seema simply needs healing and not justice.

In another example, Ishar (Punjabi, South Asian worker), who has practiced social work for over 15 years, described a similar situation in which she discussed, at a peer supervision meeting, a racist incident with a client. She explained that in peer supervision meetings, workers came together to debrief their clinical practice and receive support around various work dilemmas. The meetings were intended to facilitate the practice of critical reflexivity and receive support from the team.

I started to feel like I just wasn't a very compassionate worker because my colleagues kept reverting back to expressions of compassion for the client, wanting to hear about her childhood, wanting to hear how the trauma had impacted her, and how the trauma is what is creating this problem over here. I continued to feel like even in that space I was doing something bad by naming the racism, like it was not okay for me to do that. Tension started to brew on our team because I began to critique the space. If we are going to talk about how the work impacts us, that means we are only allowed to talk about certain things and not others. Things became so heated on our team, so problematic, that the peer supervision space stopped. To this day we don't have it.

As in Seema's account, racism is made raceless in and through discourses of compassion and trauma. First, Ishar experiences herself as an uncompassionate worker, through her co-workers' desires to remain focused on the client's sites of vulnerability. Second, trauma organizes the encounter as one that is dictated by the client's personal injuries. Ishar's workplace focuses on violence against women, and feminist and trauma discourses are central to how the program defines violence:

It is about trauma. It is about recognizing the effects of trauma and violence. So a good social worker recognizes the impacts of trauma and violence on a client's life and how the impacts of trauma and violence can really shape how the client sees herself.

Within this agency, discursive production of trauma, violence, and feminism work in concert with each other to constitute understandings of good practice. Victim discourses shape how the subject-position of the client is produced and compassion dictates how workers are to perform attentiveness to client stories of vulnerability. Seema states that in these environments,

gender was more important, to understand women—that's the other thing, right ... and in a lot of these agencies, especially in agencies that work around violence against women—it might be changing now, but gender also is paramount to anything else, it trumps everything else, too.

The history of white feminist organizing situates gender analysis at the core of many social services (Srivastava, 2005). The point is not to dismiss client vulnerability, trauma, or violence, but rather to highlight what these discourses do when they are used as explanations for the occurrence of racism or used to deny the operation of race altogether. Ishar's questions to her team about how the peer supervision space is being used result in its demise. Her insistence that racism be recognized disrupts the supportive climate of the peer supervision space, in addition to the investments that white women carry to be seen as good and helpful subjects (Heron, 1999).

### **Are You a Good Social Worker?**

Many participants described situations in which their skills and abilities as social workers were called into question by clients and co-workers. In her story, Janet, a black worker, exemplified the more insidious operations of racism. She described how a white client did not directly call her any derogatory names, but instead posed many questions about her skills and abilities:

That stuff is always hard because very rarely is it ever explicit, so you are often relying on your, “Did that just...,” “Could that just be...?” “I think that was just an act of someone being racist”... [laughs]. I do have one client that really likes to use his vocabulary lately, so he is explicit about the language that he’ll use with you, but often it comes in more insidious ways like questioning your ability, what your level of education is, asking for other opinions from other people, just those things that kind of question your capacity in the role, and you just know it is about something other than your capacity in the role and it is about the person that they see before them, I think.

Unlike Seema’s client, who exercised a direct practice of racism by calling her names, Janet’s client employs a subtle form, in which racist exclusion is concealed through the language of skills and capabilities. Janet’s encounter with this client was further exacerbated when one of her colleagues began to intervene in her work with her clients. Janet stated that her co-worker was re-doing her work and, consequently, reinscribed the problematized perception that her client held of her as a worker. When she confronted her co-worker about her involvement, the co-worker replied that she thought Janet could “use a little help.” Janet described the moment as follows:

I pulled her aside and I let her know I was more than fine in the role and capable, but she continued to do it. She essentially said that she didn’t feel that the clients viewed me as capable, so she thought that I could use a little help. How do I not look capable in somebody’s eyes? I am speaking and wearing a name tag saying, “I am a social worker,” and I am in my role. Yeah, that was really weird and very challenging because you don’t want to label it about race, because people just run and get so upset when you talk about race with people. I couldn’t feel that it was anything but that. While I addressed it with her and with management, I never talked about feeling that it was a racial incident.

The production of surveillance emerges (and is camouflaged) through the language of helping. Janet’s colleague acknowledges that she is being judged by clients, but similar to the response from Seema’s team, Janet’s colleague intervenes by directly surveying her work and literally conducting her duties for her. Consequently, in making the choice to confront her colleague, Janet made a conscious decision not to name the incident as one in which she experienced racism:

I just spoke about how demeaning and inappropriate it was because it completely took away from my ability to do my work; and the credibility that she said I didn’t have, that my clients saw—she is just bringing that to

fruition in doing that. After that she kind of left me alone, but you could kind of feel the tension from the staff afterwards.

Janet keeps the discussion located at the site of individual merits and abilities, and confronts her colleague by defending her skills. The inappropriateness of her manager's intervention is named, but race and her experience of racism is circumvented through a discussion about her capabilities as a social worker.

The common thread running through these incidents is that social workers of colour question their capabilities as professionals, or have them questioned by others. Many of the participants wanted these dilemmas to be recognized by their organizations as legitimate practice dilemmas, and education or policy development may be a way in which some accountability could be created by organizations. Although providing an analysis of the ways in which racism operates in the social work classroom is outside the scope of this paper, I will mention briefly here that many of the social workers interviewed for this study explained that their social work education did not prepare them for these difficult practice moments. Most of their education focused on strategies to work with diverse communities (from the perspective of white workers) through cultural sensitivity models, but did not examine what it means to practice social work as a racialized person experiencing racism. For some workers, this gap in education is striking in comparison to what they describe as an overemphasis on educating white students about how they might work with populations of difference. The overarching critique suggests that social work education is still about and for white subjects (Jeffery, 2002). For example, through humour, Seema described the effects of having to read the classic text by McIntosh (2007/1988) on the "invisible knapsack of white privilege":

The material never talked about people of colours' perspectives and it's all geared more towards white audiences, educating white audiences. I certainly got pieces out of it—it wasn't just also about race but it was also on homophobia, sexism, so there was a whole bunch of things that it was on. And there were pieces that I got out of it for me, but the readings particularly on race weren't geared to me, they were geared to white audiences. And I don't think I really need to read, personally, on unpacking the white knapsack by Peggy McIntosh [laughter]. I mean it's a classic ... but also didn't facilitate my learning as well [laughter] in any sort of way. But we spent weeks on that! And it was always *the* article.

As a woman of colour. Let's unpack my invisible knapsack. Because let me tell you it's quite invisible! [laughter] As I am showing you, I am carrying an invisible knapsack—Peggy got to unload hers [huge laughter] and everybody came together to carry it around, but nobody asked me what's in my knapsack [sarcastic laughter]... and they still don't!! [very loud laughter] ... instead it just becomes more and more invisible until somebody sees that I am carrying a honking camper on my back! [uncontrollable laughter]. Ohhh ... we laugh but it's true!

This moment in the interview marked in many respects the heart of my research. Her humoured description of her relationship to the McIntosh article points to the central concerns around the ways in which the racial organization of the



profession situates white subjects as the normative figures of the profession. Her narrative highlights the ways in which social work discourses can work to minimize and make invisible the weight of racialized discourses and racism for social workers of colour. I do not believe that the value of the McIntosh article itself is being mocked here; instead, Seema's narrative brings attention to the ways in which whiteness reclaims the centre, even within critical practice approaches. People of colour carry a heavy burden as a result of not being supported to discuss the effects of racism within the profession.

### **Racism is Inevitable**

The workers' narratives offer key insights into the ways in which whiteness operates as codes and normative scripts about the profession, to regulate the professional identities of racialized workers (in relationship to whiteness) and what workers can or cannot say about the incidents of racism. The narratives in this study illustrate how whiteness is embedded in social work knowledge about the identity and practices of social workers. My analysis is informed by critical race scholars who explore the mutually constitutive processes that constitute white dominance and racist practices, in addition to exploring how these processes take place at *micro* levels of social interaction (Ahmed, 2004; Alcoff, 2002; Essed, 1991; Goldberg, 2009).

The work of Fanon (1967) has been foundational to the study of race relations. In particular, his scholarship is most credited for its analysis of the ways in which the white body and the black body are shaped through practices of objectification (Alcoff, 2002; Puwar, 2004). Fanon (1967) offered critical accounts of the ways in which the white gaze shapes the racial Other through practices of objectification, or as Fanon stated, as forms of "crushing objecthood" (p. 109). He asserted that black subjects can never know their blackness outside of whiteness, as the white gaze is inescapable for racial subjects whose blackness is always situated against a dominating whiteness to emphasize the mutually constitutive processes of racial difference (p. 110). Alcoff (2002), drawing on Fanon's work, stated that racialized bodies experience a "double layer of awareness" (p. 280) as they interpret the meanings attached to every moment, action, or interaction with whiteness. She explained that the colour line remains a dominant schema through which subjects are identified. Alcoff (2002) contended that the "epidermal schema," Fanon's notion of the corporeal body, or what she refers to as "the habit-body" (p. 280), constructs protective and defensive responses for racialized subjects in relationship to whiteness. As a result, in the neoliberal world, when non-white subjectivity emerges and white subjects feel threatened, racialized people have two choices: to resist or to "return to the category of non-threatening other" (p. 280). Alcoff argued that these two options are already set up by the white world for racialized subjects, in which "no original move can be recognized" (p. 281). Alcoff contended that racialized people cannot fully occupy whiteness or a non-white subjectivity. The imperatives to be empathic, client-centred, and aware of power relations constitute a dominant understanding about good social work practice. Social workers of colour are in tension with these expectations when discrimination erupts in the clinical

relationship. They are situated between performing as good, compassionate workers and being viewed as sources of disruption in white institutions.

The workers' responses to the racist encounters are also shaped by histories of racial violence and multiple experiences of racism at both systemic and micro sites of social engagement. Essed (1991) argued that day-to-day racism is to be expected in our modern world; however, the operation of racism is often unpredictable in terms of the specific practices or the subjects involved. Furthermore, everyday sites of racism are also unanticipated due to their unpredictable operation. Racism unfolds in both overt and subtle ways, but Essed reminded us that its process "activates the whole pattern of injustice of which it is a part" (p. 147). In a similar vein, Goldberg (2009) stated that race works through everyday micro interactions, in addition to macro-political arrangements of geo-political interests, that the two go "hand in glove" (p. 25). Goldberg stated that micro-expressions of racism are just as deeply disturbing to subjects as macro expressions, as they are deeply unsettling due to their cumulative effects. Therefore, although racism does not operate exactly the same in every situation, and racialized workers will make meaning of the occurrences in different ways based on history, context, and differences across subject-formation (class, gender, sexuality, and so on), I follow Essed's (1991) contention that "experiences of everyday racism are repetitive and shared rather than unique" (p. 148).

Ahmed's (2000) conceptualization of encounters helps to explain the constitution of these racist practice scenarios described by participants. She argued that encounters are sites in which subjects cannot be located simply in the present, because they are intimately linked to multiple perceptions, histories, and sites of difference. Ahmed argued that these meetings are antagonistic because "they also *reopen the prior histories of encounters that violate and fix others in regimes of difference*" (p. 8). When subjects come together, they attempt to recognize each other by looking for what might be familiar about the other person, and the processes through which subjects determine if they are familiar to each other are socially and historically produced. Historically, racialized communities did not occupy the position of the helper; rather, they were situated as bodies that required regulation and control (Dua, 2004; Thobani, 2007). In other words, social workers of colour run the risk of not being recognized as legitimate professionals, as their very presence disrupts or shifts the "boundaries of what is familiar" (Ahmed, 2000, p. 8). The site of familiarity in social work is the helping relationship. Clients seek social services for assistance and the worker's role is to meet their needs. How we come to see or recognize each other is never outside of these established professional norms. What do the visual markers of difference mean to white subjects (clients and colleagues) when working with racialized people? Is it possible to view a person of colour as a professional helper? Or is a racialized worker viewed as a threatening Other (foreigner, immigrant, less qualified, etc.)? Racist encounters are an inevitable consequence of the ways in which our social world has been organized, and they produce very real dilemmas for racialized professionals.

### Conclusion

This paper has explored a process through which contemporary social work practices reinscribe colonial continuities (Heron, 1999) to constitute social workers as good and innocent subjects. The data from individual worker interviews demonstrates that professional practices are intertwined with colonial constructions of morality, in which imperial practices are tightly interwoven in scripts of civility to shape goodness (Jeffery, 2002). Racialized workers cannot be seen as liberal, moral subjects when racism is named, as the very naming of racism disrupts both the ideals of the profession and the neoliberal underpinnings of the state. Being seen as moral subjects requires an erasure of race, which is impossible for racialized people. This paper has illustrated the moments in which race cannot be ignored by racialized workers, regardless of their investments in the ideals and practices of the profession. The production of civility is kept intact through moral imperatives to be a good helper (Heron, 1999) in which innocence and whiteness secure themselves at the very moments in which difference is denied.

Workers of colour cannot be perceived as effective, empathetic, or social-justice oriented in these moments because racism pulls them outside of their commitments to be empathetic and client-centred. In other words, they cannot be seen as good. In this sense, their stories are sites of resistance and directly challenge the ways in which whiteness is centred in social work. Social workers in this study desire work places that acknowledge and address their daily encounters with racism. Foster (1994) argued that counter-narratives can challenge dominant scripts within various sites of social inquiry and offer “new if not disturbing insights, alternative and disquieting ways of thinking, [which] can be a means for creating new paradigms and expanding existing ones” (p. 145). My focus on practice dilemmas and racism brings a new dimension to the existing literature on critical practices. I assert that the workers’ narratives are sites of *critical practice*.

The dilemmas described by racialized social workers in this research invite new questions about the ways in which social work pedagogy constructs the role and practices of the social worker, in addition to the ways we theorize power within the worker–client relationship. Future research must examine the operations of whiteness and racial violence at every level of social work education and practice, including international social work (Badwall & Razack, 2012). Social work pedagogy needs to examine the ways in which colonialism and whiteness are foundational to the constitution of the profession, and to expand our thinking about the role and practices of social workers to ensure that practice experiences do not assume that the social worker is always powerful and the client always powerless. The participants’ stories demand that attention be given to the ways in which social work’s colonial roots shape present-day commitments to social justice and critical practice approaches. It is my hope that this research pushes the boundaries of what can be recognized as critical social work, and raises questions about how the profession’s values are lived on the ground during everyday moments of social work practice.

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