Strengthening critical allyship in social work education: Opportunities in the context of #BlackLivesMatter and COVID-19

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Abstract

COVID-19 has shifted social work education and widened the gaps in services for historically marginalised communities, including people of diverse cultural, sexual and gender identities and social classes. Existing inequities based on cultural differences have been magnified, perhaps most recently evident in George Floyd’s slaying and the subsequent #BlackLivesMatter demonstrations across the globe. Learning to be an ally for diverse communities and working towards the betterment of all people is a goal of social work education. We argue that simple allyship is not enough given the structural inequities present in North America and Australia the civil unrest amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Social work education’s focus should trend towards allegiance with disadvantaged communities or critical allyship and include a commitment to undertake decisive actions to redress the entrenched colonial, capitalist, systemic and structural inequities that oppress many and provide unearned privilege and advantage to others. We explore strategies used in classrooms to promote allegiance and make recommendations for social work education, policy, and practice in this time of change.

Keywords: #BlackLivesMatter; allyship; allegiance; cultural responsiveness; cultural competency; cultural diversity

Introduction

The global anxiety and tension surrounding the COVID-19 public health pandemic may increase the existing racial divide in both the healthcare and global economies worldwide. Amidst COVID-
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19, the continued crisis of social justice has had a light shone on inequities for Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour, particularly in North America. Worldwide media coverage of the death of George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black Minneapolis man who White police officers killed after allegedly trying to use a small counterfeit banknote, has called attention to epidemics of mass incarceration, deaths in custody, systemic violence against People of Colour, educational disparities, and the disproportionate poverty of Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) across the globe.

BIPOC, as an acronym for Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour, has recently emerged in North America and other parts of the world. In a recent media interview, an Indigenous leader in the US noted that, while each community faces its own struggles, the BIPOC acronym is meant to reflect solidarity and university among people of colour (Clarke, 2020). However, critics of the term argue that although meant to create unity, the use of the term also runs the risk of erasure (Deo, 2021). Therefore, we intentionally choose to explicitly name Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour rather than the shortened BIPOC acronym to avoid inadvertently erasing Black, Indigenous, and other groups while also promoting unity between these communities.

The coverage of Floyd’s murder and subsequent demonstrations across several Country’s highlighted the work of #BlackLivesMatter. From the #BlackLivesMatter movement, ongoing peaceful demonstrations, civil disobedience and, in some cases, rioting has emerged as a response to injustices being faced by Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour. These acts of resistance reflect anger and frustration around these continued injustices from communities and the strength, will, and determination to insist on radical and rapid social change. This also showed a desire for
non-Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour peoples to fight against these social injustices, including social workers.

There are many injustices for Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour. One such example that became highlighted during the Floyd coverage was current incarceration statistics. These are unusually high across the globe and highlights these disparities and injustices experienced by Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour. In some states in the US, unexplained police custody deaths are a growing issue (Heide & Chan, 2018; Nellis, 2016; Southall et al., 2008). In Canada, 18% of all deaths in custody are Indigenous, though they make up 4.9% of the population (Department of Justice, 2018). Analysis by Change the Record, an Australian Aboriginal-led justice coalition, found that there have been 437 Indigenous deaths in custody between 1991 and 2020 (Allam et al., 2020; Mills, 2020). These deaths represent 28% of all deaths in custody during that period, although Indigenous communities represent about three percent of Australians. These deaths, which are historically based on social, economic, and political issues, represent essential learning opportunities in global social work education.

To bring about change for the injustices faced by Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour, social work educators must draw upon their collective history of social advocacy and the lived experiences and wisdom of communities of colour. As the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2018) noted: social workers should challenge “social conditions that contribute to social exclusion…and work[ing] towards an inclusive society, working with people to achieve transformational change for socially inclusive societies” (n.p.).
Activist circles have promoted allyship as a way for social workers to show their commitment to social justice initiatives. Some groups argue that allyship has been co-opted within the broader capitalist system in which ‘issues’ are framed, branded, and transformed into commodities. Thus, allyship has become a comfortable ‘armchair’ identity rather than a call to action. As Indigenous Action (2014) argued: “Ally has also become an identity disembodied from any real mutual understanding of support. The term ally has been rendered ineffective and meaningless” (n.p.). Carlson et al. (2020) offered similar criticism, noting that if “allies don’t act, then they aren’t really allies, more than that, they are doing harm” (n.p).

Some groups now encourage those pursuing social justice with and for colonised and racialised peoples to use terms that emphasise action such as “currently acting in solidarity with” (McKenzie & Balasubramanian, 2014, p. 140) or words such as ‘accomplice’ or ‘co-conspirator’ that emphasize risk-taking and rule-breaking and require working for meaningful change (Clemens, 2017). We use the term critical allyship (Nixon, 2019; Yomantas, 2020) to emphasise allyship’s link to critical social work theory, pedagogy, and practice and differentiate it from its increasingly corporatised and depoliticised use in mainstream discourse.

We are a group of social work educators from Australia, Canada, and the US, working together to fully understand and attempt to dismantle the systems that continue racism and injustice towards peoples of colour in our countries. The authors of this article include a gay White man, a cisgender heterosexual Aboriginal Australian woman, and a cisgender, heterosexual, White woman. We write from our positionality but also our shared critical analysis and years as educators and social workers. This article presents ways to teach about allyship in the context of COVID-19 and
#BlackLivesMatter. It demonstrates new ways to think about and approach critical allyship for students and practicing social workers. The article recognizes that unearned privilege and power accrue to groups and individuals in complex webs depending on their social location and the social relations in which they are involved.

**Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

Critical social work is an essential theoretical framework informing our pedagogy and practice. In the critical pedagogy tradition, social work students learn to interrogate their experience and positionality within social relations of power and privilege. Social work educators who use critical pedagogy teach students to become comfortable with uncertainty and systematically analyse their lived experience by questioning assumptions (Morley et al., 2019). Students learn to own and name behaviours that reinforce structural inequity and perpetuate the marginalisation of Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour (Sue, 2004) and engage in actions that challenge and change oppressive social structures and systems (Morley et al., 2019). These attitudes and approaches recognise that racism is an everyday reality for Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour and is embedded in organisations, laws, and policies (Bennett et al., 2021; Crenshaw et al., 1996; Keum & Miller, 2017; Quinn & Grumbach, 2015). This process of critical reflexivity is an integral part of social work education and professional practice as part of our commitment to continuously deepen our greater understanding of the operation of power and privilege within and outside the classroom (Krings et al., 2020; Sue & Sue, 2008).

*Critical social work and critically reflexive practice*
In Australia, theories that explore ongoing oppression are termed *critical social work* (Pease et al., 2016). In North America, anti-oppressive approaches (AOP) cover similar ground, noting the intersection of social forces such as class, race, gender, (dis)ability, colonialism, homophobia, and heteronormativity, and analysing how these social relations interact to shape everyday lived experience by forming a complex and continually changing dynamic. We use the term *critical allyship* to signal the connection to these theoretical frames and the need for ongoing critical reflexivity and concrete action at personal, cultural, structural, and systemic levels.

Driven by underfunding and neoliberalism, employers increasingly demand that social work graduates have narrow, technical skills (Carey, 2021). However, AOP and critical social work approaches have argued that the problems facing humanity today require comprehensive skills in social analysis, advocacy, and strong critical reflexivity. Morley et al. (2019) argued that critical reflection provides skills that closely connect social work to the continuous need for systemic change (including decolonisation) and expose inequities. Allied health professions also undertake reflection as part of professional development (Jackson et al., 2019). However, critical reflection in social work focuses on individual experience, practice, and theory and how larger social structures shape possibilities for more socially just practice (Mattsson, 2014).

Reflection and social analysis are integral aspects of critical social work. However, they are often difficult to enact in the high-paced, under-resourced, neoliberal human service workplace (Baldwin, 2016; Martinez Herrero et al., 2021). Neoliberal workplaces undermine society’s collective capacity to advance social justice strategies. #BlackLivesMatter has brought the world’s attention to ongoing police violence against Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour,
together with other forms of systemic racism and inequity (Boucher, 2018). To combat this, social work educators must support students and educators to develop critical reflexive skills and skills in advocacy, activism, social organising, community development and policy critique and development.

**Structural and economic inequities and impacts on social work education**

Since the mid-1970s, governments in industrialised countries have been pursuing neoliberalism, a set of policies to limit government, cut taxes, make labour markets more flexible, and improve conditions for private profit-making (Khoury, 2015; Martinez Herrero et al., 2021; Stanford, 2014). In many communities in Australia and North America, neoliberalism has contributed to the privatisation of human services (Watts et al., 2018), and the consequent reduction of public services aimed at improving the social welfare of the community. Claiming to promote accountability and efficiency, neoliberal management models such as New Public Management introduce increasingly strict outcome measures that determine the pace of work and diminish social workers' practice autonomy. However, the outcomes do not represent the full range of interventions that are part of every good social work endeavour (Briskman, 2013; Harris, 2014).

Instead, these metrics narrow social work practice and introduce increasingly restricted, routinised services, sometimes under the guise of evidence-based practice (Boucher, 2018). Standardisation can limit the time and space for the development of emancipatory and decolonising practices (Baines, 2016). However, to resist neoliberal, colonial, and other oppressive practices, social workers need to develop new ways to undertake critical reflexivity in the current neoliberal
workplace and build individual and collective social justice strategies (Williams & Briskman, 2015; Morley et al., 2019).

COVID-19 and social work: A call to action

COVID-19 has triggered unprecedented global anxiety that health systems may be overrun, consequently freezing the economy and widening the structural inequalities for those who experience disadvantage (Galea & Abdulla, 2020). In addition, recent data have highlighted the increased risk of contracting COVID-19 and increased risk of dying from COVID-19 among minority groups (Galea & Abdulla, 2020; Wadhera et al., 2020; Commonwealth of Australia, 2021). Therefore socio, economic and political crises experienced by Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour are exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Galea & Abdulla, 2020).

During COVID-19, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison spent $270 billion building a coordinated response from the federal government to prepare for a “poorer, more dangerous” world (Macmillan, 2020, n.p.). He was sharply criticised for his lack of humanitarian and forward-thinking, especially for those in our communities who are vulnerable and marginalised. Suggestions for alternative ways to invest the $270 billion dollars included tuition-free university and Technical and Further Education (TAFE), placing dental care into Medicare, fully funding hospitals, rebooting the manufacturing industry, building public housing, addressing homelessness, and investing in renewable energy infrastructure. Contrary to the social investment that is needed to avoid a deep recession, the Australian government has suggested cuts to many social programs and has vastly increased the cost of degrees in the social sciences and humanities (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2020). This suggests that enrollment in these programs
will drop with severe impacts for labour forces (Horton, 2020) and thus service provision in some areas. Social work remains committed to opening services and helping individuals and communities adapt to ever-changing conditions (IFSW, 2020). The pandemic has precipitated an explosion of mental health issues, domestic violence, and homelessness, which may already exist in marginalised communities. However, this represents only a fraction of the social problems growing during the pandemic (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020; Feger et al., 2020), and serves as a significant call to action for a profession that is now under duress due to the workload and neoliberal working conditions as noted above.

**Moving beyond competence and towards responsiveness and humility**

Cultural competence has been seen as a valuable way to address some of the tensions and challenges of working with racially and culturally diverse populations. However, cultural competence is not attainable as culture is not stagnant but ever-changing (Danso, 2015; Pon, 2009; Sakamoto, 2007). Becoming competent at another person’s lived experience is an unrealistic goal, but affinity with is a target. Most of us live in more than one cultural setting, and therefore, how we perceive, experience, and engage with the world around us often needs to be understood through the lens of one or more cultures (Atteberry-Ash et al., 2019; Truong et al., 2014). Reflecting the need for concepts that reflect the dynamism and fluidity of identity and the need for a critical decolonising perspective, many activists and academics have suggested the concepts of cultural humility and cultural responsiveness (Sakamoto, 2007; Pon, 2009; Danso, 2018). The term competence implies a set of knowledge and skills that can be achieved and mastered (Bennett & Gates, 2019; Bennett et al., 2021). However, effectively working with people from diverse
backgrounds requires more than a theory of knowledge and clinical skills; to these, we must add cultural humility (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998).

There is also a rise of the term cultural responsiveness. Cultural responsiveness holds culture as central to health and wellbeing, is relationship-focused, and appreciates and values diversity between groups, families, and communities (Bennett et al., 2018). Indigenous Allied Health Australia (IAHA, 2015) developed a cultural responsiveness framework suggesting six capabilities: (i) respect for centrality of culture; (ii) self-awareness; (iii) proactivity; (iv) inclusive engagement; (v) leadership and responsibility; and (vi) accountability. IAHA (2015) argued that cultural responsiveness is a strengths-based, action-oriented approach to acceptable and appropriate practice. This framework gives suggestions in each capability where social workers can take action to increase their cultural responsiveness.

Outside several Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the US (Bowles et al., 2016) and Indigenous institutions in North America and Australia (Bryan, 2019; Trudgett et al., 2020), social work is a career taught in Euro-centric institutions. Within and outside these institutions, social workers are required to work cross-culturally but often lack the experience or training necessary to do so (Fernando & Bennett, 2019). To work toward dismantling racist systems of inequality is an ongoing practice. Similarly, becoming a critical ally is active and consistent (Anti-Oppression Network, n.d.). This can mean reorientation of the dominant ways of doing, thinking, and being and critically examining positions of privilege, inequities, and power in social work.
Critical allyship and its limits

The word *ally* is commonly part of military terminology to describe partners in war and occasionally peacebuilding. Allies, particularly those in positions of power, are needed to win prolonged conflicts (Becker, 2017). The inherent complexity of allyship is that allies can choose to change sides. In the context of this paper, allies can go home, leaving Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour stranded and vulnerable. The term *ally* can also mean different things to different people. In this article, we propose that allyship is action (Radke, et al., 2020), a way of living, and a way of being.

Many non-Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour focus on the word *ally* as if it is only a noun or tend to see it as an easily absorbed aspect of identity and of being a *good person* (Nixon, 2019). The danger of identifying in this way is that it is tempting to forget who it is that one is being good for and with. In social work, when allyship becomes more about identity than the actions; when it becomes more about *saving those people* than doing with; when it becomes more about being seen as a good person than the underlying systemic causes; that is when it is dangerous or even deadly (Nixon, 2019).

Practicing allyship does not mean using it to enhance personal power (or ego) but rather striving to address injustice (Nixon, 2019). When people are reminding us that to be silent is to be complicit, it might provide an urge to say something. But if activism begins and ends with performative allyship, one abdicates oneself from the genuine commitment and sacrifice that is necessary to dismantle the systems of racism. Many non-Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour speak of feeling overwhelmed by guilt and shame of not knowing about or doing anything
to counteract the injustices of oppression and racism (DiAngelo, 2018; Nixon, 2019). Guilt can be unhelpful when it makes us feel stuck or focused on feelings of helplessness. Feeling stuck and guilty can be another way to abdicate responsibility and action for change (Zembylas, 2019). There are ways to process strong emotions, such as meditation and journaling that help many people feel strong enough to carry emotional burdens (Bennett, 2021). Various forms of critical self-reflection and reflexivity, alongside scholarly and activist self-education and collective education on these challenging topics, should take place.

Guilt and shame often go hand-in-hand. Educating oneself does not give the individual the right to shame other people for not knowing, doing, or not yet being successful in antiracist, anti-oppressive knowledge and practice. Shaming frames the battle as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ when allyship is a lifelong commitment to antiracist behaviours and accepts that learning is lifelong. Thus, social work educators should seize opportunities to educate others when witnessing racism but try to do this in a way that engages and can lead to further knowledge-seeking and action.

Social work educators can caution students to be careful and strategic when joining debates concerning Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour and decolonising issues. Rather than focus on the pressing issues of inequity and social injustice, many people get caught up in trying to discredit racism or the existence of inequalities (Kivel, 2017). Often the best strategy is to avoid participating in debates that focus on whether racism or inequity exists and instead engage with those with open minds and a capacity to explore issues critically and thoughtfully, no matter how difficult the conversations might be. Authentic allies take psychological risks by holding themselves and others accountable to Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour and values of
equity and social justice. Being a critical ally is not about feelings of discomfort, grief, or outrage, though discomfort can feel overwhelming at times. Critical allies have to examine their privilege and use it in ongoing antiracist and decolonising work. Self-care and boundaries are vital because the work is continuing and prolonged (Nixon, 2019).

Allegiance: Offering new possibilities for extending allyship

Real allegiance requires confronting oppression and systemic racism directly because racism and oppression are a pernicious and central part of social work and challenging them must be a political priority. In any era, particularly in this era, it was/is not enough for individuals to reconsider racist ideas but not take ongoing action. Social work as a social justice-based profession needs a mass of people involved in actively resisting racism in all its systemic forms, including those within the institutions it learns and works. Otherwise, the oppression of Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour will continue to be a destructive and oppressive force in our society, as it has been for so many centuries and decades. Critical allyship has many parts to it. Developing organically from our diverse positionality and conversations, and finding more urgency following George Floyd’s death, we suggest five possibilities that social work educators should test and use to extend the model of critical allyship.

1. Acknowledge biases

Social work educators should encourage students to identify and acknowledge their biases and to critically engage with more socially just perspectives on the world. We all live in a society that is crisscrossed by oppressive relations, and we cannot live entirely outside of these social relations, but we can take conscientious and continuous action. Acknowledging prejudices and racism does not diminish our contributions as social workers or lessen our commitment to social justice. It
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extends our capacity to work in ways that are empathetic, full of integrity, and directed to social justice. As Banaji and Greenwald (2016) note, everyone has implicit biases and subconsciously holds discriminatory and oppressive attitudes toward others in this society. Razack (2014) argues further that there is no space of innocence in this society, where one can be entirely free of social norms and relations.

Implicit bias may not be consistent with one’s conscious beliefs (Bertrand et al, 2005) and yet it often hovers in the background like an uninvited and unwanted but hard-to-expel guest. Harvard University’s (2011) Project Implicit allows you to take a series of tests to see where your unconscious biases lie (so it cannot be said that there is no way to know the biases one does or does not hold). This project looks at race, gender, age, weight, disability, and sexuality and provides a meaningful way to be further self-aware. Relatedly, Indigenous Action (2014) argues for recognising that although all settlers do not benefit equally from colonialism, unearned privilege and advantage are systemically accorded to those from the wide variety of settler populations throughout the world. They assert further that as people within communities “that maintain and benefit from colonisation, (settlers) are best positioned to dismantle it and it is incumbent on them (us) to build a healthy culture of resistance, accountability, and sustenance” (Indigenous Action, 2014, n.p.). Unsettling America (n.d.) argues similarly, noting the importance of remembering that critical allyship is not an identity nor is it self-defined. Critical allyship is a lifelong process of building relationships based on trust, consistency, and accountability with marginalised individuals and groups (Indigenous Action, 2014)

2. Educate before engaging
Social work educators should model practices for developing knowledge in unfamiliar areas initially by independent study. Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour should not bear the burden of determining our professional education or ensuring that the profession has a social conscience on racism, colonialism, and reconciliation. Social work educators should avoid expecting Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour students to speak up on diversity topics or provide their perspective simply because they belong to these diverse groups. While some Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour will be happy to share their views, it is unreasonable to place the burden of education on that student unless they express a desire to ask that student to speak for others with similar identities. Additionally, social work educators should not invite colleagues who are Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour from the community during a diversity module only because they have a diverse identity. Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour should be invited because they bring expertise to a topical area, which may or may not be on cultural diversity issues. When making invitations for guest lectures, social work educators need to be sensitive to the additional labour guest lecturing could represent. Social work educators should ensure that guest speakers are compensated (i.e., guest lecturers outside of the university should be paid) or that similar labour is provided in exchange (i.e., two lecturers may exchange guest lecturing in their areas of expertise).

There are various resources available for us to learn from so that we do not burden Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour for either our own or students' professional education. The advantage of modern information technology is that students do not have to travel significant distances to educate themselves. Although it is wise to start with peer-reviewed sources, it can be helpful to use popular source platforms such as Google Searches, Twitter, YouTube, Facebook,
and several Twitter streams. Hashtags such as #BlackXplaining101 (O’Sullivan, 2020) highlight many Indigenous peoples’ words explaining various issues, including history of slavery in Australia, statues, monuments, and racism or “100 things White people can do for racial justice” (Shutack, 2017). #IndigenousX provides many resources, including books that raise awareness of colonisation (Murphy-Oates, 2020).

3. Extend the conversation beyond police brutality

The digital age has played a pivotal role in us becoming aware of unjust aggression by police as we now have a way to capture and transmit events and images. This information is then amplified through social media. As Indigenous Action (2014) notes, we need to be committed to “dismantling all systems of oppression, whether they are found in institutional power structures, interpersonal relationships, or within ourselves” (n.p.). Social work educators must help students understand the complexity of systemic and institutional racism. Aboriginal Australians are underrepresented in leadership roles in politics, education, and industry (Wilson & Wilks, 2015) and have difficulty accessing quality housing, are over-represented in the criminal justice system and their access to quality healthcare is usually poor (Parliament of Australia, 2008). Variations of racism and injustice range from being very clear (e.g., halting the human rights act to impose the Northern Territory Intervention in Australia) to surreptitious policies such as cashless welfare cards, which are much debated by political leaders and the community (Bielefeld, 2018). Instead, we support Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour in their need to access quality education, and thereby to begin to break the cycle of systemic racism (World Economic Forum, 2020).

4. Target racism
Social work educators must all speak up against racism in the workplace and support our colleagues who are Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour. Aboriginal academics are under-represented in Australia with fewer than 430 Indigenous academics currently employed in general, of which only a small number are in social work (Thunig & Jones, 2020). This lack of visibility is particularly evident in senior leadership roles. Indeed, Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour continue to be underrepresented at all levels in higher education (Fowler et al., 2018) and the limited access to promotion needs to be investigated, and comprehensive strategies need to be adopted. It is the responsibility of all to ensure a safe working environment for every Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour working or studying at the university.

Universities throughout the world have failed to seriously engage with the systemic and structural nature of racism (Ash et al., 2020). Comprehensive change strategies will require the setting-up of committees at all levels of the university to address racism, and these must be led by those with first-hand experiences of the issues without overly burdening these individuals with the exclusive responsibility and little in the way of support and resources (Ash et al., 2020). Universities could also publish the ethnicity of potential candidates for appointments and those who have been successful in securing senior appointments, so that trajectories can be tracked and strategies mobilised for further progress. Funding bodies should also make public the number of grant applications from Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour and the proportion of those who had been successfully awarded grants. There will be challenges to implementing these structural changes. For example, grant-awarding and promotion committees should consider indicators of academic success such as community engagement, knowledge, impact, and other practices that have academic merit but are now viewed with scepticism. Additionally, research funding
specifically earmarked for inclusion and diversity should be made available to advance equity and inclusion in research and across the university. These structural changes signal that antiracism is being treated as a priority and should see considerable success moving forward.

Allyship implies that we are helping someone else and requires non-Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour people to transfer/redistribute their historical privileges and power to Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour. However, it is about acknowledging the inequalities arising from all the advantages from which you have gained benefit (anti-oppression network, n.d). Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour should judge if you are a good person to work with and if you are fully committed to change 365 days of the year. Real commitment means calling out people (even one’s boss) when they are racist and providing alternative ways of understanding and acting on the issue at hand. White and/or settler privilege can and should be used for social justice goals (Kivel, 2017). Critical allyship should not be something one chooses to do only in non-confronting situations (Nixon, 2019). Rather, it is a full-time expression of responsibility and commitment to social justice.

The neoliberal model of social work practice argues that allyship, diversity and inclusion are good for business and likely to improve services by involving multiple voices and perspectives (Morley, 2016). This reasoning is flawed, given that it has always been more profitable to hire lower-waged workers, including women, people with disabilities, and Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour, and yet unemployment and lower wages has plagued these communities (Sumera et al., 2020). Instead, though their salaries cost more, White men continue to occupy better-paid jobs and leadership positions (Lewis, 2018). This suggests that patriarchy and race are as crucial as are profits to capitalism and colonialism. The profit motive for allyship and inclusion also implies that
if profits fall, for reasons that have nothing to do with diversity, all those who are not White and male will be re-marginalised. Thus, critical allyship and solidarity should not be based not on commercial profit but on values of social justice, equity, and fairness (Fraser, 2010; Gates et al., 2021). Though often seen as something that can be applied after the more technical, measurable, managerial tasks are accomplished, these values are the centrepiece of social work codes of practice and should not be viewed as optional (Hughes & Wearing, 2016; Kennedy-Kish et al., 2017). Grounding these values in the lived experiences of oppressed groups provides social workers with a mechanism to maintain its integrity and vibrancy. This, in turn, provides a mandate for social analysis, critical reflection, and social activism on #BlackLivesMatter and encourages the proactive challenge and dismantling systems of oppression, including racist and embedded colonialist thought and behaviours.

5. Make critical allyship and allegiance a research priority

Social work researchers can play a role in furthering knowledge about critical allyship and allegiance with Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour and other diverse communities. When researching cultural diversity issues, social workers should ensure that these communities are not merely represented as a demographic group. Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour and other diverse communities need to be intimately involved in research design, planning, implementation, and eventual dissemination, including being part of conversations about whether the research is appropriate and necessary (Munro & Shakeshaft, 2019). Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour have often been studied by researchers that do not belong to or have any connection to their communities (Bennett et al., 2021; Wilks et al., 2018). Black, Indigenous, and
other People of Colour should not simply be studied but rather partnered with to ensure the research is culturally appropriate, relevant, and meets the needs of the community.

Social work researchers committed to critical allyship and allegiance must carefully examine their often-unconscious complicity in racism in the social work classroom. Social work educators and researchers must be willing to have uncomfortable conversations in the classroom about the practice, as well as their experiences growing up in a racist society, which has inevitably influenced our behaviours and choices in the classroom. Future research opportunities on critical allyship and allegiance should include autoethnographic and collaborative autoethnographic approaches whereby social work educators have focused critical conversations about racism within the university system and strategies to dismantle it.

Conclusion

This article intends to respond to the recent upsurge in activities associated with the #BlackLivesMatter movement demands and struggles of other racialised and structurally oppressed groups. We extend current theorisations of allyship by shifting the emphasis to critical allyship and allegiance, underscoring the connection to the tradition of critical theory, practice, and pedagogy in social work. We also emphasise the need for critical reflexivity on individual practice and positionality, as well as on strategies and tactics for ongoing solidarity with Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour. Allies who do not take action could be perpetuating harm. The pedagogical tools analysed above also contribute to critical social work theory, pedagogy, and practice by highlighting the indivisible connection between action and analysis and providing a way forward towards greater racial equity and social justice.
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