

Episode 175 - A Panel Discussion on Systemic Racism (part 2 of 2)

[00:00:08] Welcome to in social work the podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at W W W dot. In social work. Dot org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of social work is to engage practitioners and researchers and lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice research. We educate we connect. We care. We are in social work. Hello I'm Charles Syms your host for this episode of in social work in this podcast. The second of two professors Elizabeth Bowen Diane Elze Isok Kim and Charles Syms of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Continue the conversation on how they have approached the topic of systemic racism with social work students here the panels discussion shifts to why they believe it is important for social work education to specifically address the issue of racism additionally they explore the topic from the School of Social Work. Trauma informed human rights perspective the podcast concludes with the panel's thoughts on moving from the academic discussion in class to real world advocacy. Professor Elizabeth Bowen is an assistant professor who received her Ph.D. from the University of Illinois at Chicago. Professor Diane Elzie is an associate professor. She received her Ph.D. from Washington University. Professor ASAC Kim is an assistant professor who received his Ph.D. from the University of Michigan and Professor Charles Sims is a clinical associate professor who received his Masters of Social Work from the California State University Sacramento. They met for this discussion in April of 2015.

[00:02:09] So you in social work education we tend to talk a lot about social justice and how that's an important value to the social work profession. It's really the mission of social work to promote social justice. It is important that we frame racial justice as an important social work objective. And talk specifically about racial justice along with that. I think that it is very important that we're able to acknowledge that race matters. You know it's a conversation already touched on a little. Many of us are perfectly comfortable talking about social justice. It's a fairly broad term. We do hear it in social work all the time. I think in our society in general people are far less comfortable talking about race far less comfortable acknowledging that race matters and yet we have so many examples of the ways that it does and that it matters for social work in particular. So whether we're talking you know as we mentioned about drug policy about the child welfare system about health disparities there are still many ways in which race is deeply impactful. And when I thought about this question I thought back to the slogan of the school where I got my Ph.D. which is Jane Addams College of Social Work at University of Illinois at Chicago and the school slogan there is advancing social racial and economic justice. So I was very used to seeing those chords together in many places at the school. And I'd like them that kind of resonates of me because yes it is social justice. But I think we can also claim racial justice and economic justice too as key parts of that and that are worth saying and around in addition to that broader term.

[00:03:44] So what I think about you know you like books are much very much willing to think about things and this notion of social justice without necessarily thinking about what that means. I think you're right I think it's easy to frame it as a global large problem. I don't know if that's more helpful or hurtful. I mean if it's too big I guess you could walk away and say well there's nothing I can do there's too much. There's nothing I can do about all that. But I think there are specific issues that are centered around race that can get lost in the overarching chatter of social justice that we must address because there are populations that's real for them that every day is a real issue. And we can talk with social justice were

for them for their experience their life experience. It's a racial issue. And I think we have to be comfortable enough as a profession to say what it is and to say what it is. Over and over and over again so that people like you heard the slogan at your school say it over and over and over again so that people understand that we understand what the basic issue is or what the issue is and that we will struggle to address it. I think it's kind of like saying that I am for world peace. But to say that I think no one is going to deny that you are for it. But as a professional as a social worker you have to be more specific and targeted toward what you as an individual and as a part of a fashion which advocates for social economical and racial justice.

[00:05:36] It's important to I think for students to begin the conversation in a broader sense I think that social justice is for me like a framework in which you can articulate the kind of injustices that we as a society are dealing with. And then within that framework we have an opportunity for each students to come explore and examine what are some of the challenges that we are facing as a profession and because there are interested in let's say a child welfare issues and their professional trajectory that they have to be aware of the fact that most of the child welfare issues are going to be intricately related to racial issues and issues regarding Native Americans issues regarding the foster care and ethnicities. I mean it's not like the racial issue is going to be absent in any of the things that we are addressing as social work profession. So I think that we give them tools to work with them their own individual selves to be able to articulate their passion and whether that passion is going to be specifically on racial issues. That's not for us to decide. But at least they didn't themselves begin to articulate it in a way that racial injustice is intricately and critically related and in did and many if not all of the injustices that we're seeing in our society. I think it is very important to talk specifically about racial justice because I do think it's very easy to talk about social justice without talking about racial justice or thinking about racial justice. I think helping students see clearly that people of color are disproportionately impacted by different policies and practices.

[00:07:43] And so it's not just talking about the need to change these policies and practices but talking of and changing them might be good for everybody. But changing them might be especially important for people of color and I think restorative justice is a good example I was just thinking about I'm very excited that this fall we're going to have a course in restorative justice practices and I've been trying to frame that the way I want to frame that for students is that I mean yes restorative justice in schools helps all kids but to not do it in the Buffalo city schools and to not do it in school districts where it is black and brown children who are being disproportionately suspended and expelled to not do it is a racial injustice issue. And it's a social injustice because of who is attending our Buffalo schools and who is getting suspended at this proportionate rate. Again I think we have to explicitly draw those connections because hear restorative justice owes Social Justice a good for all kids. But there is another layer there and it is critical that we do that with students of color in our school systems in this country. Otherwise they are on because of other policies and practices including suspension and expulsion practices the way they get implemented in school districts. We set them on that womb to prison pipeline and we have got to stop that. So yes so I think it's very important to talk specifically about racial injustice and the kind of follow up from my thinking. Adding my pieces the notion of restorative justice we've done some stuff actually through the school social work many years ago and trying it.

[00:09:42] One of the things with around some of these issues particularly racial justice issues social justice issues in general but racial justice issue is now how do you integrate or bring into the conversation to communities. How do you get the community. Because in

order to do that means somebody has got to give up some power. And too often I find folks are concerned about well what if they do this. What if they do give up some power and let a particular group come into the school and be part of that process. No but people get nervous about that. We're talking about the school and this particular setting but it could be that the criminal justice system could be in a mental health system it could be wherever whatever system for me and when I think about some of this is about. Are you willing to give up some power. Again we talk about that an intervention. Now how do you reduce the distance between yourself and the people that you're working with in order to work with them instead of prescribe to them. And it's about someone that you know being willing to accept that power dynamic exists and then working to reduce that distance. Right. I think we're all on board with social justice. But this conversation of sharing power being willing to give up some of the privileges that is inherent for some of us in front of the system. I think that's where it gets uncomfortable. But that's absolutely where it needs to go. So here to university it's a Buffalo School of Social Work. We have a trauma informed human rights perspective and that's infused in our curriculum.

[00:11:17] So I'm wondering how do we think about this or how do we link this issue of racial justice into this kind of common form and human rights lens. Let me start with that. So according to the Article 79 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights all human beings are entitled to equal protection of the law without any discrimination and no one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest detention or exile. Unfortunately recent incidences of police brutality against the black male specifically in the United States suggest that the basic human rights not afforded for black males who have been historically oppressed and presumably regarded restfully in terms of the earlier comments that were making the drug policies are disproportionately affecting people of color and African-American males specifically in the context of the United States that is built on racial hierarchy. I think that trauma as I think of it is about collective lived experiences that starts at birth and follows through the lifetime so trauma for people of color is not a one time event that we might be thinking about it in a different sense but it is a rapid chronic exposure to discrimination and marginalization from the society that impact not only the mental health physical health as well. And I think there are a large body of research that indicates that exposure to racial discrimination impacts and have negative consequences in both mental health and physical health among specifically Occam African-Americans. So I think it directly relates to the lives of black males. Specifically it affects how they view society and how they are feeling marginalized and neglected by the various society. They feel like they need to be part of or are some people more on the lines of targeted.

[00:13:22] I think that you feel targeted or there are times when I am walking into a store and I get stopped. Can I help you. Five times between the beginning of the story is halfway through so you can feel targeted like people are watching so folks. Well that's just paranoid thinking you know look it's reality for many people. That's their experience. Well we want to make somebody feel crazy. Tell them their experience is not real. Over and over and over and over again that it's just an exaggeration of what's actually happening and you can begin to feel angry. And I think that the issue of dehumanization is important in all of this because you know when we dehumanize people we deny them human rights typically we deny them. Life itself. And I thank thanks for talking. I'm I'm sitting here thinking about how when the Ferguson events went down and then there were lots of articles on the Internet some fabulous articles about racial justice issues. And I forced myself at that time to read the comments and it was so incredibly painful and horrifying to read the depth of people's hatred of black people. And there were hundreds of comments like that attach to those articles. So for me I mean it just gives me such great pause about how deep that growth is in our culture. And I think you know one positive thing is is that it's

becoming more apparent to us that we can't ignore ads. But I think that dehumanization of people that persists and it's manifested in so many ways and runs so deep in the fabric of our society and within our bones as people of the United States.

[00:15:50] You know I think that certainly for me has the links to our trauma informed and human rights perspective because it's just been this horrifying process of dehumanizing people and we have many examples then of violating people's human rights in this country we love to look at other countries and see how they're violating people's human rights. Well let's look in our own backyard. And I have to say I'm glad that I didn't teach social welfare history and policy in the forum because I don't know if I could have done it. Well I was thinking you know if all of you were talking about the trauma aspects of this that you know obviously when we talk about and it's not just Ferguson it's we've had this happen in many parts of the country in many different ways. That get publicized more than others. There's obviously the trauma too you know on an individual level to someone who's you know the family members of a person who's killed by the police for example. But I think we're clearly hitting upon a trauma at other levels too. So to a whole community to you know the entire country in some ways to you know maybe all oppressed people are people of color when we have this constant reminders that this is how we're viewed how You're dehumanized are viewed as less than human in our society. And you know I think we have a lot of policies that contribute to that dehumanization. And I was starting to think about what if our policies instead could be more trauma informed because you know in social work we talk a lot about our programs being trauma and form.

[00:17:30] So how can my agency or my program be trauma informed. But I'd like to start to think about how could our policy. How could our laws be more trauma informed. And because my interest is in drug policy I think clearly we see many examples how that is not fair. Trauma informed when we treat drug use primarily as a criminal justice issue not a public health issue. And I don't know a lot about law enforcement about the judicial system about that aspect of our policy but from what I hear especially as these incidents come out it's clear that that is not a very trauma informed system either. And so just think about how things could be so different especially in terms of racial justice if those systems were transformed in that direction. And I know that's something that won't happen quickly or easily but that I hope social work can be a voice and change in that direction. So as educators we hope that the impact of what our students learn and discuss in the classroom will extend beyond the classroom. So how do we help our students move from the discussions and reflections that take place in class to advocating for racial justice in the real world whether that be in their field placement in their jobs or in other community settings. When I teach a course especially on diversity and oppression addresses the issues of racism and other isms in our society. I always try to bring up their current affairs that are happening either here in the United States or elsewhere. But it's surprising that not many students are aware of some of the glaring issues that are covered in more traditional media.

[00:19:08] So it might seem maybe half of the students in my class would be aware of the fact that the Walter Scott case would be happening and unraveling as we speak. But half of them may not be aware of that. So we tend to sort of localize and sort of target our own sort of feed on time in terms of social media. And we get sort of this little slanted view of we know where our media consumption is happening. And so I try to have them be more open to exploring other regional media forums even in some of the more open ended alternative media sources like a Mother Jones or other aspects of that more specific to racial issues. But I also think that that's something the media is also sensationalizing the stories that may not need that sort of the lack of federal word focus. And sometimes what's

highlighted them the media I don't necessarily mean that it is important and that discussions and the relevance of the fact that we are talking about the issues of racism. Well I think it's important to pay attention to what's not being discussed as well because I feel like there are many efforts that are happening in the grassroots level that it's now being covered in the media. So for example I work with the refugee communities in Buffalo and many of the issues that were percolating up in the community level was not being discussed with the media until much later and only then we pick up on other issues that are happening that affect these in front of our communities.

[00:20:56] So we have to be mindful about the fact that I think it's important to sort of be involved in the community like Charles were saying earlier and having that partnership in order to be aware of what's happening from the grassroots level up but also the larger discussions on issues of race and ethnicity that are sort of overwhelming us all the time but in having those conversations we sometimes lose sight of the fact that the very things that are happening in our own backyard and probably not being covered and I think it's important for us to point students in that direction if they don't know what is happening to point students in the direction of especially local I think efforts that community organizations are taking on around social justice issues because I think that can be helpful for students and also keeping their hope alive and their belief in social change. Because I think what they're learning in the classroom you know they're learning about so many of the things that are wrong that I think they also need to learn about the things that they can do to correct those wrongs and to see people actually doing those things. And many of our students are involved I think in social justice issues and they organize things. It's really wonderful but I think at least pointing all of them in those directions because they have to believe that they can make a difference even if some of their professors are feeling a bit pessimistic about it. But yeah and I think a lot of exciting work. That's where it's happening at the local level these days.

[00:22:49] I think that's important because sometimes you feel like when you are in the profession long enough and practice as a practitioner you kind of gravitate towards all the things that are wrong with the profession and with a system that you're a part of and you lose sight of that wonderful thing the fact that you are making a difference and the kind of the challenges that we face is because we're working against the status quo. And so we can highlight the fact that we are facing the challenge because we are pushing against the norms and kind of letting them know that that's OK and having a curricular opportunity to engage in a conversation and a network of people who are concerned about the same issue that you care about and that brings the issues to resilience and part to have real conversation about the possibility and the applicability of social work as both as a profession but also as an advocate having a kind of along those lines I don't know if I always do a good job of conveying this to my classes. But I want to convey that students and I underestimate their own ability to be change agents. And I think about it in the field placements specifically because when you come into a field placement setting on one hand you're a low power actor in that situation and you're kind of the lowest person on the organizational hierarchy coming in as an intern. But I think because of that you have kind of an insider outsider perspective when you come in that way and I think sometimes students can see patterns or injustices that people who have been there for a while it might just be so entrenched and it's kind of gotten lost in the shuffle. You know so I don't know how exactly to empower students to know that.

[00:24:41] But I do want them to know that that I think you actually can see into a lot even at an agency level even just in your field placement especially if you are kind of connecting some of these dots with the micro and macro practice issues with racial justice with social

justice. So I hope that. Yeah I think many of them too. I mean I hear them talk about how they take that trauma informed perspective in their agencies and that you know have discussions with their colleagues there and are often met when interests you know are able to tell us more about them. So I teach in the foundation year and we've talked a lot about our concerns around making sure that students have the lens and we're concerned who making sure that social work is being deliberate and specific about addressing racial injustices populations that we work with. But I'm also heartened sometimes because I hear students talk about their experiences in the field and some seem to get it. I mean sometimes I walk out of class going hey they are paying attention that they see the disparity. They see that the problem. They may not know what to do or they may feel that I don't want to rock the boat because I just want to make sure I pass for field placement. So I'm heartened by that some day on more occasions than probably it sounds like I'm also thinking that listening to people talk we had a fuel seminar for a long time. It's kind of gone this way in that way until we finally get eliminated.

[00:26:11] But I think there are things that kind of seminar can address because sometimes I think wouldn't it be great if we could put a booster Session in for students about nine to 12 months out they have to come back to the school and we can kind of re inoculations for the world they're facing. Well I wonder sometimes if in doing some we got too ambitious that it could be a place where students didn't have to produce something but really got a chance to sit down and talk about somebody is critical because I'm sure they see it but I don't know if they always have the opportunity in a field placement or in a field placement setting to really explore it because there are so many other things that have to occur. The summer I can be because we're asking in our case we're asking people to be masters level practitioner. So how do you critically think about the experience that you've had intersecting that are connecting that with what you've been exposed to in class. So maybe you can start to develop strategies maybe some of that springing some people from the community who have come through school and actually now are in a position to impart some of their experience and knowledge and use those kinds of settings for something like that. I know that that may be problematic and it may not go very far with it. I've been struck by it all. Couldn't we do that. Would that be useful. Just a thought. I think that's why it's so special for us to have the social work profession and education.

[00:27:38] And then we have this a place where we can foster and facilitate a conversation that is going to be relevant when they go out into the real world and practice on whatever the passion that they have. It's always going to be reflected upon the fact that what they know in the real world is predicated upon the fact that the education that they received here and social work can actually mean something. So I think for us to create a connection between the community and the classroom in a seamless way I think that's both our challenge and our opportunity in creating a place where we not only as a social worker or an educator create a space where students can talk about issues they are facing in their internship places or not. I think we have the model that experience we have to be willing to step in and model that process critically looking at yourself honestly looking at yourself. PSAP your field of practice and understanding that you know working on self is important. Isn't just I got the MSW and I got my license and now I can go do it but or I am going to a training session. Best training or in-service that working itself is more than that. It is about being honest with yourself and how are you doing the work. How are you practicing them. Does anyone have any final thoughts or concluding remarks. We would like to share. I think it's a wonderful conversation so far. I'm very critical on it but as a final Fobbs maybe things that are fucked up in the last minute I did have something I wanted to say that I was thinking about going into this.

[00:29:35] So knowing that I was coming here today to do this podcast and I was thinking about this topic racism racial injustice and how it is an uncomfortable topic often and I'm saying this from my perspective as a white person. So I was thinking about that and thinking OK we know this is uncomfortable and as a result I think often when white people talk about the topic of racism at all. Not going in one of two directions. One of them being kind of a response to minimize her tonight. So no we hear people sometimes saying things like oh I don't think things are that bad anymore. I think we've moved on and then I think the other response we hear sometimes from us white people is a response that acknowledges racism. But sometimes I think we feel compelled to try to set ourselves apart from it so I can acknowledge that this happens but I don't want you know to think about the fact that I my contribute to it in some ways or that I might benefit in some ways. And so instead I want to present myself as this kind of enlightened or otherwise exemplary white person who's not part of that system so my kind of challenge to myself here and I'll extend that challenge perhaps to other white people is to try to be willing to do some of the hard work to go beyond that to have some uncomfortable conversations around this to have some potentially uncomfortable self reflection about privilege about the way we contribute to that or benefit from that about implicit and explicit bias. And just to kind of have the humility to be able to go there. And it's not easy but I think maybe we all need to challenge ourselves to do it.

[00:31:09] Well as I said here I mean I think certainly all of us white folks are part of the problem. And I think about myself we as a school like what else can we do. I mean the racial injustice issues in Buffalo are so huge and so major that what else can we do thinking creatively about how the school can engage around those issues. Many students are engaging around those issues. Many faculty were involved in the community in different ways. But what else can we do to have more impact. And I guess the other thing is about the white privilege issue because you know I try to think about that a lot and how I act that out in my life. I guess when I say that you know we're all part of the problem is that you know we all benefit from that. Right. There is that system is held in place I think with such violence and that I think has become perhaps more apparent to people in this country. It has always happened in both the north and the South but with the events in Ferguson and then all of the bystander videos that keeps surfacing I think that people perhaps more people are getting a sense of the breadth and depth of the violence that holds that system of white privilege in place. And I think that we individually and as a school also need to I think we need to take that on in a more concerted way somehow partly because of the depth of that violence. It's starting to move. And by that I mean that the use of physical violence.

[00:33:23] First we've got video but we've always seen that when people step outside of the other kinds of economic particularly violence worthy of subjugating a better term of people that we as a side we've always been able to go to physical violence relatively easily and kind of reinforce those perceived social norms more expectations. I'm kind of thinking where I'd like to leave or my final thoughts are kind of follow some of the things that folks have said and this notion that we're not blameless either. And heart of us recognizing or struggling to move forward we have to alter our past and say this is where we were this is where we're going. And this is the reason why. And I think sometimes we like to dress up as the lone voice in the wilderness but we have our own pieces of this and we can again we've said this earlier that if we're not careful we can become heart and parcel to the systems that we say are problematic and either implicitly or explicitly. I think for me because as I started with fake identity the intersectionality issue that as an Asian American male I have an opportunity to start a conversation about the issues of racial injustice in a way that other ethnic minorities are able to. So for me it's about creating a place for

students to social work students who are taking classes from me have a place or a safe place for them to talk about uncomfortable topics like institutional racism that we don't necessarily avoid talking about uncomfortable topics as if we are talking about the issues of safety or tried to separate those two out.

[00:35:31] And it's important for me to say that being uncomfortable is part of the top description for me as a social worker. Because if you aren't able to withstand that or at least to process that on your own in school while you're preparing to become on a social worker then I think it will be very difficult to even address that issue as a social worker because I believe that social worker is part of the conversation that we need to have as our colleagues in order to promote and advocate for those racial injustices that we're seeing. And we have to be on the front line and getting that opportunity possible for not only for the students but are educating others who are able to undertake those opportunities this concludes our conversation on addressing institutionalized racism and racial injustice in social work coursework. While this is the end of our podcast we hope this conversation is only the beginning of an ongoing dialogue and social work education and beyond. Thank you for listening and thank you to all of our discussions for participating. This has been the second of a two part panel conversation on why it is important for social work education to address the topic of systemic racism. I'm Charles Sims your host. Please join us again. In social work. Hi I'm Nancy Smith Professor Endean at the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school art history or online and on ground degree and continuing education programs we invite you to visit our website at [WWW dot social work dot Buffaloe that edu](http://WWW.socialwork.Buffaloe.that.edu).

[00:37:29] And while you're there check out our technology and social work research center you'll find it under the Community Resources menu.