

**Episode 173 - A Panel Discussion on Systemic Racism (part 1 of 2)**

[00:00:08] Welcome to in social work the podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at [www.socialwork.buffalo.edu](http://www.socialwork.buffalo.edu). We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of in 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. The National Association of Social Workers Code of ethics identifies six core values of the social work profession. One of those values is social justice. This value states that social workers are to pursue social change on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed people the professions code of ethics. Specifically ask that social workers focus efforts at addressing discrimination and other forms of social injustice to meet this challenge. Social workers must be sensitive to and knowledgeable about the oppression marginalization and the disenfranchisement of people. Therefore it is essential that social workers in training be provided the opportunity to learn about and explore the inequities faced by individuals and groups. They will come in contact with. However these can be sensitive and uncomfortable topics for students. Therefore how these discussions are managed in the class are important. This podcast is the first of a two part panel discussion on exploring systemic racism. The discussion is not meant to be instructive of how to lead these conversations. Instead they are discussions on how the panels instructors have approached that topic.

[00:02:04] The hope is that this will be a vehicle for dialogue by and among other instructors who teach this content the members of the panel are all faculty members at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. They are Elizabeth Bowen Diane Elze Isok Kim and Charles Syms. Professor Bowen is an assistant professor who received her Ph.D. from the University of Illinois at Chicago. Professor Elze is an associate professor. She received her Ph.D. from Washington University. Professor Kim is an assistant professor who received his Ph.D. from the University of Michigan and Professor Syms is a clinical associate professor who received his MSW from California State University Sacramento the panel met for this discussion in April of 2015. So we would like to emphasize that we're presenting this podcast from the perspective of building learners rather than the experts on the topic of racism and how best to address it in the social work classroom. We are a varied group of social worker educators with different backgrounds and different levels of experiences in terms of teaching in general and teaching on the topic of racial injustice in particular we do not present ourselves as exemplars who can tell you what the best way to address race in your classroom but rather as concerned individuals who hope to contribute through this podcast an open discussion on racial inequality in the United States and how we can address racial injustice as social work educators. On that note we will introduce ourselves by stating our names petitions the courses we currently teach and how many years of teaching experience we have. Well I'll start with myself. My name is Isok Kim. I am an assistant professor at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. My research focuses on mental health issues among Asian immigrants and refugees.

[00:04:11] I teach graduate level social work courses that dive into issues of race ethnicity and immigration. I also teach a course on mental health policy. This is my third year teaching at the university. My name is Charles Syms. I am a clinical associate professor here at the University at Buffalo. I teach primarily addiction's courses but I also teach our first year intervention's courses in the past taught the Brasier oppression courses here. So I've had roughly 17 years of experience teaching. My name is Diane Elze and I'm an associate professor and I directs the MSW program also at the University of Buffalo School of Social Work and when I've taught in the MSW program I primarily taught social welfare History and Policy and Social Services for Children Youth and Families. So that was a few years ago. And I have about 15 years of teaching experience. My name

is Betsy Bowen an assistant professor here at UVA school social work currently teaching social welfare history and policy which is a foundation policy class for MSW students. Also teaching an addictions course on the nature and treatment of alcohol and other drug problems. And this is my first year as a full time professor and teacher. So pretty neat. So thank you for your introductions and I guess the first question that you want to reflect on is how do you or don't you use your various sexual identities in teaching social work courses and in other settings with students. Charles do you want to start. Yeah it's kind of interesting because you know being African-American and male and a number of the courses.

[00:05:56] What I try to do is think is when questions come up or topics or issues come up. I'm not opposed to talking about that from that particular perspective. I might say well being a male you know or being African-American and you know this has been kind of my take on it. I usually don't use my experiences my personal experiences. I'm not sure why but I am willing to talk about what I think based upon. And I mean I say this in my personal experience but I may talk about it based on what I think makes a reasonable response to that particular question or issue I'm fairly willing to do that. I'm always concerned though how it gets accepted by the students on the other it I'm not sure whether they dismiss it or and I'm reticent about asking because my assumption it might be incorrect is that folks get defensive around the discussion about race. Folks are afraid. You know it's like a hot stove are afraid that if I say the wrong thing was Professor Syms going to think about me. So I've been somewhat reticent but I'm curious about what others think. I think for me most recently you know I've been involved in developing curriculum for me into professional education and collaborative practice initiative and had experiences doing cultural competency sessions. When we piloted that curriculum. And I think they are my intersectional identities in that session came out very explicitly with students because that was part of what we were hoping to do with students to have them also reflect on their identities and on their cultural backgrounds.

[00:07:47] And so I talked very specifically about how growing up working class growing up as a woman growing up as a white person and also being a lesbian. How all of that affected my access to health care. How it influenced my interactions with healthcare providers and other you know other access issues. So there I think the aim of that was for us to do that very explicitly and to also have the students through it and so we modeled it for the students. I think with other courses like with social welfare history and policy I also step into and I try to create opportunities to talk about racial justice issues and I think in social welfare history and policy it's fairly easy to do that because I mean there's really no end to how often you know because so many of our policies historically have been so racially unjust and have been and were developed to exclude people of color. But I often will raise the issue of I think how I talk about that is I talk about that as a white person. I talk about systems of white privilege. I try to talk about the challenges we have in talking about those issues you know trying to create an environment in the classroom where people will feel free to take risks and to make mistakes. But that's challenging because I think they're afraid of disapproval by from their peers disapproval from me. So so I actually I think at times try to give examples of my own development and my continuing development so that oh I'm a person who makes mistakes too. You know I mean I could make a mistake tomorrow. I guess those are my initial thoughts about it.

[00:10:09] But yes trying to cut through that defensiveness to help them not be defensive is very challenging because we don't want to close off conversation. We want to try to open it. You know I appreciate it. I think what both of you are saying about trying to model first and how we can and we may struggle with it ourselves sometimes but how we can try to be open and talking about our perspectives and where we're coming from. Any of these issues. And I think as a white person I started to think about this in terms of privilege and how can I own that. And I think I still struggle with how do I demonstrate that to the class. But when I was thinking about this question I thought you know well identify as a white person as a female as a heterosexual female as a middle class person. And then in terms of privilege what kind of came to mind was that I think my identity

characteristics really fit with this image that a lot of people have of who a social worker is. So clearly we know a lot of social workers do not that background. But I think there's still somewhat of a popular image of social workers are predominantly white or predominantly female that they look like me and a lot of ways when I really became aware of that privilege when I was doing my dissertation research that I had to go to the single room occupancy apartment buildings to recruit people for my studies.

[00:11:28] So I had to hang out in the lobby or in public areas of these buildings and had to get permission from the building managers in order to do that so that I could talk to the restaurants and try to recruit people for the study men for the most part and really didn't have a lot of trouble doing that. When I went up to the managers to try to introduce myself and get their permission sometimes before I could even explain who I was. They just looked at me and said Oh are you one of the social workers because they were so used to having social workers who would come and talk to the tenants about different things. So I really had less privilege the ease of access that I don't know if I would have had if I was a social worker doing the same research Boker percent that I do. So tired of be mindful of that privilege and try to be able to bring that up and to not be afraid to call that out for what it is. The other thing that I thought about this question too is because I do fit that image and because you know people do have that association. Sometimes what a social worker looks like. I really want to try to bring in other examples that don't fit that and namesake into my classroom. And I'd like to use a lot of multimedia I'd like to use a lot of youtube clips but I'm trying hard to find examples when I do that where it's not a white person who's in that position of authority Erste who's playing the expert role and I want to find examples too that don't always show people of color as being the ones who are seeking services or needing help.

[00:12:48] Because I think a lot of people have this image of it's mostly white people who have the answers. It's mostly people of color who use social work services in the social work help. Again we know that's not true but that is sort of a common stereotype in society. So I try to add diversity to my classroom by finding multimedia that breaks a little bit out of that mold. So I am a one point five generation immigrant from South Korea. When I bring up the issues of institutional racism it actually comes from both personal and intellectual understanding on the issue. And so as an immigrant I'm constantly reminded that I'm part of the minority and are not like other minorities. But however as I'm Asian my ethnicity is often rendered invisible because apparently the only racial issues that is important or necessary to talk about this between the blacks and the whites. I try to highlight the fact that you can learn a lot by learning how Asian Americans have been treated throughout the U.S. history and the ways in which Asian Americans communities are used in order to maintain and perpetuate racial hierarchy in the United States and the fact that there are not a lot of students the social work students are aware of U.S. history in general but rarely are aware of the issues that really relates to Asian American and the United States. I feel like it's my responsibility as an Asian American to bring up that issue and how that creates a lot of the disparities or a myth that there are a good minority and there are bad minorities and creating that dichotomy really creates further separation among the people of color which is the grand narrative.

[00:14:38] The racial injustices is maintaining and perpetuating that status quo. I feel like I am in a position to share those thoughts and experiences personally and professionally. In talking about how the racial issues are integrated in every aspect of our own social or fashion as you were talking I was thinking about you know our immigration laws through history and how we know the incarceration of well and the seizing of the land of Japanese immigrants and all of that. And I started to think about which you know we cover in social welfare history and policy. And you're right citizens have no idea about the history about the treatment of Chinese Americans except maybe they heard about how we exploited Chinese people on the railroad. But that might be the extent of it. I remember a student in one session of social welfare policy saying you know this class makes me so angry because there's so much that they didn't know and then learning it not until

college and I think it's part of what makes them feel angry why didn't we know that sooner is history. We've gotten such a distorted history in our educational to add to that. I think part of the issue problem or whatever is how do we help students understand that is still alive today. There are issues that still exist even in this so-called where people are bantering around this post racial society that we're supposed to be in at this point in time and we have many examples that is not accurate but there seems to be this kind of OK that's all in the past.

[00:16:34] We can now move along and move forward without ever really addressing or understanding the past and the mistakes and the depth of some of the injustices that occurred to people of color in the past. And obviously people got to apologize but they got to understand what I want students to kind of get. And I'll give you an example. When I was first starting out in professional practice I was a CPS worker knock on the door CPS worker an African-American a predominantly African-American community. But it took me a while to understand that for a lot of folks I was still from downtown and I had to understand the heart of that is embedded in that social political historical piece of who I by authority my power represented. Now I probably was given more of a benefit of a doubt but it still existed. So what I try to help young students social workers understand is I know that you're nice people and that you want to help people but you've got to understand that for some of the people that you're dealing with their reality is different. And you have to work to overcome that. And I'm sure we'll talk more about some of this later but it is working on self. It's not working. And I think that's why I'm addressing this idea of intersectionality within yourself is so critical and knowing the limitations of social workers as you sort of plan ahead in your professional career but at the same time we have this sort of wonderful ways of relating to each other because we have different intersections of our individual characteristics whether that's based on race based on gender.

[00:18:27] We all have privileges and we all have the characteristics that we think we are having some challenges and that at some point in our lives who have been discriminated against. But at the same time we've been privileged. I mean I have to say that as a male I have been experiencing a lot of privileges that many and all of the females and women weren't afforded. So that's not always possible unless you are given the chance to explore that intersectionality and identities that you've moved along. But how did that actually impact the kind of the work that you're going to be doing as a social worker. Especially in kind of sort of an authority figure that you're going to be become in order for you to work and impact the larger community. And I think what emerges from that that we can do with students both inside the classroom and in many places outside of the classroom is teach them how to be an ally with their friend group that they may not be a part of. And I think that can be very empowering for students. So what are examples of how do you address institutionalized racism and racial injustice and different social work classes that you teach are in other settings where students are present. Well I think one way I do it when I've taught social welfare history and policy is looking at the history of each of those policies and how institutionalized racism is inherent in our policies in this country housing policy. Hanife the history of AFDC the history of Social Security disproportionality in child welfare the history of our immigration laws such as the Chinese Exclusion Act the seizing of land from Mexicans who were in the United States from Japanese who were in the United States.

[00:20:31] I don't think we allowed Chinese people to have land. I mean there were lots of exclusion laws around that. So I think examining because those policies were not made so that there would be a level playing field for all. So I think that that is a big one and then I think you know as the MSW program director I think that supporting student activists and them organizing events in whatever ways we can do that is really important and I think having issues around institutionalized racism on our Facebook page for NSW students I think pointing them to additional resources trying to make those linkages for them outside of the classroom is really important and encouraging them to go to community events and really trying to advertise those community events around the school

and to support students in growing. I mean I think those are just some of the ways I think about trying to do that. I use things in class like an individual talk about you know people have all these great interventions that they want to incorporate and they want to use with clients. We spend time talking about the research and who's part of the research and no so what does that mean for the folks that you're working with and how do you as a social worker then begin to think about OK so how do we move forward from there. Mean do I just throw the intervention out because there were no there were no African-American families or no Latino families in it toward know what do I have to do in order to think about utilizing interventions for client populations. Because let's face it many of the work.

[00:22:22] It's a matter of how you think about implementing them with a particular population that might be different than the population that it was the research was actually done. So we talk about them that addiction. We'll talk about policy course you know the policy piece we talk about the movement forward. There's some really good actually some good youtube stuff out there. This is kind of the history of of addiction in United States treatment of addiction in the United States and policies that surround that that I actually incorporate and I always wonder is it I guess sometimes you're wondering individualized racism or discrimination is really easy for people to buy into and to see because they can actually know they can see somebody being called me or being refused housing. Institutional it's much more subtle and I think much more difficult for people to see unless you're really willing to look for it and really willing to analyze what the issue what really was going on. So when we talk about some of the laws that that came about in the late 19th century we got to think about the backdrop of what was going on at that point in time with drug policy in the U.S. at that time. I think you made a wonderful point and I think when I teach classes and try to bring up the issues of institutionalized racism we try to highlight first historical practices that actively limited full participation by people of color. And like what Diane mentioned earlier about the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 and also the 1942 executive order 1966 that effectively deported Japanese Americans across the West and the United States and exploited their land.

[00:24:14] So I think there are some sense of surprise again and realizing these were being included and being incorporated into the legislation and practice and was rationalized as a national security issue. But when you think about it and my career and sense that these sort of institutional practices were only applied to people of color and communities of color. And we have to sort of begin to have a conversation. Why do you think that's the case and how do we think about the issues that are like hundred years old and even 200 years old and how it actually reflective and current practices. And I asked students to identify some of the current institutional practices around housing around health care around issues regarding education and obviously the criminal justice system and try to just kind of uncover the institutional aspect of enduring racism that still goes on. And that's be willing to acknowledge that and have the conversation of the fact that you know yes institutional racism is not as bad as it was a slavery time but underneath it all we're still having issues. And perhaps more because it's so hard for us to catch them and hold them accountable for this perpetuation of status quo that privileges those who are in majority. Well you know I think we do have a new system of slavery called mass incarceration. And I believe the forensic social worker addresses them. But having students understand what explains this mass incarceration of black and brown men particularly that we've seen in this country. And I think that the culmination of a number of different policies that we've had in directions that we have purpose.

[00:26:24] You know that policy makers have taken this country and additionally the impact of 100 years of racial discrimination that legally may be something you can't do today because we have a system of laws. But the impact of that like a wave right the impact of that has kind of moved through our history so that if we are talking to people what the rationale is well they committed crimes. Well that may be. But what is how did we get here. How did we get to the point where people see that we see that there are only viable option is to do something illegal in order to have a

reasonable standard applied. Have some of the things that you and I on TV all the time that that becomes a viable option. And we we have a system where we are very willing to lock people where we make no bones about that. We're one of the most incarcerating a state or country to incarcerate ourselves. The number one most incarcerated country in the world the bases we're so we're very willing to do that but we don't necessarily and I sometimes feel for students because they come from the school and they know they have these ideas that have been exposed to us in the class but they don't have enough information or enough strength to withstand the pummeling they get.

[00:27:54] So one of the things we talk about is how do you survive as a social worker in a place where you might find yourself in an interdisciplinary platform you might find yourself the only person there who's thinking from a macro perspective who's taken from a policy perspective that it's easy if you're not careful you can find yourself caught up in those belief systems that continue to harm individuals and communities. If you're not careful or if you're not thoughtful and so you got to figure out a way to insulate yourself against those winds that may be coming your way. It reminds me of when I thought about this question the number one issue that I always think of is with drug policy which is part of my personal interest personal passion and drug policy is so linked so closely with incarceration and such huge racial disproportionality there. That's something I feel very strongly about conveying to and certainly in addiction's coursework and you know one of our policy classes to you know what I find so I agree that often institutional racism is a little harder to spot it's harder for people to understand or put their finger on it. But in both my classes I show you know some of the data we have on this. We know that people of different races use drugs at pretty similar rates. There's really no evidence to suggest that people of color are using drugs at any rate higher in fact maybe a little bit lower than the rate at which white people use different drugs. But when you look at who's in prison for drug related crimes state prison federal prison. It is such glaring disparities and I find that a lot of people don't know about this. A lot of my students don't know about it until we talk about it and talk about this idea that incarceration is serving as the new Jim Crow because it's happening on such a large level and it's happening so disproportionately especially to black and Latino men and women too.

[00:29:48] So I find that they need that knowledge and a lot of them don't necessarily have that. Because it's I don't know if that conversation has infiltrated into society and honestly I don't know if it's infiltrated far enough even in social work. Sometimes we do bar micro hat on. And so we know how to work well with people affected by addictions but we don't see how that power. See how that big picture plays out. And I agree. I want the students to have the tools to be able to talk about that in different settings. I think one of the challenges we face in a we're talking about how institutionalized racism is so difficult for students to say. And I think part of that is because structural oppression of many different convenience is so hard for people to see in the United States and our society. I think that blame is such blaming of people who are poor for being poor and we give individualized reasons for their poverty rather than looking at the structural issues and many of those structural issues affect our students too. So I think that's very much high that addressing the structural reasons for poverty and trying to change students thinking about blaming people who are poor that those are very tied together I think I mean at least I find them tied together in the classroom and in discussions with students and they're continually bombarded with this by a lot of the challenges that they're faced with today. Student debt as one example. You know why do our students the United States have so much debt.

[00:31:38] And I think that's really critical thing to think about when they're increasingly most of the social workers students are interested in clinical practices. And I think that's important and needed in order to do a clinical work. We have to have a macro understanding of why we are there in the first place. So having to navigate between this micro clinical aspect of how to work with an individual and how that individual is actually not representing him or herself but reflecting the remnants of the historical and contemporary packages that the society has created around them. So

the issues of poverty issues that of drug policy and the challenges that we have in terms of economic opportunity and especially in inner cities is in a way the very essence of who we have become. And I think that's difficult to advocate for if it's a macro issue but nonetheless we'll have to have a lens that we are able to see both on a macro level and the micro level if we can be at least willing and advocate for these populations that we work with I just sort of another area where that intersectionality for me I think is important. And that's when I've taught the social or practice with gay lesbian bisexual transgender populations of course. And also when I talk with students in different places around LGBT issues I think there's still a lot of racial justice issues that the gay lesbian bisexual and transgendered movement needs to deal with. And I know that one of my responses recently when the governor's budget came out and then he prohibited state travel to Indiana.

[00:33:44] One of my responses was that I wish that he cared about poor people in New York and working people in New York as much as he cared about same sex couples in Indiana. I'm sorry Governor it's not good enough. You know as a lesbian and I think for me being a lesbian faculty member whenever I can model for students being concerned about issues of poverty and racial justice and those issues it's important for me to do that because I think that still many gay lesbian bisexual transgender organizations are very white dominated. They have a limited lens. I think the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force is an exception. They do a lot of racial justice work but certainly not a national organization. So I think that's an important issue for me in our curriculum and just in my own life as a lesbian so be aware that intersectionality and to model that for you have been listening to part one of a two part panel discussion exploring and addressing systemic racism. Please join us for the second part of this important discussion. I'm Charles Syms your host. In social work. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean of 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 our history or online and on ground degree and continuing education programs we invite you to visit our Web site at [www.socialwork.buffalo.edu](http://www.socialwork.buffalo.edu). And while you're there check out our technology and social work research center. You'll find it under the Community Resources menu.