

White Social Workers' Path to Showing Up for People of Color

Cite this podcast – Sobota, P. (Host). (2025, April 22). White Social Workers' Path to Showing Up for People of Color (No. 336)[Audio podcast episode]. In inSocialWork. University at Buffalo School of Social Work.

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Peter [00:00:11] From the University at Buffalo School of Social Work, welcome to the inSocialWork podcast. I'm Peter Sobota, it's good as always to have you along. Efforts to raise up diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility aren't new ideas for social workers and our profession. Currently, to say the least, we appear to be in a point in time in which attempts to promote these have fallen into disfavor, and in which colorblindness and meritocracy are on the rise. Today on the podcast, we will meet and talk with Sommer Blair, MSW LISWCP. She's a doctoral student at the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work, the founder of the Parenting for Racial Equity Project and a former social work practitioner. We wanted to speak with her about a question that she's been exploring in her scholarship and one that many social work professionals and students have recently been asking some form and that's as a white person, and as a social worker, how do I show up for and foster solidarity and allyship with people of color? She will share her ideas and opinions on helping white parents raise anti-racist children through an ethnic-racial socialization intervention based on what she refers to as critical consciousness. Ms. Blair will describe how whiteness can be explored through white racial socialization and identify strategies for white individuals to become active allies in racial justice. Finally, she will discuss recognizing privilege, dismantling systemic racism, and fostering inclusivity through community engagement, policy, and practice. Hi, Sommer, welcome to inSocialWork.

Sommer [00:01:56] Thank you for having me.

Peter [00:01:58] Oh, no, no. I'm sure you have many other things you could be doing on a Tuesday, is it? Yeah, a Tuesday here. So we really appreciate you taking the time and and we're continuing our tour of the Pitt School of Social Work. And so we're glad we just had Bailey Nichols on recently. So, yeah. And, so, welcome.

Sommer [00:02:22] Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Peter [00:02:25] All right, here we go. So let's get right to it as they say. So just, how about this? Let me start this way. We, and you don't have to agree with us. We appear to be in a time where, or in which attempts to promote diversity, equity, inclusiveness have seemingly fallen into big disfavor and which. and in which kind of colorblindness and merit-based decision-making are being promoted. We thought you were doing some really interesting scholarship and you've already told me when we were just briefly chatting about doing this podcast that you are a white person, a social worker, a doctoral candidate, a partner, and a parent. Am I leaving anything else out?

Sommer [00:03:22] Well, I hope to be a doctoral candidate very soon. I don't want to mince words, but I have not defended my proposal. So technically, I'm still a student, but we'll see, hopefully soon. But yes, all of those things are right. Those are all roles and identities that are all very important to me.

Peter [00:03:39] Is there time to sleep?

Sommer [00:03:41] No, actually. Especially when your partner is an accountant and it's tax season right now.

Peter [00:03:49] Oh, let's not talk about that. Given all that, your research and teaching interests could, I think, kind of be summarized by this question that I think you might be asking. As a white person and a social worker, how do I show up for and foster solidarity and allyship for people of color? Is that fair?

Sommer [00:04:13] Very fair, yes.

Peter [00:04:14] All right, so here it comes. How did you arrive at this question?

Sommer [00:04:19] Yeah, yeah, I appreciate that. I really enjoy getting to share because, and when you mentioned and listed off all those roles, all of those roles intersect for me. I mean, truly I am a living embodiment of intersectionality and what that means and what can look like. And that's really what brought me to the work too. You know, I was a practicing social worker in South Carolina. I was working in different roles within the child welfare system, a little bit case management, a little bit clinically. And I knew I always wanted to kind of pursue a PhD just because I have a love of learning. It's in my history, my family, everyone is public school educators, so teaching and learning has always been really important. But social work called me and I knew I wanted to return somehow. But there wasn't really a question in child welfare that I wanted to pursue a lifetime of work on even though I loved the work I was doing and I just remember When the murder of George Floyd happened in 2020 My partner is a black man and we lived right outside of the Capitol in South Carolina, and so people were protesting and Some people were supporting the protesters, and some people were obviously not. South Korea is a very red, red, red state, always has been, probably always will be. And I remember we had, being an interracial couple, we have a lot of friends that are white. We have a lotta friends that were black. And I noticed that during this time, a lot our white friends kinda came out of the woodworks, if you will, saying, what can I do? Oh my gosh, I feel so bad, and da-da-da, da-do-do, all these things. you're a social worker or to my husband you're a black man like what do you need and while I think the attempt was from a place of you know a good-hearted place unfortunately it made us feel very uncomfortable even to my husband when I was like should we go you want to go protest and it was similar we were rounding out an extended tax season um due to covid and all that was going on then and he was you know, finishing these 70, 80 hour weeks. And he was like, no, it's 110 degrees outside. I don't want to go protest. They can go protest, like I've done enough. Like my, essentially like my lived experience is enough. I shouldn't have to do more, especially in this heat. All that being said, and so that kind of led me to the question. And I immediately, you know I knew, quote, like I knew I'm not supposed to ask people to teach me these things. I'm supposed to ask. my, I worked with a lot of, most of my colleagues were, were folks of color. It's not my job to go ask them, what should I do? So I'm Googling and I'm looking and I just feel, felt like there was a lack of concrete resources. We also at this time began to foster children. So we had a lot of children of color living in our home. And then as being the only white person in a lot of these spaces, it felt like people were taking care of, my

friends and family of color were taking of me in this time more than I was even showing up for them. And that felt really wrong and that felt really misguided and all of that to say that is when I knew I could work on this problem. I could on this program forever and be very okay with it because this could be my life's work because this is so important to me. And that's when I began looking at what should that look like? How could that look? like and. the part of parenting as well came into the play, being a foster parent, both to children of color and to white children. And so that's eventually what led me to the University of Pittsburgh and the Center of Race and Social Problems, where I now do the work that I do under the mentorship of Dr. James Hughley. And I'm so thankful for all of the experiences and the people who came before me that allowed me to end up in this space.

Peter [00:08:22] Yeah, well, thank you. So in addition to really all of that, you also ask questions and wonder about how to navigate your role, you know, as not only a social worker and who you are, but I just know from talking with you a little bit that being a person of faith is something that's very important to you. And you're wondering about what the role of that is as you kind of put all of these ideas together. Could you, would you be willing to talk a little bit about that?

Sommer [00:08:59] I think, and I'm not, certainly not an expert in this field, so I'll start with that caveat. This is just my lived experience and what I'm speaking to is very anecdotal to that. But that being said, being in South Carolina, and not just in South Carolina, but what I've seen and what I've heard is that this is, and the little research that I have done is that the experience of segregated communities of faith, it's just pretty common. Yeah. And it's very prevalent. And so that leaves families like ours, like interracial families in a tough position in that, okay, so basically who's gonna fit in and who's going to stand out? And it has become even trickier, I feel like, because not only do we have this dichotomy of what color you are, but now with the increasing polarization of politics, That is playing a role in everything as well, as far as are you going to a church where you believe that the pastor or pastors or the elders or whoever the leaders are of that congregation, what are they thinking? Are they supporting policies that really help me and help what I look like and help my lived experience and help people? And those type of questions can really send you in a spiral of... because you want to connect with your faith. And also you have certain beliefs and values that you feel like are a direct or could be a direct interpretation of principles of your faith that should be, there's not basically room for wiggle room in that scenario. And so we fortunately have found a community here in Pittsburgh that is really one of the beacons of what diversity and faith can look like. And unfortunately, that's very rare. And even in like a very small preliminary study that I did from interviewing pastors of predominantly a monoracially white church, monoracially black church, and a multiracial church. there's hesitancy with integrating in any of those spaces because of the difficulty, because you wanna quote reflect your community and the reality is the communities are segregated. So how are you supposed to, you know, and all those things. So easier said than done, like when you're in more of a metropolis area like Pittsburgh, where there's folks that are all different living maybe in closer proximity. When you get out to suburbs or when you get to more rural places, It's like, well, I live around all white people, or I live all black people, or I lived around all brown people. So wouldn't that make sense if the church reflects the community that we all still are living in our bubble? And that can be difficult to kind of navigate. So long story short, or long story long, I think the current political climate too, and how especially the rise of Christian nationalism.

Peter [00:12:13] I was just going to ask you about that. What kind of I mean? Yeah, I mean, it's, let's put it this way. It's in the discussion. It and and I have to think there are impacts. So sorry, go ahead. You you really anticipated the question. Go right ahead.

Sommer [00:12:30] No, I just, and again, we're getting information by the day in it, I feel like of things that are being passed by the executive branch and all these things. And so we might talk about something and by the time this podcast is released, it's outdated. I mean, things are happening that quickly. Right. And what I am always not fearful of, but I feel I feel like something that I hold in tandem and something that I've been very fortunate that my colleagues in and around social work, whether in Pittsburgh or elsewhere, have come to understand is I identify more as a follower of Jesus than as a Christian. Because being a Christian now has been that term has been molded, exploited, changed.

Peter [00:13:23] weaponized in some cases.

Sommer [00:13:26] Weaponized, yes, yes yes. To fuel this anxiety, this victimhood, this fear, and that's just not the principles that I read out in the book of the Bible. Yes, there is times when there's condemnation and judgment and all these things. And ultimately the big story is one of joy, love, peace, and hope. And that's not the message that I'm receiving what I'm hearing. Christian nationalist talk. I'm hearing fear, I'm hear of division. I'm not hearing those things that I hear about week in and week out. And again, I am not the expert in this. This is just my lived experience and I think it's something a lot of Christian social workers are grappling with because they might even be hearing from colleagues who aren't, how could you be this and be a social worker? And the reality is, and something that I always stop and say, Whoa, slow down! is I do not reflect. And I don't think anyone of any identity should hold should be the whole spokesperson model for that either. And when we do that thing, when we say, because I know you do or go to this place or do this thing, I know you believe all this or you support this person or you blah, blah, bla, blah. That's a really tricky and like slippery slope you can go down. There's a lot of things that America has done. that I do not support as far as our colonization of people, our enslavement of people and all these things. And am I still an American? Yeah, I am. Like, I think you can hold two things and we get, our issues arise when we start thinking binary, when we started thinking no but instead of yes and, if that makes sense.

Peter [00:15:17] Oh boy, so many questions. While you were talking, by the way, it reminded me of, I think it was, might've been Martin Luther King who said, what is the most segregated hour of the week? And I think, what is it, like nine or 11 o'clock on Sundays or 11 O'clock on Sundays, yeah. And it's really true here in Buffalo, no doubt. And I'm sure probably throughout the country. So given, All of that, it got bigger, the whole thing got bigger. What are you exploring and studying in your research?

Sommer [00:15:57] So I'm really passionate and have been for a while about children and now my role as a mother. And all of my work, whether it was my foster children or not my biological children, my drive is how can the world be better for them? So like for my two biracial black white children, how can world be for them. And ultimately, they have a plethora of black cousins. They have a pleather of white cousins. How can the world be better for them as well? My nieces, my nephews, the kids we hang out with, the children that are my best friend's kids. So it's not just thinking about just mine. And so, and that's really, that's what drove my work in child welfare. That's what drives my work now. So what I do now is under the mentorship of my research mentor, Dr. Hughley, He started this project several years back called Parenting While Black. And Parenting while Black was a racial socialization intervention aimed for black families so that they could come together and learn about things like the discrimination their kids would face, to learn about the system, systemic racism, and things like that. Things a lot of them already knew.

Peter [00:17:20] I was going to say that is baked in for many folks, but go on, please.

Sommer [00:17:26] But the main message for there was that, how do you advocate for your children, especially in space and education, when you know this information? Like you already knew this stuff. How do you then become an advocate for you kids when you think something's happening in the classroom, when you think something's in the school district, when you think something's happening in your neighborhood, or you wanna make a change or that stuff. And also, that's just one part of it. I think even the bigger message of why that group comes together, and they're still running programs now, is. We also just experience joy. We are not defined by our disparities. We are defined by the Black experience is filled with hope and joy and love and family. And these things that we sometimes focus on, especially in research, is all essentially doom and gloom, as my husband likes to say. Like, we are more than this and we don't like to be defined by this. And so keeping that idea in mind, The University of Pittsburgh also has another institute called the Racial Equity Consciousness Institute. And that's under my other mentor, Ron Adoko. And thinking about those two things, and that's a multiracial space. So this is black, white, brown, all folks coming together to learn about what racism and how it's affecting us all. I don't know, like the book, *The Some of Us*, like, how are we all by Heather McGee? How are we being affected by this thing? Even white folks, like it's not beneficial for any of us. And taking all those things in mind, running a couple of exploratory studies through some qualitative interviews, doing a huge deep dive into literature, I ended up with this question and then this intervention called the Parenting for Racial Equity Project. And what it does is it's aimed at white parents who want to racially socialize their children, so white kids, on how to be the next generation of anti-racist. how to have these discussions, how to make it not taboo or icky or gross, how it's like an everyday thing. We know that's occurring, you know? And so there's a lot of research on how in black families, they have to have the talk, essentially with their kids, sometimes as young as four years old about what do you do when a police officer comes up to you? What do you in these situations? We as white people are not forced to have those conversations with our children because it quote, doesn't affect us. So this intervention, Parenting for Racial Equity Project that I founded is for to say, it does affect you and this is why your kids need to know. And it's geared towards a range spectrum of folks. Maybe folks who have been super interested in racial justice issues their whole life and maybe folks who are more apathetic and like, I don't know, I think like, I know racism was wrong, but like, why do I need this type thing? And ultimately the draw-in is. your kids, this world is becoming increasingly, increasingly diverse. No matter what's going on in politics, you can't stop it. There's people like me and my husband who are making it this way through the children that we have. That being said, how do you want to prepare your kids? And that's really like, and some people get icky by that. Like, okay, this is gross. Like we're doing something for white kids so that they feel better about their future. No, I wanna pause there because that's not the main goal. The goal is because these kids end up growing up to be adults and these adults then work and live and perpetuate these systems that we know are inequitable. If they don't know and are instilled in this as children, yeah, sure, maybe they'll go to college or maybe they will sit in a seminar one day if it all comes back about DEI and all these things, right? And so maybe they think about these things in the future or maybe their parents will tell them, it's not nice to treat people different because of the color of their skin. Yeah, sure. We've all maybe heard some version of that and how effective was that? Like for me, there was so even being married to someone who was a person of color. I didn't know half of these things until really diving in. And I certainly didn't know how to have these conversations with children. And so now it becomes it's really the parenting racial equity project is also like being modeled from Reese from PWB, which is parenting while black. It is it's about joy. It's about experiencing those things. I had to tangent really quick. I had a mother tell

me in one of my sessions, she said that. She was pregnant. They were going to find out the gender. The technician says, you're going to have a boy. And the dad's first response in the room was, oh, great, because the world needs another white boy. And that's how kids are being brought into this world, even by those of us who consider ourselves racially progressive. We're teaching these kids to be ashamed of themselves. We're teach them to be fueled by guilt. We're teachings them that they don't matter, they're part of the problem. And while there might be tinges of that, that's not the message a child should receive. Any developmental psychologist would tell you, that is not what's gonna fuel them to make decisions. to stand in solidarity with people of color in the future. That's what I'm finding it. And it's really hard for some people because it's like, you do have to balance. You should learn about racial privilege because we certainly have it. You should about these things as a white person and as a White kid and know these things. And also you can still experience joy. You can still be proud of who you are. We explore those and I talk to parents about it isn't some easy answer. It isn't, some people are like, Ooh, white identity, and it's like. Well, you are white. That is part of your identity. You cannot change that. How can you still experience, do you want, don't you want your children to live and be happy? Yes. Don't you them to also stand for anti-racist principles? Well, there's gotta be a way to do both. And children should be allowed to experience that. And I'm so thankful for the mentorship of people of color who honestly allowed me to be able to feel this for the first, who gave me permission, if you will. Yeah, we understand you your kids hating themselves. Are you hating yourself? It doesn't help me in any way as a person of color like That doesn't you that doesn't fuel any type of action You feeling guilty or sorry for yourself doesn't helped like our cause that doesn' help disrupt these systems that were that were Trying to disrupt and so um, i've been really fueled by that and i've Been really thankful because I think if it were to just come from me it would be like What is this? wild white lady saying. Yeah, because I can stand on the foundation that these researchers and community activists of color came before me and did they open the door for me in so many ways and open the doors for these white parents to learn and how to do this in a way that might not and certainly is not always correct but at least moving in the right direction.

Peter [00:24:27] Yeah, you know, you've mentioned this term twice, and I guess I just want to ask you this question. How is what you're talking about similar and or different from anti-racism?

Sommer [00:24:44] Which part of which part is you mean like the?

Peter [00:24:46] really you're almost like your your whole perspective that you're laying out because you you you sprinkled it in every so often and my assumption was that a lot of what you're talking about sounds similar to being active not not just talking about something but doing something doing something different um which is like for me fundamentally what anti-racism is and does that Does that term fit with the work that you're doing or is it somehow a nuance?

Sommer [00:25:18] Well, I hope it fits or else we need a new tagline because our tagline is raising the next generation of anti-racists.

Peter [00:25:24] Okay, then there you go. I think you just answered the question.

Sommer [00:25:28] And truly, it's funny because a lot of the white parents who I work with, they see that initial flyer or whatever, they get an email or they're on a muster and they sign up and they think the first discussion is going to be, how do I talk to my kids about

race? Because so many of us don't know how to do that. I want practical concrete answers about how to have this discussion in an age appropriate way. And I said, hold on, we'll get to that. You need to know about yourself first. Because they they want to jump right into that and so it's not we the our our program is six weeks we don't get to talk about race until week five we get to that in week six how can your family have a we literally create based off of all the other weeks of curriculum in week 6 what is your concrete action plan as a family and we call it the anti-racist action plan so what are you specifically going to do. And we take time and consideration in that because If we jump into it, a lot of those gestures would be very performative. One off, let me show up, blah, blah blah. And you need to know, and I think this is true in a lot different spaces, you gotta know about yourself before you can really, you got to go through your own healing. And that's the thing is, and Ron Adoko from Reece does a whole lesson on this. You gotta go through your own racial healing. And that includes white people. So you gotta deal with that guilt. You gotta deal with those things that you've said before and that you done before, that your parents have said before, that you heard your uncle say at the Thanksgiving table, that you didn't say anything. You gotta with all that. And there might even be some trauma. Of course, people of color have experienced much, much more extensive racial trauma and therefore must go through much, more racial healing. And there's still a part of that with white people too. We can't jump into what you should do until you know who you are and you've reconciled that. And so it really does lead to, and I've had some people say like, I say, what are the spaces that you're in right now? Are you on the school board? Is your kid in a school district? Is your kids, oh, you homeschool, okay. Where are they at? Are they in a soccer program? Do they go to music lessons? Like, where do you work? Like all these different things, you show up in those spaces. If your kid's homeschooled, you don't show up to the school board and say, demand, like, more anti-racist curriculum when your kid doesn't even go to school. Like, that doesn't make any sense. Like, it's very performative. You have to show up in places that you're already, any place that you would show up and advocate for your own child, now you show up and you advocate for people and families and children of color, too. Don't do it in spaces that you weren't already in. Don't show, don't drive across. this this drives me nuts don't drive across the city to go to some other part so that your kids can hang out with black kids please don't do that again performative people live closer to you than you think you don't have to drive across this city another thing that people don't even think about and people have told me multiple times is i was like are your kids even exposed because so many of us live in in bubbles are your children exposed to people of color Like, oh, there's the one. you know, one brown P.E. teacher at school. Okay, so no, that's a no. How then, can we, well, I don't know. Like, what am I supposed to do? Like, blah, blah blah. We live in this area and we do these things. Okay, what about things that you do not so often? When you go to the dentist, is your dentist white? You know, there's dentists who aren't white. You know there's when you have something done on your house, when you need paint done or when you a construction project, you can look up. and find, but all folks of color who perform those same jobs, you pay them and they do a good job and your kids see that. Because if you're just talking and you're not doing the action part, not only is that performative to other folks around you, you're showing your kids it doesn't really matter. And so that even has caused people to stop and think, oh, there are more areas of opportunity than I think, because we're limited. But if we don't start really like Thank you. imaginatively about these things, if that's a word, then it can be very consolidated and confining. Well, based on what I'm doing, that's what we're trying to change. It can't be based on what you're doing. And I even say sometimes away from the idea of, when we talk about DEI, What's the I inclusivity? Most people, from what I've heard, a lot of people of color don't want to be included in what us white folks are doing because we're miserable too. So why would you want to be included? In this mess? Instead, why don't we think more expansively? Why

don't we think about that and who we expose our kids to or the programs that we do instead of saying we need to bring people to us or we want to involve more people in what we're doing. Let's change the eye to. if I can even think right, expansive and E, like think, how can we make, instead of making, fitting more people into our tight bubble, make the bubble bigger or let's pop it all together. Like that's even better, I don't know. We're so, as humans, we just like, it's just easy, especially as parents. We're in this rat race where we're just like on this wheel of. Okay, drop off at school, go to work, work, go get make dinner, da da da. And it's like, we don't stop and reflect and think of how can we expand our world? How can we do this for kids? And so when it seems like, oh, I'm hearing these outside voices or the Black Lives Matter movement is erupting and it finally reached my little area, I don't know how to enact these principles that I'm here and I should do, because again, you're trying to include it. into your little bubble or square, instead of thinking, how can I expand myself and my family and what we do so that we can change ultimately and fundamentally all together?

Peter [00:31:34] Yeah, it's kind of like saying I really like and I'm open to change just on my terms. Right. So, you know, I think you have been talking about this, but I just want to make sure, I think even talking about it maybe without naming it, but in some of the things that I've read, you talk about consciousness and socialization. And so I want to ask you about both of those, if we could, for a minute. A conch. What, um, could you define them? Could you define both of them, consciousness and socialization and how they fit into your thinking? It's, it's, an hour podcast Sommer. Okay, but no.

Sommer [00:32:21] I'm gonna give you the super layman's term, as if I was talking to someone who's not in academia, not even in social work, whatever, and they say...

Peter [00:32:29] That's fair.

Sommer [00:32:30] Hey, what are you? What are these two big jargon words that you say that you do when it comes to conscience? Oh, gosh, can't even say the word. We're talking about ultimately like, I think of that as just raising awareness. period. Like the very simple term. And that's why I think some people who are in anti-racist or attempting to be anti-racist or folks who are watching others attempt to be anti-racist sometimes don't love it because it's like so you know more so what. Like are you going to do anything. Um, Jamel and Bussey wrote this article in 2018. And I've used that to inform a lot of my work too. Whereas it takes a little bit of a step past like what Freer did with critical consciousness. And they talk more, this would not be included in the layman's, because this is a very heady space.

Peter [00:33:33] Okay, we can we can move into that beyond the layman. I'll go right ahead

Sommer [00:33:37] But they talk about a theory called transformative consciousness.

Peter [00:33:41] Mm-hmm

Sommer [00:33:44] So moving past, okay, so I'm aware of these things, which I do think is the first step and something that my research mentors, especially in RISD with the Racial Equity Consciousness Institute, that's their goal. You can't do anything about the problem if you don't even know what the problem is. So I echo those sentiments, I think that's true. I understand that, yes, we are all adults and have access to technology. If you wanted to, you can find it. And I even argued to my to my class yesterday, I said, Some people don't

even know what to Google though, like, they don't even know, like most people don't know about systemic racism. Like they genuinely do not know, especially white people, we do not now. And even and even the people of color who experience internalized racism, because we're in America, and we were living underneath these umbrellas of meritocracy and capitalism and you can pull yourself up by your bootstraps. I've seen Joe from across the street do it. So I don't understand why you can't like, because we live in that kind of mentality and head space, it is like earth shattering to hear, oh, there's a system that was put into place that is keeping you where you are on purpose, not unintentionally on purpose. And I think for some people that is so. antithetical to the to the American experience. That can't be true about America. That's true about other places. It can't, it can't. I mean, we've been instilled these values for so long, starting when the first like textbook or the first time you say the Pledge of Allegiance in kindergarten, right? Like, we all have this opportunity, we can do it. And so to hear, whether that's when you're a teenager or a young adult or an older adult, whatever, to hear, that's not true. There's other stuff going on that's working against you. I think for some people that's like just wild to think about. And so I think that is where the consciousness part comes into play. You have to know about these things and you have to be made aware of it.

Peter [00:35:53] I'm sorry if you're interrupting, but I think you're going even further than that. So you're kind of talking about consciousness and transformation.

Sommer [00:36:03] Well, the transformation, I would say, is then the second part. Kind of what they describe, like you can know about it. OK, so I've been taught all these things and now I know. And not do anything about it, like ultimately, like, well, especially for white people who ultimately say this doesn't really affect me, like this isn't really like my issue. So and that's why, you know, I say this and it's it's kind of sad to even bring up, but. when I was applying to doctoral programs and I knew that this was what I wanted to do based on the history I gave you and such, I had several mentors even from my, whether that's MSW program or around that said, you shouldn't study race, it's not for people like you. Meaning it's for white people. You leave that to the researchers of color. Like, and to me, I'm like, I didn't know, I didn't have the words at the time, but I was like, that's wrong. But I don't know why that's wrong. I just know that that's wrong because that's wrong, right? And what I've come to now know and like put being able to articulate now is that's what we do. We do it in research. We also just do it and like our everyday lives for people who have no connection to academia or the Institute. It's we ask people of color to do the work to fix the problem that quote we created, like. that Americans created, that white Americans created that white male Americans created like, right? And so I said, and the research also supports this white people, yes, they have been studied extensively about our medical issues and our mental health issues and what have you. And the one spot where we're studied less, right because you read all these studies and it's like, oh, and our sample population was white males age 18 to 42. Well, you know, that doesn't, that doesn't really speak to my experience. I'm a woman that doesn't speak to My experience as an older adult that doesn't speak to you know my experience as a person of color, whatever my experience has a disabled person, whatever the case may be. The one area where that's not true is in studies, where race is studied. White people are not ready when it comes to race. People of color are studied when it come to race because we want to talk about the disparities and we want to talk about. oh, look at these poor educational outcomes and look at this, this prison, this school to prison pipeline and look the incarceration system and look all these things and blah, blah, blah, and we wanna, that's when we wanna that's what we want to study people of color. That's when it becomes interesting and vote. And to me that's so sickening because it's like, okay, we're not gonna include people of color in research. where it can affect positive outcomes. We just wanted to continue to do

exploratory studies where we talk about how bad things are. And there's no solution offered at all. We write a recommendation section that says, and in the future we should think about how we should, blah, blah, who's actually doing those things?

Peter [00:39:11] Yeah, well, I think that's also a function of when whiteness gets basically conceptualized as the norm, what's normal. And everything that isn't white is something to pay attention to, or is somehow a shiny object. You know, I don't know what it is today. I'm coming up with quotes as I'm listening to you, but while you were talking, I remember watching I think they were talking to, it might've been Toni Morrison, the author, and I don't know if this was around the time where George Floyd was killed, but in a sense, they were asking her to provide, you know, like, sage commentary or advice, and she just simply said, you, know what? No news to me. This is a white person's problem. Don't ask me, don't ask to figure it out. And I think that's, I think, that's true. I think and that fits very much with what you said. Let's not forget about socialization. Let's, let's not leave that out of the mix. Yeah. What do you think? What are you talking about there?

Sommer [00:40:27] Socialization, you know, I study racial socialization. And so it's how do we send implicit and explicit messages to our kids about race? So implicit and exquisite. And I think the reason why racial socialization research until the last five years or so was so scarce for white people was because, you know there's this seminal article that was written in 2006 that defined what racial socialization is. And it uses that similar definition and it's by Hughes and anybody who studies race is familiar with this article. It's very, very, you know, in the academic world, you know cited all the time. And so people took that definition and ran with it and said, because they, what they did is they had the original definition was, which was implicit and explicit messaging, but then they broke down what that can look like in different spaces. And for them, some of the things that they talk about, there's like four or five different categories. One of them's preparation for bias, right? Well, white people don't have to prepare their kids for bias. So boom, that doesn't count. Another one was something that's like a more minute category was something about like silence about race. Okay, well that doesn't really apply to people of color. And I'm like, ding, ding ding, that applies to us, white people, that apply to us. But because it wasn't considered in the main categories, it was like, ah, that sometimes happens, blah, blah blah. And so what ended up happening is so for like the next decade or so, people would use those different categories, which a lot of which talked about bias and discrimination and those things and say, oh, so racial socialization isn't happening in white families because they don't have to have these conversations or face these different obstacles that we know families of color are going to have to face. And some people still adhere to that. And some people like myself, so I'm not saying one's right and one's wrong, I'm just saying there's differences of opinion. Some people like myself say, well, if you go to the definition, before you start going to the breakdown of the categories, the definition is just implicit and explicit messaging about race. For white folks, we often don't have the explicit messaging, aka the direct conversations with our kids, but we're doing the implicit. Everyone's doing something, you're saying, you're sending some type of message all the time. And so some of us argue that racial socialization in white families has been happening all along. It's not happening in the way that promotes anti-racism, like you and I have been talking about, but it's happening. It's promoting this idea of you know, what some people were, we're searching for a new term besides colorblindness because that's a very ableist term, but this color blindness, right? Like there is, there's messaging being sent. Everybody's equal underneath the eyes of God. Yes. And, right. It's like, or if you work really hard, you'll have better outcomes. Yes. And like these other things are like, but we're only getting that first part of the messaging a lot of times. Even for those of us who have been raised by parents who taught us to treat everyone treat everyone equally Yes,

and They're not being treated equally by by all systems and by all people like you know i'm saying like there's this there's We're we're not finishing if you will The idea there and so We just did, me and my mentor just did a huge literature review of all these different things, especially for white families, about how they're racially socializing. And we came up with new categories because our idea is these categories that were created in 2006, almost 20 years ago, were ultimately, while there were some white families included in the study, they were ultimately created with families of color in mind, because that research has been going on since the 70s or 80s. there was very little thought into what would these categories look like if they were specific to the messaging that white families sent.

Peter [00:44:29] Mm-hmm.

Sommer [00:44:29] And so that's how we're kind of re-conceptualizing what racial socialization looks like. And then ultimately like, and that's what I tell families because we have a whole lesson, that's one of our other lessons of the six on racial socialization during the Parenting for Racial Equity Project is, if you listen to nothing, if you take nothing, you are still gonna be racially socializing your children, period. It's going to be happening. Now, if take maybe some of the things we're talking about, as I facilitate this group, you might be able to shift, change, transform the messaging to be more anti-racist for your kids. And so now you're racially socializing your kids in a different way, but it's still going to happen whether you choose to listen to any of this or not. Cause I think some people think if I just put it out of sight, out of mind, my kids, you know, they're not learning to be racist. Cause Obviously, I'm not saying those things. I'm saying anything. I'm just saying, like. white I'm not I don't say things like white people have it easier I'm not saying these things and it's like but your implicit messaging things that you're not saying are speaking even louder and that's one of the biggest parts of all the research is in white racial socialization is that kids parents will say all even again most of these studies are done with really racially progressive periods. And they'll say, I believe blah, blah, blah, all these different like anti-racist principles. I believe systems do impact people of color. I believe, blah blah, I do believe blah blah blah. And then you give the survey to the kid. The kid doesn't match the adult. The kid, doesn't think those things. The kid does think that children of color in their class aren't as smart or tend to misbehave more or they do think these things. And so then it's like, and so when white parents then see their kid's survey results, they're like.

Peter [00:46:25] They're mortified, yeah.

Sommer [00:46:26] my gosh how is this happening? I don't understand and it's because but the ultimate and I love to point out this the crux of the question on the kids surveys will be do you think your parents think the same thing as you and the answer is always yes. In fact I believe these things because my parents believe them and so it's not what parents believe that affects their children. it's kids' perceptions of what parents believe that affects the kids. And so you could be talking, you could think till you're blue in the face all these wonderfully positive, racially progressive, super just, super equitable things. If your kid doesn't perceive you as that way, they don't believe those things. They're modeling based off of what they perceive you to believe. And I think that hits parents really hard because it's like, Oh, I guess I haven't really verbalized those things. I guess, I haven't really demonstrated through my actions that I do adhere to these values. I guess haven't, and it's like, well, if you're not modeling that explicitly, then what do you think's gonna happen? And so that's really the biggest like, aha moment. And one of the best examples of that, when people want, again, people want concrete examples. White people are really concerned with having their kids have diverse group of friends. Oh, we put them in this soccer program so that they could, you know, and they're the only white person or we

specifically chose the school district even or like some people really are trying to make efforts to increasingly racially diversify their kids world. That's not a bad thing. However, research doesn't explicitly support that that's gonna lead to any better outcome. It could, but it's just not yet supported. What is supported is parents' peer groups, parents' friends lead to kids having less racially biased attitudes. Parents' friends. So the kid could literally have all white friends, but if their parents, friends, or family that are people of color who they love and support, who come into their home even. That's what makes a difference. And so, and people ask me, why do you think that is? Like, why is it, why are my friends, why is my group more important than my kid's group? And I say, it goes back to kids are whether, subconsciously like idealizing what their world is gonna look like as an adult, right? So this like happy go lucky, like. Oh, we're all friends here in kindergarten, or in second grade, or even in middle school, like, whatever. When we can all, when we're forced to sit together in a cafeteria, you know, or when we are all.

Peter [00:49:13] Yes, when we have no choice.

Sommer [00:49:15] And we have no choice. Oh, but I see. And again, they're probably not thinking this consciously, subconsciously. Oh but I see. When you get to a certain age, you live around people who look like you. You're friends with people who look like You don't you don't associate with people who don't look like all of that stops. And Beverly Taylor. And why are all the kids? Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria? I don't know if you know that book.

Peter [00:49:40] Absolutely, actually, I watched that book in action on a fairly regular basis, unfortunately.

Sommer [00:49:47] Well, and she and she mentioned she mentions at some point, you know, kids of color, like adolescents, they get to a point where it's like, we've been friends with white people for so long. And then we get to like high school where we're really starting to conceptualize like how, yeah, oh, my lived experience is different than yours in many different ways. And it's it's not okay. And Then you're trying to articulate these things to your white friends and they're They're not, right? They're getting it. No, we're all the same. We go to the same school. No, it's the same, we play in the same band. No, It's all the s- Like because that's how we've raised our white kids, right? Like we're the same we're equal, blah, blah. So that's obviously what they're gonna verbalize to their friends of color once their friends come to them and say, I'm having a really hard time. I think that teacher said something to me that was not okay. Or I feel really like, you know, when you said that joke, it hurt my feelings. Oh, you're being sensitive, blah blah blah. And that's where the ripple effect starts to occur. Right. Even if you've had friends of color as a kid, adolescence and young adulthood is when we start to like, kids start to really conceptualize and concrete their ideas that identity. Yeah. And really, exactly. Really solidify their identity. It's like, oh, you don't get me because we've been this surface level thing for a long time. And now that we're like moving into adulthood, now that we really like identifying ourselves and how we stand now, now it's not the same. And that's when this like splice occurs.

Peter [00:51:18] I wanted to ask you, because you're doing this all in the context of social work, the last thing, if you'd like to comment on this, what are you hoping for will be the impacts and what are the implications for, I'll cast a broad net and you can pick, social work practice, education. Yeah, let's just leave it at that.

Sommer [00:51:45] Let me start off by saying this. I think our research and our teaching and our education, it doesn't make it to the quote real world fast enough. And so that's one of the first things that I'm hopefully and actively fighting against. I want my research to be disseminated to people. And that's why all of my projects are community-based. I partner with a community partner. I go into a community center and do these things. I think that's number one. I want these principles to be acted out in real life white families right I want their kids to know these things and I want them to end up growing into and I think that's what social work research sometimes miss. It's like oh it's cute if you're a community-based researcher that's cute and it's like no we should all be that, like it shouldn't be something that you are or you aren't. It should be just a part of who we all are that's my opinion and that's how you get the research to folks faster instead of this 17 year gap or whatever. That's what I would say with research, so actively, like. literally, if you will, like injecting the vaccine of anti-racism into communities. I might not be changing the whole world, but I'm changing the world of these few people. Like that's kind of the goal with the research. With the education, especially what I'm seeing with my students in like MSW programs and things like that, it specifically I'm thinking about like white social workers and what they're doing and how they're showing up not just for their clients or their communities of um that they're serving not just of color but also white clients and in white communities but also for those like colleagues of color around them so when I say that I mean I have so many students who are grappling with this like identity racial identity crisis if you will that are white who are like I'm throwing off all the whiteness I'm getting rid of it and like blah blah blah and it doesn't well again heart in the right However, um it ends up one, seeming sometimes inauthentic to like, you know, communities and it's like, but we know you're white, so you aren't like me. And that's okay, you just, but don't pretend, you know? Like, so that's where it comes off as inauthentic. And then for white clients and communities they're serving, and I've seen this as I grade papers and stuff where they're reflecting on experiences, they're very jaded and biased towards white communities and white clients. oh this this white man of course he's acting this way because he's so privileged and blah blah blah and he's coming to you for therapeutic services you know and it's like but we're so aware because we're teaching these things in our education in our social work education curriculum about how to work with diverse clients and communities okay i am i'm aware as a white person that when someone comes in who's different from me whether in sexual orientation or race or whatever Able-bodiedness. I'm aware of those things and I'm going to be OK with it. It's like, but as soon as someone confronts us with our own whiteness, it's as white folks, it's like you wouldn't be like, no, absolutely not. Like, and that's hurting the client and communities as well. Like, we're not recognizing our bias towards people who even look like us. We're recognizing our recognize our bias. We're taught to recognize our biased of folks who are different. But I still feel like I'm seeing that bias. Maybe not show up quite as but very similarly for people who look just like you. And I'm like, again, hurting someone else doesn't lift someone else up. There's no like benefit in that.

Peter [00:55:19] I think the implications for what you're saying, and I think, you know, this almost goes without saying, but I usually say it anyway, is the implications here are huge because social work is an incredibly white profession. And, you can't ignore that context, you know, that's the implicit piece that you've been talking about. So we are it, we're kind of at the end of our, no, we are at the of our time here. But I wanna thank you, but before I do, is there anything that you wanna like insert in here that we didn't get to? I know we could probably have gone on and on, but is there you wanna insert in here before we say goodbye?

Sommer [00:56:06] think just to reiterate like one more time that there's probably some things even today that I said that are incorrect. I'm not 100% perfect. I don't know like, you know, not incorrect as in like factually, but as far as I always come from a place of learning. And so what I, a growth mindset, so what I said today, I'm going to continue to build upon, and I'm gonna continue to research, and I'm gonna continue to talk people. And I think for some white people... their issue is they want to know everything, and they want to be completely prepared before engaging in conversations like this that you and I just had. Or before having those conversations with their kids. And it's just like, stop trying to be perfect. You're never going to be 100% there. And just be willing and able to accept and receive feedback. And, you know, that's hopefully I'm living and practicing what I'm asking others to do as well.

Peter [00:57:01] Well, I was just about to say that. I think, you know, it's one thing to kind of have the conversation, but it's also, in my opinion at least, for whatever my opinion is worth here, it's another thing for you to come onto a podcast and have your ideas recorded and to have them put out there with your name attached to them. So I think it's a... for whatever again it's worth, a noble and brave perspective to have Sommer. Thank you so much for joining us.

Sommer [00:57:37] Yeah, thank you.

Peter [00:57:41] Thanks again to Sommer Blair for taking the time to talk with us. The inSocialWork podcast crew is Steve Sturman, our technology and web guru, Ryan Tropsf, our GA production assistant, and Nudger in Chief. Say hi, Ryan. (Ryan: Hello!) And I'm Peter Sobota. I'm gonna take the time to remind you that we have about 14 years of podcasts on all sorts of things social work on our webpage at insocialwork.org. If you can't find something that interests you there, you're probably not interested. See you next time everybody.