

Our Current Moment: The Future of Social Work and DEI

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Peter [00:00:10] From the University at Buffalo School of Social Work, welcome back to the inSocialWork podcast. It's good to have you along everybody. I'm Peter Sobota. We appear to be in a moment in which diversity, equity and inclusion are under almost daily and full throttle attack. The spirit of these initiatives are not only dismantled and undermined, but in a seemingly gleeful fashion. We thought it would be a good time for a conversation about this present moment and the future of social work and DEI. We reached out to our guest, Dr. Tonya Bibbs, scholar and member of the Social Work Futures Lab, to comment on the future DEI, the role of social work, and maybe most importantly, the future social work given our current reality. Dr. Bibbs will revisit the question of the role social work in society. And we'll look back at our collective histories and debate the multiple futures we can envision. She'll outline the social work future lab principles to frame the way forward. Dr. Bibbs will challenge the tendency to flatten DEI to training modules and the assumption that if we can just find the current right single lens, we'd be all good. She'll complicate that story and ask whose knowledge counts and whose timelines we're operating on. And finally, how to turn these insights into action. Tonya Bibbs, PhD, is senior research associate at the James Bell Associates and associate professor at Erickson Institute in Chicago, Illinois. Hi Tonya and welcome to May 2025 in the United States of America.

Tonya [00:01:58] Hi Peter, thank you for having me.

Peter [00:02:00] So, we're in a moment, apparently, in which diversity, equity, and inclusion are under almost kind of daily and full-throttle, gleeful attack. It's so widespread, at least in higher education that the Chronicle of Higher Education has been tracking, it's a regular feature of their site, I'm sure you've seen it, has been the tracking the impact nonstop and the list grows longer and longer every week. And mostly universities are kind of capitulating to the you know federal executive orders and the dear colleagues letter that was sent out in February. To dismantle their DEI initiatives and deal rather than dealing with funding cuts, grant cancelations and increased kind of dictating of what can stay in and what needs to go. So we're a couple of social workers and so are a lot of the people who listen to our podcast. And we know that the impact of these lists and these actions have real consequences and are most likely to affect the quality of life and social functioning of everyday people, particularly certain people who are marginalized in our overall society. So we reached out to you and you kindly agreed. To comment on our present kind of authoritarian moment, the future of DEI, the role of social work, and really, I think the future. We really wanna talk about the future of social we're given this reality. So before we dive into futures thinking, which we're eager to hear about, and our history to a certain extent, let me ask you to start by talking about what you see, what you see when you look at the current landscape and especially why you agreed to talk with us today.

Tonya [00:04:25] Well, thank you, Peter. I want to start by saying, I want to pick up on the comment you made. We are in a moment of daily gleeful attack on DEI. And I would say that that's a really good place to start, because it really helps us as social workers parallel the experience people with limited experience, the certain people that you described, who, who are who are regularly dealing with the daily gleeful attack on their experiences as marginalized people. For us in academia, for us in social work, this is something that might feel new. I think for certain people, for marginalized people, that it's not a new experience. So it puts us in touch as it should be as social workers with those experiences. So in that regard, I would say that we have come closer and in more collaboration with the people with whom we work. The other point I would want to make is that this is a familiar place for social work. We have been in this place and we are situated in this space of questioning. What is our role in society? What is social work's role in society? And how do we respond to what's going on around us? And I'm thinking now of Musen Park's work on the way that social workers reacted to the internment of Japanese and the ways in which we were complicit. And this was a mega trend that was happening in that moment. And that's how we responded mostly by supporting the internments. So. Not completely, but she makes a good case for the ways in which we, you know, we were involved in that. And some people say we shouldn't say internment, it's actually imprisonment now, so I want to correct myself there. And so the question is, what is the role of society? What is the roll of social work in society? It's something we need to think about. And I say the other piece, and one of the reasons I really wanted to talk with you today is this issue of DEI as a clustered concept. It is something that in many ways has become a mega trend in and of itself. And really kind of imported from more corporatist, human resources work, but it's not unfamiliar to social work we have since our inception really been concerned with concepts of justice and inclusion, not without some battles between us about what justice looks like and what inclusion looks like. They have been central concerns to our field. So as we look back on our field that as we look forward to our future, I would like for us to center ourselves in what we know about ourselves and what we'd like to become, rather than being disrupted by attacks on what has really been an important set of concepts.

Peter [00:07:24] Yeah. I think when we spoke in preparation to talk today, one of us made a comment, it might have been me, I'll take credit for it, that the term DEI has gone from something that we aspire to, so to speak, to now being weaponized. It's a pejorative now. And that didn't take long, did it?

Tonya [00:07:50] Yeah, and it's you know, it's interesting the number of ways in which, you know that language can be co opted as a weapon, but it's also language is also an opportunity. And one of the things that I like to think about is that the language doesn't belong to anyone. We all have access to the words, but who has access to a narratives that we that we use to that we used language to construct certain narratives and one of one of my hopes for social work is that we will continue. To use our potential and our position in society and in academia to construct important narratives using language that we choose, not necessarily language that were reacting to. The other piece I wanted to mention is that Even in social work, DEI has really become sort of compliance-driven, a checkbox, certain checkboxes that we need to meet. That's unfortunate because as those concepts have historically existed in social work, they have been really towards trying to move towards a different cultural trend or a different societal norm or a different way of being in communities or being with families. A different way of thinking about, if you're a clinical person, a different of thinking about the evolution of a cell. So it has all of these developmental and transformative ideas that have been embedded in our work for years.

And then we made it into something that was really, did you include this person in your conversation? Did you complete the?

Peter [00:09:28] Did you complete the training?

Tonya [00:09:29] Did you complete the training?

Peter [00:09:31] The online training, no less.

Tonya [00:09:32] Exactly, yes, you know, so I think this is an opportunity for us to step back and say, okay, what have we always been doing that we can continue to do and what will we like to do differently?

Peter [00:09:45] Yeah, and I really liked, you know, I know we're going to get into futures thinking, but you, I don't think you can really fairly talk about the future without acknowledging the history and then some of what you said about our role, our being social workers role in, you But, you know, we're kind of complicit in the whole kind of... Native American schools movement and we don't have the greatest track record when it comes to child welfare and and marginalized folks and You know, we were kind of involved in eugenics and supporting it in our own way So I think that when we when I think about moving toward the future You know I'm a proud social worker. I'm gonna have a levels a lovers quarrel with some of the things we've done and haven't done, but I think we need to acknowledge it.

Tonya [00:10:44] Yeah.

Peter [00:10:45] And, you know, before...

Tonya [00:10:48] And I will say and when we do acknowledge it. Looking back on the past, we look back at it, we look at the past as a way to learn about what we don't wanna repeat. Yeah, we've all been in these conversations and courses and we've used these articles and courses to train social work students, to get them to think critically about their roles. We've had conversations among ourselves. We look back on that history as a cautionary tale. So how does that cautionary tail inform us in this moment?

Peter [00:11:22] Um, could I get like a slightly personal here? I just, I, when, when you were talking, it just hit me, uh, something that's, you know, I I'm in Buffalo and you're in Chicago. Yeah. So, um, so we're recording on May 16th and two days ago, uh in Buffalo was the, I believe the, now the fourth anniversary. Of the event in in in our city where a person a white person drove from the middle of new york state. After doing a lot of research and and killed ten people in a predominantly african american supermarket and community in in buffalo and you know i think it's fair to shake that say that this shook us. Well, it shook some of us. It didn't necessarily shock everybody, as you mentioned earlier, but what I've noticed, and I don't have any data on this, but while you were talking, it hit me that we have spent a lot of time in Buffalo talking about this and being hopeful that this awful thing would change what happens in our town. And honestly, two days ago, I didn't hear much about it. Four years later and I'm not sure, I'm scared of what that means but I'm not sure exactly what that So here's to a better future.

Tonya [00:13:08] Here's to a better future. And, you know, I think that when I hear you describe this, how time has shifted the way people are thinking about this event and think about the issue of cultural memory. And what we remember, and what we choose to

forget. And who's included in that? If we think about this idea of inclusion, there's so many layers to inclusion. And one of those layers is cultural memory. So if we are so shocked by something that happens that we need to remember it and commemorate it each year, each time that we want to remember that it happened. It's because we want to make sure it doesn't happen again. We cannot forget that this happened every September 11th. We do that. And I'm not saying we shouldn't, but we do that so what would happen if every year in our cultural memory you remembered that this happened? If you go back to the Black families that were affected by that and say how is this living with you. How would we reshape our future, as you said, by looking at that history and by integrating into that cultural memory, that frame of experience? I'm in Chicago. I'm a black woman. I live on the South side of Chicago, which I'm, and you said you're a proud social worker. I'm proud social workers. I'm also a proud Chicagoan. I love Chicago. I do too, actually. And I am a strong ambassador for my community, my neighborhood. I live in Bronzeville. We have, and this is, you know, bringing this up in part because I love Chicago and love to say that, but also because I'm a proud member of a Black community with a really rich history that is often depicted in society as only violent. When in our cultural memory, in our frame of reference for ourselves, we have a very different perspective. Part of that does include some of the violence that we've experienced, but we also have a different narrative about what brought that violence. So inclusion is also about, like I said, cultural memory and also about having inclusive stories and inclusive storytellers.

Peter [00:15:30] Absolutely. I'm going to ask what I think is going to seem like a very silly question, but I'm really interested in your take, if you're willing to give it. What do you think? I read something in, I don't know if it was in Inside Higher, or I don't know where I read it, but despite the attack on DEI initiatives and programs, I read that most Americans, the majority of US citizens, think it's gone like too far. They're actually in support of at least what DEI aspires to, let's put it that way. Yet, if you just look at our political rhetoric, you would think we're in a big hurry to dismantle this because that's what everybody wants. What do you think drives? The resistance. To DEI initiatives? I know that's a broad question, and feel free to pass on it if you'd like.

Tonya [00:16:49] Well, I'd like to comment on a couple of a few different strings of what you talked about here. Sure. So you mentioned that. And I've seen this survey research as well that most people are in support of DEI, the principles of DEI. And I'm thinking that out of a town hall, there's been all of these town halls that we've been seeing on YouTube and various media outlets of a small predominantly white community where they were enraged about the fact that they have not yet returned this man from Venezuela who was supposed to be returned to the United States. It was court ordered, and they were pressing their representative and saying, why wasn't he returned? What's going on with that? And to me, that speaks to this fundamental issue that we share. That's it. I don't know these people. My guess is they probably weren't necessarily thinking about immigrant rights or thinking about their Lat May, people in their community, if they have them. That this probably was probably wasn't on their mind before. Yet, when their fundamental sense of injustice, you know, their concern about having justice was disrupted by seeing something happen. The courts, the rule of law said that this man was supposed to be returned, and they're saying they're not doing it. And that that disrupted something in them that we all share, we all have a fundamental sense of justice. And so I am not surprised when I hear that at its foundation, most people are in support of diversity. They all are in supportive justice of equity and inclusion because we do share this sort of fundamental desire to live in a just society. Now, what that looks like, something else. And I think that when, agendas start, when political agendas start convincing people that my sense of justice could only be achieved at the expense of someone else's or that if someone else gets something that I'm

not going to live in a just society, then we start thinking, well, Actually, VEI is not a good idea because, and so I think that there's an opportunity when we see what people are actually committed to, what their moral commitments are, to actually move forward with building solidarity across differences.

Peter [00:19:41] How about this one? What do you think about the criticism that the so-called left and that social work, you know, the big social work that pretty much they've they've gone too far with DEI? They just take they're too woke. They're too, you know, and they're out of touch with most of the US population. Basically, what the message there is the backlash is really our fault. I know you just kind of spoke to that, but I wanted to ask that a little more directly.

Tonya [00:20:24] Well, I think the question of gone too far really depends upon which what horizon you're working with. And one of the things, you know, we'll get more into futures work. But one of things we talk about in futures work is scenario building. And what is the ideal future? What is the preferred future? Is it that we transform society? Is that society kind of goes as it is and maybe there's more women in leadership positions and that's your idea of achieving inclusion? What is the end point? So this question of it's gone too far to me speaks to we might have different end points and which voices in which communities are deciding what is the preferred future and what is the preferred end point. So I think that that is probably. And it's an ongoing tension that's probably not going to go away. Um, and I think this question of out of touch, I think that Social work has a responsibility to be in touch with communities, to be touch with families, to be touched with the policy concerns that are most directly impact especially marginalized communities and families. Whether or not we're doing that is something that has to be an ongoing question that we ask ourselves, a critical reflective question that we asked ourselves. I think if we can answer it know, if we can constantly ask ourselves this question and answer it in a way that we feel like we can look ourselves collectively in the mirror, then I think that's a good practice. I'm less concerned with accusations of being out of touch, unless they're coming from communities. But if they're used as a strategy for suggesting that we should not do what social workers do, then I think it's just that as a strategies.

Peter [00:22:24] All right, so all right, let's let's get to futures thinking, because I think that is the lens that we really kind of wanted to talk with you about. And so futures thinking in the context of. The discussion we're having today. Could you start by maybe telling me and the folks who are listening who might not know exactly what futures thinking is? Could you just give us the 101 and then of course, you know, what distinguishes it from other frameworks maybe? And then let's talk about how to apply it to our topic for today. Would that be all right?

Tonya [00:23:06] Well, one thing I would say, first off, is that we are all always thinking about the future. And so to think about the feature and to be concerned about the features is something we're all doing. Futures in foresight practice is an intentional way of thinking about future. And it is multidisciplinary and it involves being able to not just imagine, so it involves the art. It involves people who are working in, there's a wonderful woman, Cara Keeling, who does a lot of work in using cinema to think about new features work. So it has this imaginary artistic way of thinking about the future, but it's also empirical. So it involves social sciences, being able to look at data to help us understand what the future is going to look like, and it's a social process. So it involves working together to consider what the future would look like, both from, like I said, a multidisciplinary perspective, but also to, for example, look at a signal. If we think about an empirical signal, we've been talking about some signals in this conversation. Yeah, it just hit me, yep. Yeah, exactly. So

we're all doing it all the time. So. So we talked about some signals in this conversation and you and I might agree that a signal is occurring. For example, there's a signal of people talking about this issue of being out of touch. That's something that we might. Detect and have different ideas about it. We just had a conversation about what that might mean for the future of DEI. There are also megatrends that we tend to look at. So we can look at, for example, a megatrend of technology and AI, and what does that have to do with something like DEI and the future DEI? Well, we might say something like, well, what does it have to say about surveillance and the ability of. Of people to surveil families, there's some work that's been done on ways in which families in public housing have been surveilled at a greater rate due to technology that has enabled that. And what does that have to do with issues of diversity and equity with marginalized families in public housing? So those mega trends are important, the signals that features work looks at is an important aspect of the work. And then again, it's social. It's also. There are different trends in futures and foresight work. So if you look in a number of corporate websites, especially in the gas and oil industry, you'll see that they do a lot of futures and four site work. They'd have for years done futures and for site, always trying to predict what might the future look like for their industry. So there are uses of it that I would say, the good and the bad, there are people who use it to decide How can we increase our footprint of oil and gas in developing countries in the next 10 years? And that's a form, it's using the similar kinds of futures and foresight work to. Develop those agendas. In social work, we're more concerned with the critical and participatory aspects, traditions within futures and foresight work. And so that becomes really important because we're really thinking about how to transform the future and how to develop antidotes for a future that is not desired, that where things might collapse. And we're also concerned in futures and foresight work with disrupting these official futures. And by that I..

Peter [00:27:09] Yeah, what is that? Yeah, yeah, say more about that, official futures.

Tonya [00:27:14] Sometimes we think about futures, when I think of official futures, I think this sort of inevitability that can creep in, that this is inevitable, that this the future we're going to have. Well, of course, the future of social work and the future DEI will look a certain way because this is what the executive orders are telling us. Of course, this is how we're going to design our curriculum because this what our current moment is telling us, Yeah, this tendency to think to treat things as natural and inevitable when they're actually socially constructed is something that we want to disrupt. The assumption that the people who are telling the dominant stories now are the people who are going to be telling them in the future and the people who must tell them in a future is something that we wanted to disrupt the. The tendency to forget the past and not pull different narratives from the past into the future is something that we want to disrupt. So there's this storytelling process that we wanna to embrace for our own purposes. And then also I'd say the other piece that, you know, this is the last piece I'll discuss is this issue of multiplicity that we, that we often talk about future often always talk about futures in the plural. So it's not one future, there will be multiple futures, there will multiple actors, there'll be multiple forms of the good. And our part of our work is to plan for that multiplicity.

Peter [00:28:54] A lot of things caught my attention there, but my ears really kind of pricked up when you said that a lot of these official futures are socially constructed. And pardon me, what really hit me right away is kind of that whole postmodern perspective in that, okay, if we constructed this, the hopeful piece is it can be deconstructed. Well, so thanks for the 101. So now let's really get into it. And if I could invite you to be, to take the lens that you know well and kind of lay that right next to our conversation about DEI in the current moment. I don't know, I know a little bit about futures thinking. I know there are

principles, but If you could just speak to all of us, like we know almost nothing about this, that would be great. So yeah, free rein, take us on, walk us through this from a futures perspective.

Tonya [00:30:11] Well, the Social Work Futures Lab, we, I think we met, I guess it was over a year and the process of asking this question of what can futures work do to help us think about the future of social work? And we came up with four guiding principles, relating, creating, navigating, and complicating. And there's a website you can go to, Social Work Futures Lab website, and go to and look at those in more detail. But it could be helpful to think about those four guiding principals as it relates to DEI and social work. And as we think about, for example, relating, And we started to talk about this a little bit. How can we think about? How our preferred future would position social work to relate to challenges in the community. So we've talked about, for example, this history we've had in social work of when things get hot in society, we don't always show up with the way that we'd like to. So if we had a different way- Very diplomatic. If we had a different way of relating to ourselves as social workers in society, what would the future look like? And how would we act now to design that preferred future?

Peter [00:31:48] That's an important point.

Tonya [00:31:50] You made the point of thinking about deconstruction as an important aspect. And I would say the piece beyond that is designing. So, yes, there's, you know, we take this constructive approach that this was made, this, you have this society was made. We can deconstruct what we know and pull out some of the underlying assumptions that are supporting what we constructed. And then we can also then start designing something else. So that that piece is, I think, where futurism really makes a strong contribution to social work, starting with starting with how we relate to each other, to our position in society and to the crisis in our field. The other part is creating. And so that piece really speaks to what we've been talking about this as well, this issue of how we set agendas as social workers. There's a lot to react to. There's really a lot of to react in terms of the concerns that come to an office if you're a clinical social worker, the clients bring. There is a lot to react if you are a community-based social worker or a policy-based social worker, but what are we creating? What are we creating as a social work? What agendas are we setting? What knowledge development are we creating that will position us to position our clients, position our communities, position policy to actually imagine something and do something different? If we think about this trend now, it's just a great turn that came out of COVID of really thinking about care work. And care work has been something that, interestingly enough, I haven't heard enough of conversations about that in social work, but during COVID, care work became much more visible and there's been much more politicized because people understood that it's really important. Essential. That's important, essential. And so how are we creating narratives about care work and positioning social work in those conversations? How does that relate to DEI? In order to think about creating diverse, equitable, inclusive cultures, Care has to be a part of that. It's not something that's just sort of an adjunct or a nice add-on, it's essential. Navigating, when we think about the role of social workers in navigating this moment, one of the things that's really clear is that we don't necessarily prepare social workers to have not only the... Practice skills and the conceptual frameworks to navigate the volatility, the volatility of the moment we're in, but we don't necessarily prepare them with the internal fortitude to navigate this moment because that is really, that's the piece that's gonna carry us through, the idea that we have each other, the idea we can get creative, the idea of that we can that we can draw upon our history and the history of marginalized communities. That's something that we internalize, but we don't necessarily prepare students to navigate the moments with that

internal strength. And then the complicating piece is that there's no simple answer. We have our moral commitments in social work. We all have them, I do too. But I get really concerned sometimes when we start thinking about issues of diversity or justice or equity and our moral commitment which we should have become very singular. And we start about one way to be diverse, one way, to be equitable, one way to be inclusive. And again, we have to think in multiple ways. Otherwise, we'll become the authoritarians. We'll become The Ones. It's like Peter and Tonya have come up with the ideal way to do DEI social work. And everyone else just needs to get on board with it. We'll be fine. We'll Become The Authoritarians, and we have To think about how we include in our designs multiplicity and complexity. Including in the ways that we govern, and including in ways that we make LUMBR multiple forms of knowledge.

Peter [00:36:37] So I didn't want to stop you because you were kind of on a roll, but could, could we back up for just a second back to the navigation piece? And specifically when you were talking about, I'm not sure, correct me if I don't get this right, but you were about, you, you made the statement that we don't necessarily prepare social workers to have the fortitude to to kind of weave our way through this, of the uncertainty and instability. And I don't mean to put you on the spot, so, but this might feel like it. How can you, maybe off the top of your head, or maybe even with a couple seconds to think it through. In the most practical way, how could we do that? What would we be, what could we do that we're not doing now? Or what could be do better?

Tonya [00:37:40] Well, as an

Peter [00:37:40] As an educator, I'm dying to hear this.

Tonya [00:37:43] Yeah, yeah. You know, I remember there's two things that come to mind immediately for me. The first one is when I was getting my doctorate and someone gave me advice when I was first starting out and said, you know, you need to make sure that you are really clear on your purpose for doing this, your purpose, for getting a doctorate because If you're not grounded in your purpose, you're gonna make it through because there's gonna be some tough times and you need to stay focused on that. And for me, I had two things that pulled me through. One was I had a theoretical... Goal. I wanted to sort of work through a theoretical idea, and it was really important for me to do that. But I also was really connected. I'm very connected to my own history, personal history, with my grandmother, who's a very, very intellectual woman, very, very broad thinker. She did not get to go to college because of the times that she was in, but she was always reading and thinking. So I was, I really felt like I was not just this for myself, but I was doing this for her and with her. And so that was me being grounded in my purpose. And how often do we really ask social workers to really dig deep down into their purpose for doing this work? And often if we ask, I like helping people, I like children, I liked families. And that's great that they come with that purpose. But how do we support them in developing a deeper purpose or even maybe even questioning some of the purpose that brought them to the work and maybe interrogating that a little bit and grounding it in a purpose that is. Aligned with the people that they truly want to help. So I think that we can do more work in this issue of purpose And then the other the other piece is building Relationships with each other so that when we are put in positions where we have to stand up We know that we have not only that we each other's back So, you know, you

Peter [00:40:01] Are we both reliving our horror stories at the same time, and I'm just thinking, how many times have I got out on the limb thinking I had people with me, only to look back. It's me on the...

Tonya [00:40:14] Exactly. You stand up and you're standing up alone. And sometimes, you know, for my for me, I would say that I've just gotten used to like tying it when you stand up, just assume you're going to be standing up. Alone. It might be a luxury that someone's with you. And that would be great. And it's great when it happens. But oftentimes, it's just me. But because I become more involved with groups that I know will either have my back in the room or will have my bag in a sort of spiritual cosmic way, I don't feel like I'm standing up alone. And I think that we need to build those kinds of communities within social work so that we're not relying on social work students just sort of sending them out into the world and saying, good luck, be that good social worker. But we're preparing them to actually deal with the world that they're going to encounter.

Peter [00:41:06] And, you know, I just, again, I'm kind of like pursuing my own interest here, but I'm, a lot of light bulbs are going off while you're talking. I, and in terms of social work education, I can think about how I think we, or I could do that better because we kind of do that a little bit in, in like the explicit curriculum. What I'm thinking about while you're talking is how important it would be to do all of this side by side in the implicit curriculum. You know, how we talk to each other in the hall, in how we treat each other in... When we're having a conversation after class, and sometimes those are the most magical moments, but if we're not attending to them consciously, and I think to use some of the language you use in a way that's relating and actively navigating, we miss that. At least I miss that

Tonya [00:42:14] I love that, thinking about the implicit curriculum. There's been some work done in social studies on the political classroom and how social studies teachers. Bring political conversations constructively into a classroom. And I think that's another aspect of the implicit curriculum that we, as social work educators, can improve. That we can think about how do we support students being able to have controversial conversations in a classroom in a way that's constructive. That helps people learn how to listen to each other, help people work together across differences, because again, the future has to be multiple, but that means the faculty has to be prepared to have those conversations. They have to have the internal capacity themselves. Yeah. To support that conversation. Oh no, not that. To support the conversation. And I want to say that one of the things I really, one of other things I like about the future in foresight design is it does provide a framework. There's still the, you still have to be able to. To be able to be comfortable with the conflict that comes with it, but it provides a framework for saying, okay, let's work with playing around with some ideas in this classroom. And students love it, I will say. Students love futures and foresight work.

Peter [00:43:40] I can imagine. Yeah. Yeah, well. So again, again, to just back up, you know, thanks for backing up to navigation, but I also complicate. That's a very interesting word, right? There's connotations to that word.

Tonya [00:43:58] Mm-hmm.

Peter [00:44:00] So I think that's when you were talking about the tendency to arrive at, I don't know, I heard it as group thinker, like a cookie cutter approach, one size fits all. But when you bring people together in and I think was a term that you use multiplicity or. A lot of times that becomes a contest about, you know, whose point of view counts the most, doesn't it?

Tonya [00:44:31] Right. Right.

Peter [00:44:35] How do you, oh gosh, how do you navigate the complicating?

Tonya [00:44:39] Yeah, yeah. So who's I love the way you put that. Who's whose idea counts the most. And that's why who counts the Most is a question of participation. And how do we participate? How do we structure participation, which is another way of thinking about civics. Another way of thinking about governance. And so how are we structuring the civic life of social work? How do we think about how we guide participation? How we guide, how we structure leadership? So that... So that all the voices in the room count. Now, one of the things that has been a really important perspective for me in thinking about whose voices count in a room is some of the social studies research I was just referencing talks about closed issues and open issues. And so there are sometimes closed issues that don't count. And one of examples when I would talk with students about this issue is if we're talking about different forms of discipline. One of the ideas that won't count is someone saying, well, I don't think it's abusive to put a cigarette out on a child's arm. I know that's a very extreme example, but there are some ideas that will count. But setting that aside, there are many that will. Setting that aside there are, because you always have, there's always going to be someone who brings them, well, what if this, what, if someone says, booing? That won't count, but setting that aside, there are so many things left that do count. And how do we structure the participation and the leadership and the ability to bring all those voices constructively into a conversation? The other piece that I wanna bring out in that is that it's partly also about moving forward without consensus, moving forward without ethical certainty. And there was a beautiful description. I was reading once someone who was writing about postmodernism and making an accusation that postmodernists insist that there's no rules, There's no, there's no there are no ethics. And I'd love the way that, that he respond to that and saying, no, it's not saying that we don't move forward. It's saying we don't move forward with certainty, but we must move forward, we just don't do it with the ethical certainty that modernism might have convinced us we had to have. Because as we know and you get five social workers in a room, there's going to be a lot of different opinions. And we still, but we can't be paralyzed by the fact that we don't all agree and insist upon a false consensus. We have to find ways to move forward with the multiple ideas, the multiple ethical perspectives.

Peter [00:47:47] Yeah, that's a great. And again, I want to remind everybody that this response was in in in response to my question about how to navigate the complicated part of the model. So thanks. That was a great overview. How about this one? I'm attempting to get super practical. And we're also kind of bumping against our time limit here, but I want to make, let me try this one, see if I can get you to bite on this one. How would, given what you've said, and again, coming from a futures thinking perspective, how would you advise a social worker to use your ideas to navigate practice and advocacy in the arena of DEI. I know that's kind of a, that's a broad one. But if I could, and if you need a minute, please take it.

Tonya [00:49:09] Well, let me let me start with a couple of things that I've done that I Yeah, that would be right where I found it very useful as a social

Peter [00:49:17] social worker. Yeah, perfect.

Tonya [00:49:19] And I'm gonna start with an example, thinking about equity in child welfare, in a conversation that I was having with a group of social work practitioners in child welfare who were trying to consider whether they should be thinking about the future of child welfare and these questions of do we abolish, do we do we trans, do we. Do we try

and transform social work or do we try and reform social work? Or do we keep things as they are? There's this question that many of us have been having about the future, and then they said, but there are things going on with families right now. I mean, we're working with families right now who need for us to be social workers in this moment, not redesigning the future. And one of the things that I love about futures practice is it allows us to be situated in different. Time zones. And by time zones, I mean the past, the present, and the future at the same time. And so I asked them to consider what it might be like to do three things. One, think about what we know as the history of social, of, of child welfare and both the problematic history and maybe the history they like to move forward. We talked a little bit about that history earlier when we talked about the ways, about indigenous people and the boarding schools. So that's one thing I asked them to think about. The current moment that they're in, their families have needs right now. And then also the future that they would like to design. If they're thinking about those at the same time, how does that speak to what their families need right now? And how does that speak to how they approach what their families need right now? And one of the things that they came up with is, yes, I'm going to respond to the immediate need, but I'm also going to find ways to support maybe that need not necessarily being a need that they have 10 years from now. So being able to say, okay, in this case, the need that they were talking about were material needs that their families needed around housing. So, yes, getting them in touch with, you know, a housing voucher, getting them in a touch with the housing need, but also as a social worker who has identified that this need is there, working with a committee that is developed, that is looking at some of these root cause issues around housing needs in their community, so that 10 years from now they don't have someone coming to them with that need. So, even whether you are a clinical social worker, community level, or more macro level social worker. You may be practicing at any given point in the time zone, as I call them, but that doesn't mean that you can't be thinking about all three of them. And if you don't have a. If you don't have a way of thinking about the preferred future, you will only respond to what's right in front of you.

Peter [00:52:28] Oh man.

Tonya [00:52:30] I want to give one more example that I think social workers love, and I love too, because I love metaphor. One of the things that foresight and futures work does is it helps you, it helps us all make the unseen visible. Because we want to not just use foresight to say, oh, we wanna imagine a different future. Well, a lot of us do, but we wanna design a different future. So one of the things that this practice does, an actual very tangible practice that I have found very useful is making artifacts. So doing a simulation. So a simulation, another really practice that's very common in futures work, the simulation where we take a trip into the future and we think about, okay, if the future that we're going to go into, we're gonna visit the future, and we're going to imagine what we see. Maybe it's a transformed future, maybe it's a collapsed future where things have just fallen apart, and we're going to. Bring back an artifact from that future, much in the way that an archeologist would. They would bring back an artifact for something they saw when they were there. It might be a headline from a newspaper. It might be a new form of technology, whatever it is. You bring it back, you design it, you make it tangible, and then you describe, okay, what are some indications right now that this thing that I brought back from the future is actually going to come into being. Right. So social.. The headline for the future MSW for president. Social Worker for President running on a care platform. Right, that's the headline that I saw when I went into the future. And I brought it back and I started organizing my fellow social workers to make sure that we are organizing a care agenda that is gonna really tap into everyone's need to have care for their children, to have cared for their seniors, to have caring for the people in their family who have

disabilities. And social work has really gotten behind that. And as a result, 10 years from now we have this MSW for president. So an artifact makes that real.

Peter [00:54:45] Yeah. Well, you just gave me a great idea for an assignment in a.

Tonya [00:54:50] There you go.

Peter [00:54:50] Yeah, I'll give you credit for it. Don't worry. That's fair.

Tonya [00:54:55] Don't give me credit. I didn't make it up

Peter [00:54:57] Well, I learned it from you. So, we're really bumping up against our timeline here and I want to thank you for everything you've told us so far, but I want to give you the last word.

Tonya [00:55:12] I have three thoughts. I mean, three thoughts I think are really pithy thoughts, I hope, on how we can think about futures-oriented work and social work and in DEI in particular. And first, the future isn't something that we predict. We're all thinking about the future, but it's something we practice. Futurism and foresight is an actual practice, much like social work, and equity is not a trend. It has a long memory, a long history, and a future that is well beyond this current moment. And I'd like for us to be situated in all the time zones of equity, all the times zones of justice, so that we don't forget that what's going on right now isn't going to be going on forever. Unless we let it. And then the last thing I would say that our task is to resist authoritarianism and to cultivate liberatory alternatives to set agendas as social workers. We need to be agenda setters. And I hope that anyone interested in joining the Social Work Futures Lab consults our website and joins us in this work.

Peter [00:56:19] Boom, there's the mic drop right there. We'll just let that sit. Perfect. Dr. Tonya Bibbs, thank you so much for taking the time. Thanks for joining us. It was an absolute pleasure.

Tonya [00:56:33] My pleasure as well. I appreciate you.

Peter [00:56:37] Thanks again to Tonya Bibbs for joining us. The inSocialWork podcast team is Steve Sturman, our tech and web guru, Ryan Tropf, our GA production assistant, guest coordinator, and content contributor, say hi, Ryan. (Ryan: Hello.) And me, Peter Sobota. We'll take a break in July from releasing a brand new podcast, but we'll have recommendations from our selections from the past year's show on our website in case you'd like to catch up. See you next time, everybody.