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THE PERPETUATION OF INSTITUTIONAL RACISM THROUGH  
ETHNIC AND RACIAL MINORITY CONTENT IN THE  
CURRICULUM OF SCHOOLS OF SOCIAL WORK

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ABSTRACT

The author asserts that the effect of assimilation of ethnic and racial minority content into the curriculum of schools of social work may perpetuate institutional racism.

Social work education as well as the purpose of the profession itself are viewed as basically one of helping people adjust and accommodate to the dominant and racist institutions of our society. Consequently, the author argues, incorporation of ethnic and racial minority content into curriculum that serves such a function is likely to serve ends to which it was not intended.

Five suggested areas of change in the mission of social work education are briefly noted.

The relevance of the curriculum in schools of social work for ethnic and racial minority groups has been a concern of social work educators for some time. Serious and sustained charges of racism have been leveled at individual faculty members as well as to the organization of schools of social work in most areas of this country over the past fifteen years. While considerable "heat" and discussion has been generated, little light has been shed on the subject and significant change has not taken place, largely due to acceptance without question and serious examination of the context within which "heat" and discussion about racism takes place. In this article the nature of that context will be examined.

## Thesis

My thesis is that incorporation of ethnic and racial minority content within the prevailing curriculum and organization of social work may only serve to perpetuate institutional racism.<sup>1</sup>

Whether we like it or not, professional education for social work practice is designed to prepare people for practice in accordance with prevailing institutional values in our society. Students learn ways of helping people adjust and accommodate to the dominant framework. Basic curriculum content is selected and used in the interests of this objective. Courses in a school of social work curriculum that are not consistent with this objective, while sometimes viewed by faculty and students as an interesting diversion from the primary educational task, are little more than an often temporary accommodation to the interests of a few faculty and students. Despite the desires and efforts of some faculty, students and practitioners to the contrary, the primary function of social work as it currently exists in practice is to help people maintain and develop themselves within the basic institutional framework of our society rather than to change the framework itself.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, curriculum content consistent with the objectives of schools of social work is incorporated, and content inconsistent with the objectives of schools of social work is not incorporated in any kind of comprehensive and meaningful way into the curriculum.

Curriculum content that is selected and used to enhance curriculum objectives obviously has the consequence, when implemented, of reinforcing and perpetuating the primary mission of the school - enabling students to learn how to help people maintain and develop themselves within the dominant institutions of our society. The existing institutions and the values they espouse are taken as "givens" and are not viewed as subject to basic change. With the exception of unequal opportunities to achieve the "benefits" of what prevails, no evidence exists that ethnic and racial minority groups seriously question the legitimacy of the dominant institutions and their values. To view the primary concerns of racial and ethnic minority groups in this country as representing basic institutional change is to misrepresent the primary interests of these groups in

obtaining on a basis of equality the political, economic, educational and social-cultural benefits that currently exist in our society.<sup>3</sup> As takes place within other groups striving to get their share of what prevails, "radical" members of ethnic-racial minority groups who disagree with dominant views tend to be perceived by the majority as deviant and attempts are made to assimilate and co-opt them into "mainstream" activity. Consequently, institutional racism, along with most other aspects of our major institutions, are generally accepted as part of an unchangeable reality.

The essential point here is not that institutional racism should be accepted or that it cannot be changed. Instead, the purpose of this discussion is to point out that as long as the primary mission of social work education and practice is to help people live within the existing institutions of our society, institutional racism is enhanced along with the other features of dominant institutions.

Thus the incorporation of ethnic and racial minority content into the existing curriculum of schools of social work in a comprehensive and integrated way means the use of that content to teach students how to help people live within a context of institutional racism. Through such use of ethnic and racial minority content, attention paid to elimination of institutional racism would be dysfunctional, counter-productive and inconsistent with the primary mission of the school and the profession. Instead, concern that may be expressed about institutional racism is diverted into "appropriate" and "feasible" areas, such as symptomatic relief of personal difficulties created by this form of racism.

Symptomatic relief often takes the form of alleviation of the personal stress and guilt felt by students and faculty about the nature of ethnic and racial minority relations in our society through various forms of consciousness and awareness-raising activities and by providing avenues for symbolic and culturally sanctioned responses to the problem of institutional racism. For example, in awareness workshops, in conferences and in courses emphasizing ethnic and racial minority content, feelings of personal guilt may be expressed, dramatic soul-wrenching presentations may be made about the plight of ethnic and racial minority groups in our society and concerns about

what to do about the situation may be raised. However, the institutional context of racism in our society is not normally considered as part of the agenda for serious examination and change. Consequently, the identification, examination and resolution of personal difficulties takes place within the cultural context of what prevails in our society and represents an attempt to reduce the stress that is felt by maintaining such a cultural context. The reduction of stress among participants in such ventures facilitates the working out of ways to more comfortably live within existing institutional realities.<sup>4</sup>

#### The Meaning of Institutional Racism

Vagueness and ambiguity about the meaning of institutional racism contributes to a redefinition of the problem as one of personal difficulties. Clearly any serious examination of the meaning of institutional racism would suggest the development of the problem along different lines.

Using a dictionary definition, racism is "a program or practice of racial discrimination, segregation, persecution and domination, based on doctrines or feelings of supposed racial differences of superiority and inferiority."<sup>5</sup>

Pervasive racist values of superiority and inferiority held by individuals, such as those related to intelligence levels, motivational differences and achievement potentials, are well known and do not have to be documented here. However, in institutional racism these values become an integral part of the fabric of our dominant cultural values and are transmitted as part of the way of life in our society. Our basic cultural values of competition, individualism, inequality of circumstances of living and of human rights, materialism and hierarchy include values of superiority and inferiority based upon race and ethnic status and over time these values are taken as a given and not subject to question.

These dominant values are organized as cultural institutions. Cultural institutions; economic, political, religious, educational, legal and welfare; represent various networks of interrelated dominant values that are relatively stable, that prevail throughout the society and that tend to maintain themselves through time. Cultural

institutions represent preferred belief systems about what is a desired way of life in a society. Such a desired way of life, reflected through cultural institutions, establish preferences for resolving basic social problems of a society, such as problems of social control, socialization and mastery of the environment.

Institutional (cultural) solutions to basic social problems of a society are carried out by formal organizations. Formal organizations represent the "agency" or means of institutional problem solving. Examples are economic organizations such as business and labor organizations and educational organizations such as schools. One component of the complex of formal organizations are schools of social work and they are clearly part of the apparatus of institutional problem solving.

Thus, institutional racism is the ideological (value) orientation of superiority-inferiority of racial and ethnic minority groups that (1) are an integral part of the dominant cultural values of our society, (2) are part of desired institutional forms of resolution to basic social problems of social control, socialization and mastery of the environment, and (3) are implemented through a vast complex of formal organizations.

#### Ethnic and Racial Minority Content

Ethnic and racial minority content in the curriculum of schools of social work has become a vague and ambiguous catch-all category for anything which is supposed to pertain to the past and present circumstances of ethnic and racial minority groups in our society; economic, political, social, cultural, educational, religious, psychological and biological. Generally, the ethnic minority content is supposed to identify and explain "the facts" about (1) the particular experiences of various ethnic and racial minority groups in our society, and (2) the relevance of particular course materials for ethnic and racial minority groups. Pressure from minority communities, students and faculty as well as tenure of the times has led to incorporation of ethnic minority content in some form in most courses in the curriculum. The form of incorporation varies from nothing, a few books on a course reading list, to one or more class periods on the subject. It is likely that most faculty provide a few bibliographical items and try to gear content to minorities where appropriate.

However, it is not so much what is incorporated, but the way it is incorporated that may raise some serious problems. In fact, when fitted into existing courses with prevailing philosophies minority content may actually reinforce the primary purposes, objectives and organization of the school.

Further, in the process of incorporation the assumption is made that ethnic and racial minority content serves to raise the level of awareness of all students about the experience of particular ethnic and racial minority groups and the relevance of the content of the academic curriculum for specific minority groups. But does it do this? If so, how does this attitudinal change occur? Such an assumption is subject to serious question.

First, as previously indicated, it is not clear what is meant by "minority" content and a "minority" group and why certain content and groups are included for consideration over others. Minority content is usually perceived in a global way as if any minority content is equal to all other minority content. For instance, we speak of addition of minority content as if any addition will suffice. Actually, however, different minority content have different relevance depending upon where the school is located, composition of student population, faculty composition, etc. In addition, we tend to lump together various groups into ethnic categories acting as if they are all the same. For example, Filipinos, Koreans, Chinese, Japanese and Vietnamese are often combined together under the category "Asian" and Mexican and Puerto-Rican under the category "Chicano."<sup>6</sup>

Second, the inclusion of ethnic and racial minority content is largely in response to pressure from concerned minority students, faculty, and community members and is primarily an attempt to appease those who create such pressure and to reduce it. Faculty activities in this area are in direct proportion to the pressure experienced from others and often reflects desire to avoid criticism. Such appeasement to ethnic and racial minority concerns does not necessarily represent serious attempts to achieve awareness and relevance or attention paid to the problem of institutional racism as defined here.

### Implications for Change

In order for ethnic and racial minority content to avoid perpetuation of institutional racism and other features of the dominant institutions of our society a change of the mission of schools of social work and of the profession of social work would be necessary. The profession and schools of social work must be a force for change if the content (ethnic minority content) of the curriculum can contribute to change. Adding, eliminating or changing elements in the curriculum in a piecemeal fashion will have limited impact as the essential difficulty is located in the very nature of what professional education and practice is basically designed to accomplish in our society.

Assuming that the primary mission of schools of social work and of the profession can be changed through collective work of social workers and others, several suggestions for change are considered next.

First, the prevailing institutions of our society must be systematically and critically examined. Examination of the dominant values that make up these institutions would require critical consideration of the interrelationship between the values of competition, inequality, individualism, materialism, and of hierarchy of social class, as well as values of superiority-inferiority of racial and ethnic minority groups. While some social work educators and social scientists have, and are conducting some examinations as indicated here, such work does not represent a primary mission of the profession and of schools of social work.

A second area for examination is (1) how social problems are defined in the content of existing institutional value constellations, and (2) how resolution to social problems such as social control, socialization and mastery of the environment can perpetuate institutional racism by promoting inequality, injustice and denial of opportunity for self-realization of most people in our society.

The third area for consideration is to examine how formal organizations as mechanisms for institutional problem-solving carry out dominant institutional solutions to social problems of our society. Formal organizations implement racist practices consistent with the institutional nature of racism that is an integral part of the way of life in our society. As previously noted, formal organizations are a



means for carrying out institutional solutions and do not (for long) have a life of their own apart from this function.

Fourth, critical analysis of "what is", as mentioned above, needs to be carried out in the context of a conception of "what should be" - a non-racist "good" society. Such consideration would involve identifying and examining the nature of desired values and their arrangements as cultural institutions; economic, political, legal, religious, educational and welfare. New institutional solutions to problems of socialization, social control and mastery of the environment need to be formulated as well as new organizational arrangements for carrying out desired institutional solutions.

Finally, given an adequate conception of "what is" and "what should be", attention needs to be given to approaches for changing to a desired society. Such approaches mean consideration of basic institutional change - a fundamental alteration of the cultural institutions of our society. Strategies of basic institutional change are based on an adequate critique of existing institutions and a conception of what is desired as the outcome of change.

#### Summary

The argument has been made that the incorporation of ethnic and racial minority content into existing curriculum of most schools of social work in this country has the consequence of perpetuating institutional racism. This position is based on the widely acknowledged and generally accepted primary mission of the profession of social work and of schools of social work in educating students to become members of the profession; to help people maintain and develop themselves within the established institutions of our society.

Clearly, curriculum content that has any sense of importance to the school and that achieves a permanent position in the curriculum, is shaped and modified to be consistent with curriculum objectives that enhance the primary use of the school and the profession. Consequently, curriculum content, such as ethnic-minority relations, that is viewed as a crucial and major part of the curriculum must support the mission of the school. Thus, from a logical and rational perspective, institutional racism as part of fabric of the dominant institutions of our society is reinforced and perpetuated by ethnic minority content.

For ethnic and racial minority content to serve interests other than the status-quo and further development of what prevails, the primary mission of the profession of social work, and consequently education for the profession, would have to be significantly altered.

Changes or additions in curriculum, such as ethnic and racial minority content, will not in itself have any significant impact on change of the current direction of social work education. If a non-racist society as well as other changes of our dominant cultural system, is perceived as part of a desired mission for social work, then the purposes, organization and curriculum of schools of social work should be designed to reflect this mission. The current situation reflects a different mission - support for existing institutional arrangements and consequently the perpetuation of institutional racism.

#### Notes

1. Colleagues at the University of Washington School of Social Work, William Berleman, Ronald Dear and Henry Maier, were very helpful to me in developing this position.
2. For a sample of the literature that amplifies this position, see: Roland, Warren, "Overview of the Intercultural Seminar" in An Intercultural Exploration: Universals and Differences in Social Work Values, Functions and Practice, (New York: Council of Social Work Education, 1967), p. 67. Herman D. Stein, "Social Works Developmental and Change Function: Their Roots in Practice". Social Service Review, 50, (March, 1976), p.1. Walter Fisher, Joseph Mehr, and Philip Truckenbrod, Human Services: The Third Revolution in Mental Health (New York: Alfred, 1974), p. 268. Yeheskel Hasenfeld and Richard English, Human Service Organization (Ann Arbor, Michigan, University of Michigan Press, 1974), p.1. Jeffrey Galper, The Politics of Social Services (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1975). David Gil, Unravelling Social Policy (Cambridge, Mass: Schenkman, 1973). Peter Marris and Martin Rein, The Dilemmas of Social Reform (New York: Atherton, 1967). Frances Piven and Richard Cloward, Regulating the Poor (New York: Vintage, 1971). Bertha Reynolds, An Uncharted Journey (New York: Citadel, 1963).

3. Observation made by Ronald Dear in a critique of an earlier draft of this article.
4. A similar process frequently takes place in professional practice working with clients disturbed about racism.
5. Webster's New World Dictionary (New York: World Publishing Co., 1964), p. 1198.
6. Ideas developed here are those of Henry Maier.

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