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# Social Work in the Black Community: A Collective Response to Contemporary Unrest

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*The frequent outpour of civil unrest in the Black community in response to instances of social injustice is a manifestation of outrage and exhaustion with systems that perpetuate socioeconomic disparities and human rights violations in this community. Lessons learned from historical practices of social work in the Black community may enhance the potential of contemporary social workers to shepherd this social consciousness into sustained social change. Toward this goal, this paper will synthesize and juxtapose the parallel paths taken by early Black social workers and their majority counterparts. This paper will also identify strategies for integrating the legacy of early Black social workers into contemporary social work education and practice.*

*Key words: African Americans, social work, community development, advocacy, social welfare*

The recent outpour of civil unrest in Baltimore, Maryland is a cyclical response to an over-exhaustion with systemic disparities and inequities that continue to plague the Black community. Indeed, we have witnessed this unrest erupt into violence in numerous cities throughout American history. As a few examples, we can recall the race riots in New York City in the 1960s (Biondi, 2007), the Miami riots in the 1980s (Campbell, 2015), and the riots that took place in Los Angeles in the 1990s (Lopez, 2015). Though this response to civil injustice in the Black community varies in intensity and impact, the potential of this activism to create sustained change may be dubious without access to governmental decision making.

Social workers are in an advantageous position to join with the Black community and to shepherd this unrest into social change. However, social work practice at large has not been

active at the level of political and social engagement necessary to effectuate change in the Black community (Bent-Goodley, 2015; Reid-Merritt, 2010; Reisch & Andrews, 2001). In fact, some scholars posit that macro-social work practices that have been instrumental in creating change in the Black community have been marginalized by the increasingly clinical orientation of the field (Donaldson, Hill, Ferguson, Fogel, & Erickson, 2014; McBeath, 2016; Reid-Merritt, 2010; Reisch, 2016). Still, leading organizations in the field, such as the National Association of Social Workers (2008) and the Council on Social Work Education (2015), continue to espouse a commitment to macro-practices, such as social activism and community development. To uphold these ethical and value statements, social workers may benefit from a better appreciation for and understanding of macro practices and strategies that have been instrumental in redressing socioeconomic inequities in the Black community. To this goal, this paper will outline the historical use of macro interventions by early Black social workers in the Black community. The author demonstrates how contemporary practices differ from those traditionally practiced in the Black community. This is the first paper to synthesize the welfare activities and juxtapose the parallel paths taken by early Black social workers and their majority counterparts.

### The Marginalization of Black Social Workers

The development of separate paths of social welfare for early Black social workers and their majority counterparts is the product of exclusionary practices in the early professionalization of the field of social work (Leighninger, 2000). As one source of marginalization, Black social scientists were systematically denied academic appointments in major colleges and universities and opportunities to speak to the Black perspective (Ladner, 1973). Furthermore, racial segregation limited the interactions of Black social workers with the majority group (Leighninger, 1987; Reid-Merritt, 2010). In fact, Inabel Burns Lindsay, the founding dean of the School of Social Work at Howard University, admonished the National Conference of Social Work for holding its 1942 meeting in a segregated hotel, which minimized the inclusion of Black social workers in conference activities (Crewe, Brown, & Gourdine, 2008). The

segregation of Black social workers and their majority counterparts extended to the welfare networks such as the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) (Gordon, 1991). As a result of these exclusionary practices, Black social workers "found it difficult to make an impact on general professional development" (Leighninger, 1987, p. 10).

The marginalization of Black social workers is also attributed to restrictive educational requirements in the early development of social work. As the field of social work moved to educational requisites, Black social workers were unable to gain access to training programs for lack of funding and discriminatory enrollment practices (Leighninger, 1987). Accordingly, many Blacks who contributed to the provision of social welfare in the Black community did not possess a degree in social work. For instance, as indicated by Sandra Crewe, the dean of social work at Howard University, Dorothy Height, who is recognized by NASW as a social work pioneer, did not receive a degree in social work (personal communication, November 18, 2014). Even more, as a result of these discriminatory practices and professional standards, in 1920, research indicates that there was not a single Black social worker "south of Washington D.C. or east of St. Louis," despite evidence that Blacks were actively engaged in social welfare activities (Platt & Chandler, 1988, p. 294).

### Black Social Work

To appreciate the full contribution of Black social workers to the delivery of social welfare in the Black community requires an expansion of the construct of social welfare. Traditional constructs of social welfare focus on the provision of alms to the poor; however, as explained by Gordon (1991), early Black social workers saw the cause of poverty in the Black community as stemming from systems of inequity. Accordingly, early Black social workers worked to deconstruct racist systems of inequity and to empower the Black community. Thus, an analysis of early practices in the Black community must take into account activities aimed at improving conditions for the home, community, and race (Shaw, 1991). These practices are often referenced in the literature as social work in the Black community. However, for the purpose of this paper, this author has

chosen the term: Black Social Work. The concept of Black Social Work aligns with Howard University's Black Perspective, which is a sociocultural framework for reaffirming and empowering the lives of all marginalized and oppressed people while giving primacy to the experiences of the Black community (Gourdine & Brown, 2015). Likewise, Black Social Work is the delivery of professionally guided interventions with an emphasis on practices and strategies that are responsive to the unique needs of the Black community and its inherent strengths and resiliencies. Black social workers are those who have a philosophical orientation towards the problems in the Black community as stemming from systems of inequity and a history of oppression.

The concept of Black Social Work may be likened to a movement in that it constitutes a group of individuals working in unison toward a shared goal. While the individual activities of specific players are integral to the movement, the movement as a whole is more than a series of individual efforts. The movement represents a collective response. As such, it would be remiss to minimize the study of Black Social Work to isolated narratives and profiles. An examination of Black Social Work entails the examination of the goals and ideologies shared among the collective Black social work community.

### History of Black Social Work

The Freedmen's Bureau was the first federal system of welfare extended to Blacks in the United States. However, contemporary social welfare literature often marginalizes references to this historic agency. The minimization of content on the Bureau within the context of social welfare may be due to its departure from traditional constructs of social welfare. This innovative approach to welfare was driven by the unique needs of formerly enslaved persons. Previously, policymakers viewed poverty as an individual problem (Trattner, 1999). In fact, "individualism and laissez-faire" were the dominant philosophical orientations for welfare during the nineteenth century (Trattner, 1999, p. 77). The Freedmen's Bureau, in contrast, intended to use federally funded programs to ameliorate systemic causes of poverty. In addition to the provision

of direct services to include food, clothing, transportation, and the reallocation of abandoned land, the Bureau also established separate institutions and services to promote fair treatment of Blacks (Stern & Axinn, 2012). Bureau agents, concerned with discriminatory practices in legal proceedings that relegated harsh penalties to Blacks, tried cases involving Black defendants, offered legal consultation in local proceedings, and provided military intervention to overturn judgments involving gross injustice (Harrison, 2007). Additionally, concerned with the legitimacy and stability of the Black family, the Bureau formalized marriages, assisted Blacks in tracing their family lineage (Harrison, 2007), helped Blacks to secure employment, and supervised contracts with employers (Trattner, 1999). Finally, the Bureau established hospitals to provide medical care to Blacks (Trattner, 1999). In fact, Sojourner Truth, alongside a number of Black physicians, was appointed as assistant to the surgeon of the Freedmen's Hospital in Washington (Lindsay, 1956). Truth was not the only Black administrator of the Freedmen's program. While race and class precluded their full involvement, there were a number of Blacks that assisted in the management and day-to-day operations of some of these programs (Lindsay, 1956).

Because the Freedmen's Bureau was conceptualized as a temporary provision of aid, it strived for capacity building through educational programs. The Bureau founded schools and sent Northern teachers to the South to educate formerly enslaved Blacks (Beilke, 2005). Oliver Otis Howard, the commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau, aligned himself with Northern ideology at the time that espoused education as an essential means of prosperity (Hansen, 2008). Likewise, Horace Mann, a legislator at the time, maintained that education was the "great equalizer of the conditions of men" (Stern & Axinn, 2012, p. 45). In regards to the formerly enslaved persons, Minister Henry Martyn Dexter maintained that "unintelligent citizens are a curse to a republic and a dead weight" upon its citizens (Dexter, 1865, p. 15). Thus, General Howard and other Northern leaders conceptualized educational programs for formerly enslaved Blacks. The curriculum focused on literacy and industrial skills. Administrators encouraged teachers to instruct on "the arts of civilized life" as well as reading and

writing (New England Freedmen's Aid Society, 1865, p. 49).

The importance of education is carried forward by Black social workers well after the dissolution of the Freedmen's Bureau. In fact, many Black social work pioneers were "educators by occupation" (Gordon, 1991, p. 563). For instance, Mary McLeod Bethune founded the Daytona Educational and Industrial Training School for Negro Girls in 1904, which later became Bethune-Cookman College (Jones, 2013). Nannie Helen Burroughs established the National Training School of Negro Women and Girls to increase their employability as "cooks, laundresses, chamber-maids, ladies' maids, nurses, housekeepers, and clerks" (Perkins, 1997, p. 234). Dorothy Height's first job after graduating from college was teaching at Little Red Schoolhouse (Height, 2009). Their penchant for education is reflected in their welfare activism in the Black community. Indeed, many Black welfare programs promoted education "ranging from basic literacy skills to advanced professional education" (Beilke, 2005, p. 10).

Education was not just a means for individual capacity building, it was also a source of community development. For instance, the program agenda for the National Urban League (NUL), one of earliest Black social work agencies (Jones, 1928), focused on generating and enhancing educational and industrial opportunities for marginalized Blacks (Martin & Martin, 1995; Reid-Merritt, 2010). The impetus behind this ideology was Black leaders such as W.E.B. Dubois and Booker T. Washington, who promulgated education as a form of self-help that would foster economic advancement in the Black community (Beilke, 2005). Further, as Congressman Ronald Dellums asserts, education was perceived as a cyclical process, whereby the educated youth would return to the communities to provide education and aid (personal communication, December 2, 2014). Thus, education functioned as a tool for community development.

Similar to education, mutual aid also played an important role in services in the Black community. Black club women, who dominated the early Black helping field (Carlton-LaNey, 2001; Shaw, 1991), and Black fraternal organizations (Dunbar, 2012; Reid-Merritt, 2010; Shaw, 1991) were instrumental in helping to establish mutual associations that provided banking,

homesteading, education, and other essential services within the Black community. Black club women, in particular, also provided mutual aid groups and Black settlement houses. These spaces provided traditional services; but, they also afforded Blacks the opportunity to come together over a shared history of oppression and to build an alliance (Hounmenou, 2012). Within these organizations, Black social workers functioned to mobilize the community towards participatory action. As such, they represent early constructs of community development (Shaw, 1991).

In the first three decades of the twentieth century, Black club women were so effective at providing social services to Blacks that they "outperformed the Black churches" that traditionally met the welfare needs of the Black community" (Martin & Martin, 2002, p. 138). Elmer P. Martin and Joanne M. Martin (2002) conducted a systematic review of the contributions of the Black churches to social welfare. They maintain that Black churches had a long history of providing social services to Blacks. Even during the enslavement of Blacks, Black churches served as "a social center, a source of social therapy and social support, [and] a form of social control" (p. 101). For runaways, the churches provided amenities that would otherwise be provided by the slaveholder. During reconstruction, W.E.B. Du Bois joined with Alexander Crummell to carry forward these ideals of spirituality and the helping tradition initiated by the Black churches. They used spirituality as a form of empowerment. Not only did spirituality give value and meaning to the Black race, but it also recognized race as a sacred concept worth fighting for. This sense of pride challenged "racist ideology that justified" the subordination of Blacks (Martin & Martin, 2002, p. 117). The centrality of the church in welfare may have been influenced by the limitations of local government to provide social services to Blacks. Thus, during the twentieth century when Black club women were actively engaged in welfare, the connection of the church to welfare diminished. However, Black social workers later revitalized the relationship between spirituality and social work practice. In fact, churches were prominent institutions in nurturing an environment that promoted social justice activism during the Civil Rights Movement (Martin & Martin,



2002).

The progressive era represented a time of philosophical change among early Black social workers in which they were optimistic about the potential of alms-based systems of social welfare to promote change in the Black community (Martin & Martin, 1995). However, this period did not last long; the Great Depression exposed Black social workers to the limits of these traditional systems of aid. During this time, social workers who had previously placed faith in the contemporary welfare agenda were disillusioned by the misappropriation of resources and the subsequent deleterious conditions of urban Blacks (Martin & Martin, 1995; Trattner, 1999). While the New Deal promoted nondiscriminatory practices in welfare and employment, states often circumvented these policies to deny Blacks equal access to social services (Barrow, 2007). Thus, the New Deal programs reinforced discriminatory practices aimed at removing Blacks from the welfare rolls and minimizing their benefits (Martin & Martin, 1995). In fact, research indicates that "racism was a potent force in the welfare systems of some states and localities" (Leighninger, 1987, p. 91).

The disconnect between the rights promised by federal laws and what Blacks experienced encouraged Black social workers to advocate for reform at higher levels of social and political action. As articulated by Dorothy Height, the Black social workers believed that "progress came through the courts; protection promised by the federal laws based on democratic principles always has meant more to Black people than to whites: it's the only hope we have" (Height, 2009, p. 134). Hence, Black social workers supported reformists in advocating for social justice. Additionally, the New Deal situated Black social workers in positions of authority as heads of some of the programming (Barrow, 2007; Martin & Martin, 1995). Mary McLeod Bethune was appointed to the Director of Minority Affairs for the National Youth Administration, where she served from 1936 to 1943 (Jones, 2013). Forrester Blanchard Washington oversaw the Negro Work in the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (Barrow, 2007). He used his position to bring attention to and redress policies that promoted poverty and dependency on welfare in the Black community (Barrow, 2007). Among his cohort of Black New Deal leaders were Eugene Kinckle Jones of the National Urban

League, Robert Weaver with the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and Lawrence Oxley, an accredited social worker (Barrow, 2007). Later social work pioneers continued to maintain a commitment to social activism. For instance, Ron Dellums saw poverty and unemployment as the cause of mental instability among Blacks and fought at the local and federal levels of government to advocate for equal access to education, workforce training, and employment (Dellums & Halterman, 2000).

### Historical Development of the Majority Social Work

Contrary to Black Social Work, the majority social work focused on individual pathology, or a clinical orientation to practice. The Charity Organization Societies, one of the earliest official social work agencies, began practice with a "narrow, moralistic, and individualistic attitude toward poverty" and its causes (Trattner, 1999, p. 101). They operated from an ideological perspective of poverty as the product of personal inadequacies (Leighninger, 2000; Trattner, 1999). Their primary means of social welfare was the provision of charitable goods. The Charity Organization Societies coordinated the charity agencies at the time to make both the recipients and the donors more accountable for their aid. In investigating the poor for their entitlement to aid, social workers formulated a system of service delivery referred to as casework (Leighninger, 1981; Spano, 1982; Trattner, 1999). As their practice became more organized, they discovered that there were social and economic causes of poverty (Trattner, 1999). These concerns exposed social workers to their need for an educational understanding of poverty and its causes (Trattner, 1999). They found support in psychotherapy (Leighninger, 1981; Spano, 1982).

The literature indicates that the merger of social work and psychotherapy was a productive union. For example, Mary Salter Ainsworth credits James Robertson, a psychiatric social worker, with inspiring the methodology for testing attachment theory for which social work case notes provided the empirical evidence (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Ainsworth & Marvin, 1994). This was not an uncommon partnership. In return for their work, social workers received training in psychotherapy (Trattner, 1999). Psychotherapy served to validate

the experiences of social workers in the field, thereby providing a scientific basis of practice and responding to the call of critics who questioned the integrity of the profession (Spano, 1982; Trattner, 1999).

With a foundation in psychotherapy and casework, social workers were able to respond to the needs of "a new clientele" brought about by wartime activities during and after World War I (Leighninger, 1981, p. 195). Social workers were called upon to assist in the assessment of potential draftees for service in the armed forces (Trattner, 1999). Further, there was an increased need for social workers in the treatment of service-related injuries and dysfunction (Leighninger, 1981). In fact, in 1920, the U.S. government established medical services at the local and state levels to include psychiatric care for soldiers and veterans (Trattner, 1999). This initiative was followed shortly thereafter with the development of the federal Veterans Bureau and the establishment of a chain of hospitals for veterans (Trattner, 1999). These new settings called for clinically-trained social workers to assess and treat service members and their families. In fact, at the time, the demand for psychiatric social workers in war-connected agencies was so great that it depleted staffing supply among public social service agencies (Leighninger, 1981).

In 1930, clinical priorities were briefly eclipsed by the demands brought about by the depression, which exposed social workers to the systemic causes of poverty and the vulnerability of the middle class (Trattner, 1999). These concerns called for "bold new action" (Barrow, 2007, p. 202). Social workers responded to the challenge with "a professional experiment" in social activism (Leighninger, 1987, p. 89). Leighninger (1987) reports that in 1934, the American Association of Social Workers assembled on a national scale to make recommendations for the advancement of policies on behalf of impoverished persons, marking the first time a group of accredited social workers had assembled on a national platform to advocate for political action. The ensuing proposal advocated for long-term federally-funded direct relief programs (Leighninger, 1987). Social workers in the majority also testified at congressional hearings on the need for increased public relief (Leighninger, 1987; Stern & Axinn, 2012).

Many of the subsequent programs and policies created new avenues of employment for social workers in public welfare settings (Trattner, 1999).

Despite national attention, this new-found activism and promotion of public welfare services dwindled following push back from legislators, who described social workers as "meddling" and resented the imposition of their ideals on their business affairs (Leighninger, 1981, p. 159). Likewise, this new position was also contested within social work (Stern & Axinn, 2012). For instance, in her 1930 presidential address to the National Council of Social Work, Miriam Van Waters maintained that social work is distinct from the "reformer, militantly urging a program of reform" (Leighninger, 1981, p. 94). This campaign was successful in returning mainstream social work to its clinical priorities following the dissolution of the New Deal (Leighninger, 1981).

In addition to ideological and political motives in the gravitation of the majority social workers to a clinical orientation, funding was also a major force. For instance, near the end of World War I, the Red Cross funded training programs that prepared social workers to address the mental health and related needs of soldiers, returning veterans, and their families (Austin, 1997; Trattner, 1999). The Red Cross was also a major employer of clinically-oriented social workers, employing over 3,000 in war-related jobs (Leighninger, 1981). The Commonwealth Fund also provided financial support towards the preparation of social workers for medical settings and child guidance clinics (Austin, 1997; Trattner, 1999). Finally, the establishment of the National Institute of Mental Health and the passage of the 1949 National Mental Health Act established significant funding opportunities for students in the examination of issues related to mental health (Austin, 1997). These initiatives also provided federal funding to states and private institutions for the promotion of activities related to the study and practice of mental health services (Trattner, 1999). The growing emphasis of clinical work and the shrinking investment in the training of social workers for public settings is reflected in the diversion of funds away from schools of social work and social work students by the federal Bureau of Public Assistance and the Children's Bureau (Austin, 1997).

The influence of the majority ideals on the development of the profession of social work is apparent in contemporary education, practice, and policies. In practice, the clinical case-work methodology developed by the Catholic Organization Societies continues to be prevalent. In fact, contemporary mainstream social work indicates a strong preference for clinical orientations of practice (Reid-Merritt, 2010; Reisch, 2016). Concurrent with the growing focus on clinical concentrations of practice, there is a shrinking investment in community development and organization (Donaldson et al., 2014; Reisch, 2016). This trend in practice is coupled with a divestment in community organization and community development course offerings in social work education (Donaldson et al., 2014; Reisch, 2016). Strategies for teaching social activism have also been largely neglected by social work faculty (Dudziak & Profitt, 2012). Parallel to these trends in social work practice and education is social welfare reform, with an emphasis on pathology and individual causes of poverty. Indeed, contemporary social welfare, with its time limits and work requirements, harkens back to the philosophical orientation of the moralizing Charity Organization Societies (Allen-Meares & Burman, 1995; Gordon, 1991; Trattner, 1999).

### Implications for Contemporary Social Work

The civil unrest exhibited in the Black community in response to social injustice is evidence of outrage and exhaustion with systems that perpetuate socioeconomic disparities and human rights violations in this community (Bent-Goodley, 2015). Social workers are in an advantageous position to enhance the potential of this social consciousness to effectuate sustained social change on behalf of this community. As posited by Bent-Goodley (2015), "there is no greater time for the reemergence of social work activism in the profession" (p. 103). Towards this goal, it is essential to integrate the legacy and traditions of Black Social Work into social work education and practice. Integral to this goal is the training and preparation of social workers invested in the advancement of the Black community. A Black Social Work-oriented curriculum would help social workers to understand their collective power and

instruct them to use such power as an agent of change. As advised by former Congressman Ron Dellums, social workers "have a unique capacity and responsibility" to organize and represent the interests of the community (personal communication, December 2, 2014). As such, social work education should not only espouse a commitment to activism, but it should also instruct on strategies and techniques and provide students with the necessary skillset (Dudziak & Profit, 2012).

In addition to their roles as advocates, it is important for social workers serving the Black community to understand the legacy of Black Social Work and to integrate this knowledge into practice. Towards this goal, there are a number of histories and anthologies of Black social welfare that may enhance social work curriculums (see Bell, 2014; Carlton-LaNey, 2001; Gasman & Sedgwick, 2005; Martin & Martin, 2002; Martin & Martin, 1995; Reid-Merritt, 2010). Social workers may also benefit from an increased representation of Black scholarship in social work texts (Carlton-LaNey, 2001). Importantly, the examination of Black Social Work in mainstream and core textbooks should be framed as a collective response to the unique needs of the Black community. This knowledge should be an integral learning objective in the preparation of social workers practicing in the Black community.

## Conclusion

This article has drawn attention to two parallel paths of social welfare and provided a synthesis of the activities practiced by both early Black social workers and their majority counterparts. As demonstrated in this paper, Black Social Work practices were guided by the pejorative legacy of slavery and the cultural traditions of the Black community. Within the enslaved community, the members learned to rely on one another to meet their needs. They further bonded over a shared sense of oppression. This group consciousness promoted mutual aid and community development activities among Black club women and fraternal organizations. Additionally, social workers espoused education and spirituality as a means of capacity building. Education and work training promoted the economic advancement of Blacks, while spirituality

fostered empowerment and militancy. Furthermore, Black social workers engaged in social justice activism to advance the Black agenda.

The philosophy undergirding the social welfare activities of early Black social workers was the perspective of poverty as a systemic problem. However, as previously described, due to issues of race and class, Black social workers were marginalized in the professionalization of the field and their practice values were minimized. As a result, contemporary practice looks strikingly different from Black Social Work. Contrary to Black social work, the majority social work was founded on a moralistic perspective of poverty, and early social workers assumed the task of investigating the poor for their entitlement to aid. In doing so, majority social workers developed a method of practice known as casework. Supported by casework methodologies and psychiatric priorities in the government sector and private practice, majority social workers gravitated to a clinical orientation to practice, which is reflected in contemporary social work education, policies, and practice. The disparity between contemporary practice and that of Black Social Work calls for concerted efforts to integrate the traditions and values of Black Social Work into social work education and practice. Through continued scholarship and sensitivity to the unique needs of the Black community, social workers can be active in helping to redress the impact of oppressive and discriminatory systems that continue to plague the Black community.

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