Pondering the Colour of Empathy: Social Work Students’ Reasoning on Activism, Empathy and Racism

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Abstract

Australia is a multicultural society. However, its history of British colonisation has contributed to enduring overt and covert discrimination, racism and black/white racial divisions. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the recipients of ongoing racial discrimination, they are the most disadvantage groups in Australia and they are significantly overrepresented as social work clients. An anti-racist stance is core to social work practice, and some literature has suggested that cultivating empathy can help reduce racism and provoke activism for social justice. In 2014, a classroom-based inquiry exploring barriers to activism extended previous student-centred research exploring empathy and racism. The findings suggest that some students hesitant to commit to action for social justice for reasons including a lack of confidence, and a lack of time and information. Facilitating social work students’ confidence, increased understanding of everyday acts of activism and skill development including critical empathy may bolster their confidence and their action for social justice.

Keywords: Racism, activism, empathy, social justice, social work education

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Introduction

Commitment to activism for social justice … is … unlikely to be free from ambivalence. Rather, doubts and dilemmas may continue along with, and in spite of, commitment (Gil, 1998, p. 133).
Until Mununga [white people] take ... responsibility for owning up, to and working against the pressures of racialised social conditioning, only tiny dents will be made in the armoury of racism (Kessaris, 2006, p. 358).

Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders, Australia’s Indigenous peoples, have experienced enormous structural, social and educational legacies arising from colonisation that continue to impact on their health and well-being (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2012). While unique cultural differences exist between Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders, much of the available literature combines these groups, making reference to separate experiences difficult. Bottoms (2013) confirmed a hidden history of violent black/white frontier violence, forced removals, massacres and land theft by British colonisers. Since colonisation, Australia’s Indigenous peoples have faced ongoing discrimination and everyday racisms that impact on their health. Significant disparities continue to exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians’ health and well-being outcomes (Close the Gap Campaign Steering Committee for Indigenous Health Equality, 2015). White Australians can be blind to the causes of these disparities, and they can deny racism even in the most violent cases, such as the case of Kumantaye Ryder, an Aboriginal man in Alice Springs who died at the hands of five young, white men in 2010. According to Perera and Pugliese (2011, p. 70), paramount in that case appeared to be empathy for the material conditions of the accused young white men and their potential lost futures, pointing to racialised constructions concerning social empathy for ‘black deaths (and) white lives’.

Sarra (2011, p. 50) noted that evidence in early British records reflected a colonial mindset of the intellectual superiority of whites and the ‘scarcely human’ inferiority of Aboriginal Australians. Sarra (2011) argued that such perceptions of superiority/inferiority remain to the present day. Regarding enduring disparities in health, mental health and well-being outcomes, Hunter (2007, p. 91) argued that increased awareness about the persistence of racism is vital, as is recognition of the demonstrated strengths of Indigenous peoples to rise above the ‘uncompromising social landscape’ of racial discrimination.

The importance of demonstrating empathic regard is evident in helping literature. Ongoing exploration and theorising regarding possible links between empathy, racism and activism for social justice seems less common. The purpose of this article is to note findings from two previous classroom-based studies by this author, before focusing on a recent classroom-based inquiry exploring students’ perception of barriers for themselves, and their perceptions of barriers for other social work students and graduates, in taking up an activist stance for social justice in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Some findings have been published elsewhere. Here the focus is on illuminating the Australian context, and
critically reflecting on students’ identification of barriers for themselves and others in becoming social work activists for social justice.

**Background context**

In a previous project exploring empathy with second-year social work students, their responses revealed least empathy for a vignette featuring an Aboriginal elder’s narrative of injustice (Gair, 2013a). A second classroom-based inquiry, using the same methodology but a different set of vignettes, again revealed least empathy for the vignette where cultural elements featured. Considered together, an ‘empathy gap’ seemed evident between students’ definitions and understandings of empathy, and their empathic responses (Gair, 2013b). Continuing a focus on racism, empathy and facilitating students’ critical awareness of the need for social justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians prompted a further classroom-based inquiry in 2014.

I acknowledge that, as a white Australian, I am not an observer located separately from social injustices against Indigenous Australians. However, I am committed to informed social work education and practice. Equally acknowledged here is that learning about racism and social injustice can be unsettling for white students (and educators) who may need to work against the grain of their own socialisation (Monaghan, 2010). Small numbers of Indigenous students were enrolled in subjects where the projects were undertaken, and admittedly content would be very unsettling for them; however, the focus here is on pondering non-Indigenous students’ reasoning on barriers to everyday activism in social work.

**Human rights, social justice and social work**

Australia’s history includes significant human rights violations against Aboriginal Australians, including murder, theft of land, and removal of children and whole communities (Atkinson, 2002; Bottoms, 2013). With similarities to other colonised peoples, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians continue to face enormous social, educational, economic and health legacies impacting on their well-being (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2012). The Close the Gap Progress and Priorities Report (2015) welcomed gains made, but confirms the need to close the health disparities gaps, including the eradication of systemic racism. Indigenous Australians might prefer services delivered by Indigenous social workers. However, graduate numbers remain low, possibly explained by a distrust of a profession implicated in the past (and present) removal of children, and eurocentric social work education (Bennett, 2015; Dominelli, 2008).
Bender, Negi and Fowler (2010) identified that the major responsibility for graduate preparation for culturally responsive practice lies with educators. In recent decades, social work educators in Australia, Britain, the USA and many countries worldwide actively have promoted anti-oppressive, anti-racist and culturally competent approaches (Dominelli, 2008; Mleck, 2014; Thompson, 1997), although Pon (2009) argued that a culturally competent approach could hinder cultural self-awareness. In Australia, national social work standards now require curriculum that includes racism and anti-racist practice, whiteness, social justice, effective cross-cultural communication and the unique histories of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2012). The anticipated outcome is that Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians will work together for social justice.

Reichert (2007, p. ix) argued that social justice is at the core of social work’s heritage and mission. Similarly, Ife (2008) identified that social work has an inherent responsibility to challenge privilege, advocate for human rights and uphold social justice, although Ife (2007) gave the example of the forced removal of Indigenous children to caution against imposed advocacy that can lead to further injustice.

**Racism, whiteness and decolonisation**

Racial discrimination is prohibited under Australian law, which includes the Commonwealth Racial Discrimination Act 1975, and state-based civil and criminal laws prohibiting racial vilification. Yet, public blindness to, and denial of, racism and discrimination continues (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2012). While racism is not confined to black/white relations, it is highly relevant in colonised countries such as Australia. Nelson (2015, p. 488, citing the work of Valentine and Sadgrove, 2012) reflects on how racialised behaviours are brought into a public arena after being learned and performed in private spaces, and there is evidence that professionals are not exempt from such behaviour. For example, Durey (2010) argued that health and social services have perpetuated Aboriginal health disparities through racist practices and attitudes.

Whiteness literature has helped illuminate hidden racisms (Anderson, 2002; Moreton-Robinson, 2000). Whiteness studies became prominent during the 1990s (see e.g. Anderson, 2002; Frankenberg, 1993; Bonnett, 1996; Moreton-Robinson, 2000; Morrison, 1993), building on earlier work from the 1960s (see Baldwin, 1998; McIntosh, 1988). According to some authors, an uncritical understanding of white identity can hold the observer hostage to unconscious racist ideologies (Doosje et al., 1998; Nunn, 1993). Such literature appeals to non-Indigenous people, including social workers, to interrogate their own racialised conditioning in the fight against racism (Abrams and Moio, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1998;
Walter and Butler, 2013). In particular, whiteness literature appeals to non-Indigenous people to critically reflect on the racial power and unquestioned ‘social logic’ of white privilege (Perera and Pugliese, 2011, p. 65). Some literature further reveals the complexities and situated dynamics inherent in understanding superiority/inferiority, (in)visibility of whiteness, and racialised self and ‘others’ (Jeyasingham, 2012), while a number of authors have suggested that development of awareness to recognise racism in the behaviour of others might not lead to self-awareness and changed behaviours (Condor et al., 2006; Gil, 1998; Schick, 2000).

Some authors identify stages of uncertainty and discomfort on the road to transformed racial awareness. For example, Helms’s (1990) six-stage process included three early stages/levels of movement away from racism and three later levels of transformation towards a non-racist white identity. Only partial empathy was noted in early levels, while, in later levels, awareness of racism and injustices was evident (Carter, 1996). More recently, Muller (2014), in discussing stages of colonisation and decolonisation, specifically identified that, for healing and progression to commitment and action, both the colonised and the colonisers need to shed imposed colonialist doctrine.

The role of empathy in professional helping

Empathy is understood to be an indispensable ingredient in helping others (Alma and Smaling, 2006; Batson et al., 2002; Duan and Hill, 1996; Hojat, 2007; Howe, 2008). Much of the empathy research links empathy with positive therapeutic outcomes and, although some authors have linked too much empathy with compassion fatigue and burnout (Figley, 2002), others present a contrary argument (Nilsson, 2014). Many authors have deliberated over key differences between empathy and sympathy (see e.g. Boulton, 1987; Trevithick, 2005), while others argue they are more closely related (Eckermann et al., 2006; Krznamarc, 2014). Recent experimental research on brain mirror neurons by Gutsell and Inzlicht (2010) found that empathy was constrained by prejudice felt by white people towards people outside their cultural circle.

Theorising about empathy is well established in the literature, although theorists are not united in their understandings. Simulation theorists promote the Rogerian, humanist imagining ‘as if’ the experience of another was one’s own (Rogers, 1956/1992, p. 832) or centring self in order to enact empathy, while ‘theory of mind’ theorists argue for intellectual rather than emotional understanding of another’s mind state (Englande, 2014, p. 6; Zahavi, 2010). Early empathy theorist Edith Stein (1917, translated 1989) proposed a three-stage process of perceptive, empathic engagement through our common humanity and not a common experience. More recently, such phenomenological theories of empathy
have been revisited (Zahavi, 2010). Some authors speculate that cultivating empathy can reduce students’ prejudice and racism (Bruna Seu, 2011; Pedersen and Barlow, 2008; Segal et al., 2012). Of interest, Boler (1999) differentiated between passive and active empathy, identifying that passive empathy may not lead to upholding an obligation to confront racism. Similarly, Krznaric (2014) called for empathy beyond a humanist tradition and maintaining the status quo, towards political empathy for social justice and human rights. Pondering a more active, critical empathy and its links to antiracism and action for social justice appears to be less explored in social work literature (Gair, 2008; Bender et al., 2010; Mlcek, 2014).

**Activism for social justice in social work**

Nearly twenty years ago, Gil (1998) asked whether social workers, while dealing with diverse social problems, also act as change agents working to overcome oppression and injustices. While admitting there were no easy answers and identifying a ‘conventional tendency of social work to help people adjust to the status quo’, Gil (1998) argued that a radical orientation ‘could be incorporated into everyday practice’ (p. 101), but that becoming an agent of change required a critical consciousness. Most recently, Greenslade et al. (2015) discuss actions to challenge injustice, as required in codes of ethics of member countries of the International Federation of Social Workers including Britain, the USA, Canada, Sweden, Israel and Australia. They argue that past research mostly has focused on activism as a macro practice, and also acknowledge the seemingly marginalised status of activism in contemporary social work practice, noting the impact of conservative, neo-liberal ideologies. However, they reveal, as have others, new, hidden micro resistance displayed by social workers battling professional value conflicts and organisational change (Bayat, 2000; Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010; Greenslade et al., 2015).

In undertaking activism, Baskin (2011) argued that non-Indigenous social workers ‘can learn a great deal from Indigenous people’ (p. 41) and that ‘Indigenous teachings’ can assist social workers to translate anti-oppressive theory into practice (p. 43). Importantly, Gil (1998) identified that it is crucial to produce competent social workers who understand and can address causes of oppression and injustice, while Bruna Seu (2011) concluded that raising awareness about racism and human rights violations involved cultivating empathy, in turn helping to provoke activism.

**Study context and method**

**Context**

The small, exploratory classroom-based inquiry described here was undertaken at a regional Australian university. Higher rates than the
national average of Indigenous peoples live in the region, and frontier conflict during colonisation was more violent here than elsewhere in Australia (Bottoms, 2013). The majority of our social work students are mature-aged, non-Indigenous females, with small numbers of male students and Indigenous students, and fewer international students. This profile may be less diverse than other social work programmes.

Over several years, I undertook classroom-based research, where second-year students were asked to define empathy, and explore and identify, through the use of vignettes, when empathy might or might not be enacted (Gair, 2009, 2013b). Those findings, together with my observations and critical reflections as an educator (Gair, 2011), and available literature have informed the conceptualisation of the inquiry reported here, including the survey questions.

The setting was a compulsory second-year subject. This subject is co-taught with an Aboriginal elder from the region, and the focus is on cultivating skills and knowledge for competent, respectful social work practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Indigenous guest lecturers present almost all lectures. Topics covered include historical and contemporary human rights violations, with specific examples from this region, first-hand accounts from members of the Stolen Generation, and narratives of discrimination within health, education and justice systems. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders’ history, worldviews, stories, frameworks and ways of working are emphasised, as is the importance of understanding white privilege, decolonisation and the need for core communication skills including empathy and relationship building. The last topic in the lecture series is activism.

The final Aboriginal presenter consolidates previous content and rouses students to help dismantle racism through her testimony of extensive activism over injustices, and her call to students to become activists for social justice in their day-to-day work as social workers, thereby contributing to the future health and well-being of Indigenous Australians. Assessment requirements include critical autobiographic journals, and a reflective statement of practice based on a case study of the death of Aboriginal man Kumantaye Ryder in Alice Springs in 2010, mentioned earlier in this article.

Methods

The purpose of the exploratory study described here was to continue to explore issues of racism, social justice and empathy with students, with a focus on barriers to activism, given the limited available literature linking these concepts. The research comprised a small classroom-based survey and therefore claims of generalisability are not made. However, Liamputtong (2009) and others have suggested that questions of rigour can include:
whether the research is genuine and credible; if the researcher’s interest, purpose and method are explained; if the researcher’s relationship with participants is transparent; if it is based on an assumption of no single reality or explanation; if participants are selected for their specific knowledge and have opportunities to express it; and if data are represented in an honest, adequate way (Sandelowski, 1986). The study purpose was explained openly and clearly to students and information was sought from students who could comment on the study focus. Here the researcher’s motivations underpinning the study are transparently presented and speculations are made on a range of possible explanations for the outlined findings.

Equally, Dadds (2008) argued that empathic validity and critical reflection could constitute considerations for rigour. Dadds (2008) differentiated between internal (emotional engagement) and external (transparently fostering new knowledge and change) validity, while also identifying, as do others, that ongoing critical reflection is essential in social work education and practice (Fook, 2012). Engaging in critical reflection and fostering new knowledge for improved teaching and learning were intentional aspects of this research. The primary aim was to explore students’ perceptions of barriers to becoming activists for social justice. The specific research question guiding this project was ‘What are the barriers to social work students and graduates becoming activists for social justice regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians?’ All students who had completed the second-year course described above in 2014 were eligible to participate. University ethics approval was granted for this project. All students signed Informed Consent forms prior to participation.

The sample consisted of forty second-year on-campus and distance education (DE) students. The survey purpose and content was explained clearly to students. The survey provided students with multiple options of possible barriers, and they could nominate one or as many responses as they perceived were applicable. A category of ‘Other’ was available in several questions. Questions required students to perceive of barriers to being activist for social justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, as related to self and as related to other social work students and graduates. Additional questions asked students to reflect on what might help overcome perceived barriers. Space was provided for students’ additional qualitative comments. Students willing to participate submitted their answers with a signed consent form to a colleague who was not party to the research.

To enable DE students to participate (these students had covered the same content including participating in on-campus workshops, but had returned home), the questions, information and consent forms were placed in a folder on the course website. All responses were collated by a nominated colleague, and then forwarded to this researcher. Students’ responses were tallied, and a thematic analysis was undertaken on the qualitative
comments to identify themes and issues. For anonymity, no identifying information was requested of participants. Indigenous student numbers enrolled in the subject were small comparative to non-Indigenous students, as were male student numbers; therefore, requesting Indigenous/non-Indigenous or gender status may have identified some students.

Limitations

Limitations of the study include that it was an exploratory, classroom-based survey. Demographic information was not requested from students and this lack of information may have limited data analysis and interpretation. Further, while the subject within which the survey was presented is core to our programme, participation in this survey was voluntary and therefore the sample and the findings cannot be seen to reflect the profile or the views of the broader social work student body. Finally, it is acknowledged that researcher prior interest in links between empathy, racism and action for social justice may have influenced the data analysis and interpretation, although this interest is made transparent.

Findings

Tallied responses

The highest to lowest tallies regarding students’ perceptions of barriers for others (other social work students and graduates) ranged from ‘not sure what to do’, ‘did not know or could not see the issues’ and ‘lack of information’, ‘confidence’ and ‘time’. Next identified barriers were ‘the organisation might not support it’, they ‘did not want to offend’, ‘racism’ was a barrier, there was ‘limited empathy for Indigenous people’ or ‘activism is too hard’. Lowest tallies identified that they perceive for others ‘inequalities might not exist’ or they ‘don’t see activism as core to social work’ (see Table 1).

In answer to identical questions asking what barriers there were for self to taking an activist stance for social justice in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, some tallies were similar to those for others (above), while some showed stark differences. For self, ‘lack of confidence’ was the highest tallied barrier, followed by ‘not sure what to do’, ‘lack of time’ and ‘lack of information’ (see Table 2). Comparatively few students identified barriers for self as ‘not seeing the issues’, ‘activism as a specialist area’ or ‘activism is too hard’. Only two students identified racism as a barrier, and no student identified ‘limited empathy’ as a barrier for themselves or identified activism as ‘not core to social work’ (see Table 1).
Qualitative comments

Qualitative comments supported and complemented the range of ticked options. Primarily, noted barriers related to: lack of information; lack of confidence; workplace barriers; fears; and lack of time. Of interest, while participants appeared to clearly differentiate between self and others in ticked options, qualitative responses did not demonstrate differentiation.
Regarding lack of confidence and lack of information, many students similarly stated:

I feel I need to learn a lot more to fully understand.

Probably just a lack of confidence, feeling like I’m not equipped with the right information.

If I had the support of a group . . . .

Don’t have any experience (need) more information . . . .

Need knowledge on how to work with Aboriginal people.

Not sure where to start.

While fear of losing friends/family was one available tick option, somewhat surprisingly, participants nominated many fears in their qualitative comments for self and for others as barriers to action for social justice. Perceived fears for others included: ‘fear of losing their job’, ‘fear of repercussions’, ‘fear of causing arguments’ and ‘fear of getting hurt’. Equally, perceived fears for self included: ‘fear of being racially attacked’, ‘fear of offending’ and ‘scared of losing job and being branded a trouble maker’. Other fears for self included ‘might be seen as weird and different’ and ‘being white and young I don’t want to be seen as a know-it-all’.

Nominated workplace barriers for others included ‘government changes, changing policies’, ‘too many other commitments’ or ‘it’s too hard’. This student’s comment captures the comments of several others: ‘peer pressure and management pressure to not rock the boat’. Another student identified this barrier to activism for social justice: ‘in the workplace it is not seen as relevant’.

For self, qualitative comments were not about workplace, which may be understandable. Rather, a lack of time was noted as a barrier to action for social justice, with these three participants similarly commenting:

I am very interested in this field but I have no time.

Time is limited, too limited to dedicate to pursuing this cause.

I always feel so busy with my own life I barely have time for anything else these days. Even after my degree I will be concentrating on my career, my new job and starting a family.

Discussion

The findings suggest that, for a majority of participants, in relation to themselves, barriers preventing them taking action for social justice for Indigenous Australians did not include racism, limited empathy, a lack
of recognition of the issues or a perception that activism for social justice was not core to social work, although participants did perceive that these barriers would exist for other social work students and graduates.

A prominent finding was that many students nominated lack of confidence or not sure what to do as barriers. As noted, almost all content in the completed subject provided weekly testimony to breached human rights and a lack of social justice, and highlighted the need to develop critical and political consciousness, and take up respectful, empathic ways of working, including building relationships for the common cause of empathic practice and social justice. Therefore, the findings of lack of confidence/not sure what to do was somewhat surprising. Looking to the literature offered some guidance. For example, Hamilton and Fauri (2001) asserted that it is not enough to exhort students’ increased political participation. Rather, they recommend practical opportunities are provided for students to exercise their political voices, arguing that such curriculum activities and related assessment are likely to increase students’ self-confidence in undertaking political action. These practical strategies can be incorporated easily into the curriculum.

The final lecture, by an Aboriginal activist, appealed to students to engage in everyday ways as activists in upholding social justice. Yet, students’ responses indicate they missed the message that activism for social justice need not be about time committed to public social protest; rather, it is core to everyday social work. Of interest, according to Greenslade et al. (2015), some social workers may be fearful to openly resist their employers’ requests even when they pose professional value conflicts; rather, they utilise covert resistance strategies to deliver on their professional obligation of activism. This latest literature partially helps explain why some students expressed multiple fears in relation to taking an activist stance in the workplace. Again, these findings provide valuable feedback to advance students’ conceptualisation of everyday activism in practice, and provide a focus for future research. An increased emphasis on quieter, micro, everyday resistance and small, accessible acts of ‘doing activism’ rather than ‘being [an] activist’ seems relevant to these findings and future social work education and practice (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010, p. 487; Bayat, 2000).

Students’ perceptions regarding ‘lack of information’ as a barrier for others (other social work students and graduates, twenty-seven responses) was another interesting finding. It might be partially explained, given that participants could not be confident of the exact content provided to others, although they would have some ideas based on their own programme. Yet the fact that fifteen students perceived ‘lack of information’ as a barrier for self at the end of a very comprehensive course seemed less understandable. Information provided to students in many forms had offered extensive testimony to Australia’s hidden violent histories and current legacies, and the necessity of specific skills and
knowledge for effective practice (in presentations, tutorials with a local elder, readings, recorded lecture podcasts and streaming DVD documentaries). In seeking to explain the findings, it might be the case that students may have revealed their difficulty in grappling with and fully understanding discomforting content, and findings could represent students demonstrating increased critical reflection in their recognition that they cannot fully comprehend Indigenous people’s experiences of racism.

Given the interest in the topics of empathy and racism identified earlier, the findings relating to these concepts are of particular interest. For example, there is a stark difference between limited empathy and racism as perceived as a barrier for others, and as perceived for self. No student identified limited empathy as a barrier for self, and only two participants identified racism—a combined tally of three responses from a possible forty students. This can be compared to a combined thirty-one responses identifying that racism and limited empathy may be barriers for other social work students/graduates. These students, who had completed a comprehensive course on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, knowledge and skills for social work practice, perhaps understandably perceived that limited empathy, racism and lack of awareness of the issues were not barriers for them. Yet, in considering other tallies and qualitative comments, something more nuanced or complex may be evident, and further speculation on the findings seemed useful. For example, thirty-one students reasoned that a barrier for others (other social work students and graduates) might be that they ‘did not know or could not see the issues’, yet only three students responded similarly in relation to self. This finding possibly could be interpreted as a signal of students’ confidence in ‘knowing the issues’, yet lack of confidence was the highest perceived barrier for self in the tallied responses, although qualitative comments did not illuminate specifics in relation to ‘lack of confidence’.

Another finding worthy of reflection is the finding that fifteen out of a possible forty students identified a lack of time as a perceived barrier for self, supported by qualitative comments. This is of interest because no student ticked that, for self, activism was not core to social work; or, expressed differently, all students considered that being activist for social justice was core to social work practice.

After pondering previous study findings and current findings, other explanations of students’ responses seemed worthy of further speculation. In looking to the literature, Schick’s (2000) work appeared to offer some parallels. Schick found that, on the one hand, students ‘intend to make a difference’ (p. 84) yet, on the other hand, they demonstrated a resistance to uncovering racism, and an active maintenance of white identities without critical awareness of the implications for their chosen profession. Students saw themselves as ‘innocent’ learners and ‘good
students’ who also projected a ‘not me’ stance on racism (Schick, 2000, pp. 85–6). Schick (2000) concluded that students seek ways to escape uncomfortable identification with racism, and that what might be evident was the invisible effects of whiteness.

As noted, many participants identified lack of confidence, fears, lack of information and lack of time in themselves and others as barriers to action for social justice. Equally, students recognised in their peers but not in themselves that barriers included racism and limited empathy. Of interest, Condor et al. (2006) found that denial of racism in relation to self could signal the opposite possibly might be true. These researchers suggested that individuals often are motivated to emphasise their capacity for tolerance compared with others in order to avoid being seen as racist. Similarly, Schick (2000) noted that students could gain capacities to judge another’s awareness of racism and discern the failings of their peers, but not discern their own. Considering the above literature, it is suggested here that social work students’ responses and reasoning might reflect similar complexities to those identified by Schick (2000) and Condor et al. (2006) and more research appears needed.

It may be the case that, for these students, limited empathy, racism and lack of awareness of relevant issues are not barriers, as they identified, although their perceptions that these barriers exist for other social work students and graduates is useful. The most frequently identified barriers were lack of confidence, lack of information, lack of time and a range of fears. However, these findings might point to inadequate critical awareness, and could signal that limited empathy and racism may be unacknowledged barriers. It even seems possible that some students might have nominated barriers such as fears and lack of information, confidence and time because they perceived it could be more acceptable than nominating barriers such as lack of empathy or racism, and therefore some students might not understand the trappings of whiteness.

It is only speculation, but seems worthy of reflection that unless whiteness, racism and empathy are sufficiently illuminated and interrogated during social work education, including the relationships between these concepts, then students could be blind to, or remain hostage to, whiteness discourse, this in turn weakening their response to the call for activism for social justice. Finn and Jacobson (2003) identified that social workers may be more likely to embrace the language than the practice of empowerment. Equally, what might be evident here is an embracing of the language of empathy, antiracism and activism for social justice, but hesitancy, even with an existing commitment, regarding the practice of it—a situation noted in the opening quote.

What is known is that action for social justice is central to social work (IFSW, 2014). It is clear that graduate social workers need active empathy, an antiracism stance and critical reflection skills in order to identify how discrimination and racism damage lives, and how the invisible
subtleties of whiteness can limit practice potential (Dominelli, 1997, 2008; Gordon, 2004; Moreton-Robinson, 2000). A critical stance is highly relevant for colonised spaces such as Australia, but may be true of other countries and groups where ongoing discrimination impacts on the health, mental health and well-being of disadvantaged groups. It seems worthy of consideration that introducing students to literature such as Boler’s (1999) notion of active empathy and Krznaric’s (2014) conceptualisation of political empathy for work beyond the status quo can assist students to develop a critical empathy and increased understanding of links between empathy, racism and everyday activism. This awareness can encompass a necessary political understanding of the damage of personal and structural racism, and help social work students and graduates embrace action for social justice. Clearly, there is more work to do in providing these students with skills, resources and confidence to be everyday activists for social justice. Possible explanations pondered here may provide food for thought for other social work educators and practitioners, and direction for future research.

Conclusion

Racism and discrimination are features of Australian society. Empathic social workers prepared to enact their professional code of ethics by standing up for social justice can contribute to reducing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians’ well-being outcomes. However, some learners might lack confidence, and they might misconceive where activism fits. This may result in students being hesitant to uphold action for social justice in their practice. It also seems possible that some students might inaccurately perceive their own levels of racism, and they may remain hostage to the subtleties of whiteness ideology and passive empathy, this again inhibiting their actions for social justice. These findings may offer guidance for social work education. Further research also seems warranted exploring interrelationships between empathy, racism and activism for social justice in social work, in order that social work education can graduate critically empathic practitioners ready for lifelong social justice practice.

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References


