

Reimagining Social Work Ancestry: Toward Epistemic Decolonization

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Abstract

Contextualizing disciplinary histories through the personal stories of forerunners creates compelling narratives of the craft of evolving professions. By looking to our intellectual and practitioner ancestors, we participate in a dialogue with a history that shapes our contemporary professional identities and aspirations for the future. Grounded in a decolonizing approach to social work, this article examines how the discipline shapes its professional identity and ways of knowing by centering the role of canonical founders in the social work curriculum. The global social work origin story in the curriculum often centers on Anglo-American ancestors that illustrate the development of the disciplinary boundaries of the international profession. One method of decolonizing social work epistemology at the intersection of ancestors and professional lineage could be to look to public history as a pedagogical tool in the curriculum. The article concludes by examining the use of podcasts as having the potential to decolonize the process of collecting, analyzing, and disseminating local knowledge of ancestors thus challenging the top-down approach to expert-driven epistemologies.

Keywords

social work history, social work curriculum, social work professional identity, social work epistemology, decolonization

Introduction

The murder of George Floyd in May 2020 may be seen as a watershed that ignited contemporary decolonizing social movements around the world. Statues of prominent figures such as Cecil Rhodes, King Leopold II, and Andrew Jackson were knocked off pedestals by activists on university campuses and in municipal landscapes from Capetown to Antwerp to Mississippi. Coming at the apex of one of the most blatantly white supremacist administrations in US history, these culminating actions represent a profound shift in how canonical disciplinary figures, who have held sacrosanct space at the center of institutions of knowledge and power, are regarded. The groundswell of

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collective action that has challenged prevailing practices of homage to promoters of racist and settler colonial ideologies demonstrates the deep historical roots of international anticolonial resistance sustained through decades of critical education, often in community and other alternative spaces.

This article examines how social work grounds its professional identity and ways of knowing by centering the role of canonical founders in the curriculum. Following Alvarez-Uria Rico and Parra Contreras (2014), I propose that the narrow ancestry often attributed to the genesis of social work reinforces coloniality in the curriculum by departing from a limited terrain of potential ancestors and relatives. This narrow ancestry uplifts white Western colonial knowledge while rendering other kinds of knowledge largely invisible. Applying a decolonizing theoretical lens, I proceed by first discussing the dangers of a single story of professional lineage. I then move on to outline the ancestors of social work that inhabit the global curriculum, examining how these limited intellectual genealogies contribute to affirming the epistemic coloniality of social work professional identity. Following this analysis, I explore the potential role of public history as a social work teaching tool through the example of a podcast that re-stories social work in a local context. I conclude by considering how social work ancestry could be decolonized through a reexamination of its story of origin, posing the question: How can social work knowledge and practice be enriched by including alternative and diverse social work ancestors and relations at the center of the curriculum?

Beyond a Single Story: Decolonizing the Social Work Lineage

Lineage is often conceived as a line, a rope, and a continuum of descent that anchors us in the flow of time. Introductory courses in scientific disciplines have long focused on a linear intellectual genealogy to induct new students into the historical trajectory of the field. These detailed intellectual genealogies anchor the elements of canonization in the curriculum, which serve to legitimate knowledge and progress by rendering prominent certain scholarly figures. Canonical figures serve as a beacon to future generations, modeling disciplinary heritage for the field (Ben-Ze'ev & Lomsky-Feder, 2020). Lineage shapes how a discipline is defined, seen, understood, and whose voices matter (Zerubavel, 2012). Contextualizing disciplinary histories through the personal stories of forerunners creates compelling narratives of the craft of evolving professions. By looking to our intellectual and practitioner ancestors, we participate in a dialogue with a history that shapes our contemporary professional identities and aspirations for the future. The notion of intellectual genealogy has been increasingly explored in the late 20th century (Koopman, 2013). Scholars have sought to examine the influences on the intellectual development of disciplines by tracing mentors, teachers, and supervisors—much like a family tree. However, like all family trees, some members remain unrecognized, closeted, or are viewed as illegitimate.

Modern notions of professionalism are deeply rooted in a Western colonial ontology, producing knowledge systems on a very different basis than Indigenous epistemological systems (Gray et al., 2016). Modern professions are embedded in notions of western liberal individualism that valorize the individual as autonomous founder, which underscores hierarchies, ownership, and the product as a commodity as the goal of professionalism. This approach stands in contrast to indigenous perspectives that uplift the collective and the process. Ioakimidis and Trimikliniotis (2020) argue that social work historiography has neither dealt with its troubled past of complicity with colonizing and racist ideologies nor opened up the depths of its rich radical histories to students. Alvarez-Uria Rico and Parra Contreras (2014) discuss the political commitment of diverse forerunners in social work who have advocated for social transformation beyond the reformism of casework. Excising these complex genealogies leads, according to Alvarez-Uria and Contreras, to perpetuating bias in the development of social work identity. There is a wealth of scholarship on diverse social work ancestors, but these stories are not always translated into the curriculum. Often figures such as Jane Addams and Mary Richmond are narrated as the sole ancestors of social work, which begs the

question of how this historical shorthand shuts out other possible ways of viewing or understanding social work. Looking solely to the work of white female social reformers and activists can limit our understanding of social work by implicitly linking the profession with coloniality, whiteness, and English language hegemony. As Iris Carleton-LeNay (2015) states in her study of African American social worker, Hortense King McClinton: “Simply making people aware of remarkable women like McClinton can strengthen and empower practitioners and scholars who face similar challenges in contemporary society” (p. 118).

How we narrate our past speaks to our understanding of our present and aspirations toward the future (Connerton, 2014). Scientific disciplines draw complex intellectual genealogies to describe their stories of origin, which is often narrated as a linear development of the field influenced by specific individuals, but these stories have also reflected erasures in social work history, particularly in relation to structures of oppression in knowledge production and subsequent evidence-based practices (Silva, 2019). How social workers understand their history—as agents of social control or advocates of social emancipation—influences how they understand their role as producing knowledge and practicing as a profession.

Adichie (2016) has cautioned that “the single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.” Single stories persist because of what historian Saidiya Hartman (2008) terms the “violence of the archive.” Archives document what societies consider worth remembering, shaping the social memory on which professional histories are built. Hartman troubles the concept of the archives by pointing out that they are composed of selections that create omissions and gaps which facilitate the seamless single story, but often erase or retell other stories. The narrow focus on the single-story social work narrative of white female social work pioneers renders other potential ancestors and ways of doing social work invisibly. Could modern social work imagine multiple stories of origin and still retain its professional identity? In what follows, I consider the implications of decolonizing social work’s single-story origins for how the profession imagines itself.

Professionalism and Epistemic Decolonization

Professionalism is a quintessentially modern social phenomenon that constructs its expertise through a unique body of knowledge that defines the scope and ways of understanding the defined field of operation. The concept of professionalism refers to an autonomous occupation with a high social status that requires specialized training and is regulated by law, standards of practice, and a professional code of ethics monitored by a collegial association (Buhai, 2012). Professional practice is rooted in a client–professional binary, emphasizing the neutrality of the professional and strict boundaries. In this way, professionalism reinforces a single story of origin and expertise, which justifies the profession’s monopolistic definition of the field and its unique relationship to societal institutions. However, professions are not static but dynamically interact with the shifting processes of institutional and societal change (Muzio et al., 2013). To explore the question of professionalism, I start by tracing the origins of this phenomenon in the 20th century, before outlining the contemporary crisis of professional boundaries in which the profession finds itself. I then link this outline back to the questions of epistemic decolonization of social work that were raised earlier to consider what this might entail for the future.

The modern notion of regulated professions emerged in the 20th century from the need to assess competence claims and enforce accountability in circumstances where malpractice and harm often occurred (Lorenz, 2012). There is a rich theoretical heritage of exploring the complex relationship of the professions to institutions and the social order (Durkheim, 1947; Parsons, 1951). In the latter part of the 20th century, social theorists increasingly criticized how the elitist power of modern professionalism (Foucault, 1977) often reproduced oppressive intersectional structures

through their practices (Mattsson, 2014). Neoliberal ideologies also emerged in the 1990s to challenge the traditional status of professions by commodifying service delivery and often limiting professional discretion (Pusztal & Csok, 2020). There are also trends toward increasingly multiprofessional teams in organizations which threaten the ability of the profession to control and organize its own field (Muzio et al., 2013).

Professions develop an expert-driven epistemology that defines how their specific methods of constructing knowledge delineate their field. In the 2010s, some scholars spoke of a “crisis” in social work knowledge (Longhofer et al., 2012). Brekke (2012) argued that “we have not defined a science of social work that would articulate the critical domains of knowledge in social work, that would define a core set of constructs that frame our approach to the scientific study of phenomena that are central to our profession, nor have we articulated the characteristics of a scientific approach that would most exemplify the kind of knowledge our profession would hold in highest regard” (p. 457). Pointing out that there was a gap between disciplinary research and field practice; scholars pondered how the discipline defines science to better understand how its knowledge could be effectively applied (Brekke & Anastas, 2019). However, some critics pointed out that this argument takes for granted a neutral social science epistemology (Shaw, 2014). Other social work scholars looked to the interpretive and experiential tradition to demonstrate the flexibility and diversity of social work practice knowledge (Bellinger, 2010). Still, other scholars criticized the direction of social work science saying that it has lost sight of its core value of promoting social justice by using its knowledge in the service of oppressive structures (Specht & Courtney, 1994). Finally, anti-racist scholars pointed to the whiteness of social work knowledge and the erasure of contributions to the field by people of color (Gregory, 2021).

One of the central dilemmas that social work scholars were seeking to address in these debates was reconciling the demand of the neoliberal state for evidence-based practice (EBP) and cost-effective social service solutions to human problems on the one hand, with the value system of the social work profession on the other. While EBP includes a variety of approaches, the main focus of critique was its overreliance on positivist orientations to knowledge to the detriment of other epistemologies (Sayer, 2020). There were three main arguments in support of EBP. First, proponents of EBP argued that their approach was firmly grounded in reason and facts, rather than politicization and conjecture (Gambrell, 2014). Second, scholars pointed out that social work should be rebranded as a science rather than simply a social justice mission (Fong & Soydan, 2012). Finally, some EBP academics dismissed the notion that any group’s voice, regardless of its experience of oppression and silencing, should be “privileged” in a neutral social science epistemology (Caputo, 2017). While EBP emerged with the ethical aim of ensuring that practices were trustworthy and based on the latest scientific knowledge, critics noted that it did not question the epistemological standpoint of the researcher and militated against underrepresented and marginalized voices from entering the realm of knowledge construction (Garrow & Hasenfeld, 2015). Community activists have long been critical of the premise that social work knowledge could be neutral, especially in a profession explicitly based on social justice that is nonetheless often mobilized by the state to enforce policies grounded in racist, sexist, and homophobic frameworks (Smith, 2021). Decolonizing scholars have argued that EBP promotes a colonial discourse by constructing social work professionalism as a civilizing mission using monocultural views of knowledge (Shahjahan, 2011).

The rich discussion surrounding EBP reflects fundamentally distinct approaches to knowing and being in the world. In considering these debates, I suggest that the project of decolonizing social work’s single-origin story is a much larger project than simply adding new voices. Rather, this project must tackle the pervasiveness of colonial assumptions in Western ontologies and how they reproduce the wider structures of oppression by embedding the binary of expert and client at the heart of ways of knowing. Philosopher Kristie Dotson (2015) has argued that the very notion of

epistemology as expert-driven inevitably leads to the “persistent epistemic exclusion that hinders (diverse) contribution(s) to knowledge production” (p. 115), which she terms “epistemic oppression.” Social work emerged as a modern profession imbued with a moral purpose that saw its aim as supporting the liberal values of human rights, beneficence, and self-determination while recognizing the significance of a holistic and relational approach to social justice practice (Clark, 2006). At the same time, according to Dotson (2015), hegemonic expert epistemologies are constructed on the erasure and suppression of diverse kinds of knowledge. The conflicting pressures of developing a distinct expert-based epistemology while working in solidarity with vulnerable populations in spaces often shaped by oppressive intersectional state policies inevitably produces deeply contested views of what constitutes knowledge and ethical practice in advocating for the best interests of the service user.

Patricia Hill Collins pointed out that Black feminist epistemologies are based on the notion that lived experience is a valid basis for knowledge claims and engagement with the community is a valid means of vetting knowledge claims (Hill Collins, 2008). These perspectives on knowledge creation are deeply rooted in relationality and value the multiplicity of local knowledge, which is distinct from highly specialized approaches that create an epistemological terrain such as a taxonomy (Kovach, 2019). Indigenous and Black feminist epistemologies depart from a holistic perspective, lacking the Western hierarchy that prevails in its expert knowledge systems. Many Indigenous languages, for example, lack dualistic constructs meaning that the world is expressed through a relational philosophy (Kovach, 2019, p. 59).

What such approaches remind us of, is how epistemic decolonization requires a fundamental undoing of the legacy of colonialism in ways of seeing the world and understanding knowing. It also involves being able to see oneself and one’s identity and experience as having a value in the process of producing knowledge. Mathebane and Sekudu (2018) discuss how the European–American domination of the discipline of social work has long obscured other heterogeneous ways of knowing and acting, reinforcing colonizing epistemologies. One concrete way of challenging the coloniality of social work epistemic frameworks, I propose, would be to broaden the ancestors and relatives of the field to better understand the indigeneity, local contextuality, and complexity of social work epistemologies. Would recognizing the diversity of ancestors and relatives be a tool for social workers to decolonize the single-story narrative of their profession and perhaps even decolonize themselves from the shackles of neoliberal bureaucracy? Could learning about diverse histories expand social work expertise? Public history projects that bring academics, social work professionals, students, service users, and community members in dialogue, I suggest, can open up the complexity of social work lineages to decolonize epistemologies and practices. With this project in mind, I now apply a decolonial lens to a common social work origin story to illustrate what epistemic decolonization of the profession might look like in practice.

Troubling Notions of the Social Work Curriculum: Decolonizing a Hegemonic Single Story

The curriculum is a set of interwoven written aims, goals, and syllabi that defines the main content of an educational program. In programs that train students for professional degrees, the curriculum is generally very explicit to ensure that all of the necessary skills to practice are taught. The US Council on Social Work Education has clear guidelines in its educational policy and accreditation standards that delineate what graduate social work education must contain. Similarly, the European Union has mechanisms in place to assess the variety of accreditation and licensing procedures in its richly diverse member states that have distinct professional social care education traditions (Lorenz, 2004). There is a South African Council for Social Service Professions that

evaluates training, accreditation, and curriculum; likewise, there is an accreditation system in China where social work has proliferated in recent decades (Law & Gu, 2008).

The curriculum can also be broken down into different elements:

- The declared curriculum (what students are assumed to be learning).
- The taught curriculum (the curriculum that is presented).
- The learned curriculum (what students actually learn) (Ballantyne et al., 2019, p. 285).

Further, the hidden curriculum is a term used to reflect the messages that students receive about the values and culture of the profession through the implicit climate of the teaching institution (Mulder et al., 2019). The curriculum thus contains many dynamic processes that simultaneously occur and may even contradict one another.

The explicit curriculum is written for certain audiences, such as students and accrediting bodies, and reflects the intentions of the authors, not necessarily the diverse realities of the educational experience. Because of the dominance of scholarly literature on social work practice in the English language, European and North American contexts are hegemonic in defining professional concepts and practice (Sakaguchi & Sewpaul, 2011).

Social work education throughout the world has core courses that emphasize the distinct national development of social policies and social service systems. But the emphasis on expert-driven knowledge has often led to the adoption of curricula modeled on Western contexts (Singh & Saumya, 2021). The International Federation of Social Work (IFSW, 2020) developed global standards for social work education which underline the importance of recognizing the diversity of local contexts and indigenous knowledge. However, many scholars have challenged the coloniality of global social work in community engagement (Carranza, 2018), through the tensions of constructing a universal model of social work (Gray & Fook, 2004), and in the need to reclaim Indigenous ways of doing social work (Gray et al., 2016). A study of Lesotho social work education, for example, points out how it replicates Western models. This replication includes Western ideologies that reinforce civilizing missions over local Indigenous histories and practices (Tanga, 2013). Yan and Tsui (2007) discuss the challenges of culturally adapting American social work education content in China: their discussion complicates the use of Jane Addams and Mary Richmond as representative figures defining professional social work. As Ioakimidis and Trimikliniotis (2020, p. 1890) highlight, presenting social work histories that construct professional ancestors as benevolent or technically skilled and enmeshed in political neutrality deprives social work of having a meaningful conversation about the complex contradictions of the emergence of the profession.

The global social work origin story in the curriculum often centers on Anglo-American ancestors of social work to illustrate the development of disciplinary boundaries of the international profession (MacLean & Williams, 2012). The University of Pune in India, for example, identifies Jane Addams, Ida Cannon, Lydia Rappaport, Mary Richmond, Florence Hollis, and H.H. Perlman as its social work casework lineage (University of Pune, 2021). During my own social work studies in Finland, Mary Richmond and Jane Addams were represented as the foremothers of the global profession as was the case when I taught social work at California State University, Fresno. Though Jane Addams and Mary Richmond each have a far more complex story than can be presented within the limits of this article, they are often invoked as archetypes of the fundamental binary between macro and micro practice in social work perhaps due to the proliferation of scholarly literature about them.

The ancestral figure of Jane Addams is presented in social work curricula as representative of social activism and community. Jane Addams (1860–1935) was an American social activist involved in the suffrage and peace movements. She also helped to establish the American Civil Liberties Union and co-founded Chicago's Hull House, a settlement house. The settlement movement emerged from philanthropy and started in the United Kingdom in the later nineteenth century.

It brought rich and poor together in close proximity to foster social connection and empathy (Barbuto, 1999). The settlement movement sought to be closely connected with the local community and flexibly address their specific needs by offering social and legal services. In the United States, settlement houses opened as a wave of immigrants came from Europe at the turn of the century. They offered a variety of activities, such as language teaching, sports, and clubs, and were especially targeted to immigrants (Archer, 2011; Schwartz, 1999; Yan & Sin, 2011). However, there were also critiques of settlement houses for their links to political conservatism and devotion to exclusionary constructions of Americanism (Fisher, 2012). Many settlement houses also followed racial segregation practices and were not open to people of color (Hounmenou, 2012; Lasch-Quinn, 1993).

The other social work ancestor, Mary Richmond (1861–1928), worked with the Baltimore

Charity Organization Society (COS), though she came from a working-class background. The COS had its origins in London and sought to systematically coordinate charities as a kind of umbrella organization. Similar to the settlement movement, the model of COS came to the United States in the late 19th century. The COS focused on using a scientific method to alleviate poverty and inequality through social reform. It developed the method of “friendly visitors,” who were largely white upper-class ladies that came to the homes of poor people to better assess their needs and “uplift” them (Stadum, 1990). Mary Richmond wrote the groundbreaking *Social Diagnosis* (1917), which comprehensively laid out the method of casework, which has been a foundational practice in social work. The ancestral figure of Mary Richmond is invoked in social work curricula to demonstrate the scientific, evidence-based, and clinical roots of social work.

There is a growing decentered movement to recognize other social work ancestors beyond Addams and Richmond. In Europe, Harrikari and Rauhala (2018, p. 81) point to three such ancestors: Eglantyne Jebb (1876–1928), a British advocate for children’s rights and founder of Save the Children; Ilse Arlt (1876–1960) Austrian researcher on social welfare and poverty; and Alice Salomon (1872–1948), renowned social work educator and antifascist activist. The legacy of German Jewish social worker Salomon has been discussed in terms of her personal commitment to social change and her recognition of the positionality of the knower of social work epistemology (Waldijk, 2012). The legacy of Japanese radical social worker, Hiroshi Urabe (1905–2002), who resisted the authoritarianism of the Japanese Empire and continuously showed solidarity for social justice movements, has also been reexamined (Ito, 2017). Hungarian Jewish psychoanalyst Sandor Ferenczi (1873–1933) has been increasingly recognized for his contributions to clinical social work, especially in his development of brief therapy and support for childhood survivors of sexual abuse (Kuchuck, 2017).

American antiracist social work historians and educators point to deep lineages of ancestors such as Birdye Henrietta Haynes (1886–1922), the first African American graduate of the Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy, and head worker at the settlement houses that did serve people of color; as well as Elizabeth Ross Haynes, an African American social welfare reformer, and other community methods of social uplift (Carlton-LaNey, 1994, 1999, 2015).

There still needs to be more research into the social diversity of social work trailblazers (Bent-Goodley, 2006), but this is a field that is increasingly being documented by online archives, such as the National Association of Social Workers Pioneers Biography Index (NASW, 2021); by oral history projects, such as the California Social Welfare Archives (2021); and groups such as the Social Work History Network at King’s College, London, which gives lectures on diverse social work histories (Social Work History Network, 2021). All of these articles, books, and discussions challenge the boundaries of the canon, the hegemony of monolingual English ancestors, and invites “excluded ancestors” (Handler, 2000) into the conversation on social work epistemology. Considering this growing field of research, I now turn to the use of podcasts as an emerging case example of decolonizing social work education in practice.

Beyond the Coloniality of the Social Work Profession: Toward Epistemic Decolonization Through Podcasts as Public Scholarship

One method of decolonizing social work epistemology at the intersection of ancestors and professional lineage could be to look to public history as a pedagogical tool in the curriculum. Public history is an applied approach to understanding the past through collaborating with the public to co-create histories by centering the audience of the community (Dean, 2018). The lines between academic and public history have always been contested, but public history is distinct because it shares authority and democratizes knowledge-building (Cauvin, 2016). However, public history is also often grounded in emotion and social memory which can raise questions about critical interpretation. In this exploration, I argue that a public history of social work ancestors offers an opportunity for universities, social work professionals, service users, and communities to come together to explore memory, professional traditions, and social work history, thereby challenging the hierarchical boundaries between experts and amateurs through creative methods. In the following, I briefly discuss the example of a podcast as a means of decolonizing the lineage of local social work ancestors.

Podcasts are digitized audio programs that are formulated as episodes on a theme or based on a personality talk show format. They have been used in a variety of pedagogical ways including delivering lectures, student experiential learning, practice learning, connecting with community stakeholders, and learning in the community (Ferrer et al., 2020). While interviews are a key qualitative method of social science research, they traditionally involve a researcher having a conversation with a participant, transcribing the discussion, coding it, and then analyzing the meaning of the interview in an academic text (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). There are many ways that power is exercised in interviews from the choice of setting to ways of interacting, which shape how the event is interpreted (Vähäsantanen & Saarinen, 2013). Further, as Iheduru-Anderson et al. (2021) point out, the “real work” is seen as the writing up of the interview rather than the product itself. Podcasts thus have the potential to decolonize the process of collecting, analyzing, and disseminating knowledge challenging the top-down approach to expert-driven epistemologies.

Podcasts as Emerging Archives: The Social Work Routes Podcast—Local Ancestors as Transformative Narratives

Fresno is a culturally diverse city in Central California with some of the highest rates of concentrated poverty in the nation (Fairbanks, 2021). As an area with a high rate of public assistance receipt and a low rate of philanthropy, social work plays a key role in the lives of many people. A native of the city, I taught social work at California State University, Fresno, for 12 years in a social work program that has deep historical roots in the community. In creating the podcast, my goal was to open up the rich local history of social activism by creating an easily accessible archive of stories in a community that has not always documented its own history well. The aim of the podcast thus became to collect narratives of how local people with diverse identities and different generations came into social work or social activism first in Fresno and then further afield.

The format of the podcast is to have an hour-long conversation, which is very lightly edited. It follows three main themes: the personal story of the guest and their pathway into social work or activism, the experiences they have had, and how they see the future. The conversation is deliberately slow to give space to deeply listen to the guest who leads the conversation. The podcast has featured a healing justice advocate, a Chicano social worker, a police violence protestor, a trans activist, and a foster youth program coordinator, among others.

In a recent social work podcast, I interviewed a Fresno community activist named Gloria Hernandez (Hernandez, 2021). Hernandez, who identifies as a Chicana, recently retired after

working for many years as a union organizer, paralegal for a rural social justice agency, mental health advocate, and community advocate against police violence. Growing up as a bilingual farmworker in a rural community, Hernandez described how she developed her leadership skills through community work and learning about relationality in practice. She spoke about always honoring the staff when she went places because labor union leader “Cesar (Chavez) taught us never to keep our heads down.” Hernandez discussed the challenges of going to college having attended poorly performing rural schools. She talked about sharing, learning to survive, saying that “enduring made us strong.” In her narrative, Hernandez outlined how she moved from labor organizer to legal advocate to mental health advocate to the primary organizer of the “stolen lives” campaign against police violence over two decades ago. Her story is one of resilience, tenacity, and a firm focus on social justice despite the many obstacles that resonate locally. She talked about overcoming fear and finding her voice. Hernandez ended by talking about the plaque that her mother, who had limited literacy skills, gave her. Though her mother chose it for the pretty picture, it bore the phrase: “never stop questioning.” Hernandez stated: “I am never going to accept an injustice.”

Learning the story of Gloria Hernandez as a social work ancestor could hold many lessons for local (and even global) students. It provides local evidence of a Chicana woman coming to voice and action in communities that often experienced social work as a colonial force, but found solutions to cope with structural racism, sexism, and classism within and outside of social services systems. She discussed at length the barriers she faced, as well as the ways of knowing that she developed to overcome obstacles. Asked what her advice to social work students would be, Hernandez said: “Open that door and bring people with you. Don’t be a gatekeeper.”

What would social work look like if its widely acknowledged ancestors and relatives included people such as Ida B. Wells, African American educator, journalist, and civil rights leader, or Grace Lee Boggs, Chinese-American social activist and feminist, or Kenyan environmental activist Wangari Maathai, or the multitudes of Indigenous people and their allies that protested at Standing Rock against oil pipelines? Perhaps social work educators must join Saidiya Hartman (2020), who has said: “I work a lot with scraps of the archive. I work a lot with unknown persons, nameless figures, ensembles, collectives, multitudes, the chorus. That’s where my imagination of practice resides. That’s where my heart resides.” What would we lose of our professional expertise if we recognized diverse ancestors as community members to develop broad local archives of activism and change-making? Could we think of the social work profession as embodying a decolonized relational epistemology or a practice of mutual consciousness-raising in solidarity with the community? Could this type of approach be enshrined in an accredited global curriculum?

Decolonizing social work falls firmly in the social work field’s core mission, ethics, and values of advocating for social justice, supporting human relationships, and working to emancipate human beings from oppression. But the decolonizing approach is only beginning to be recognized as central to transforming social work epistemologies, theories, and methodologies (Gray et al., 2016). A decolonizing approach means understanding how Western universities and professions are grounded in the global colonial project where colonial knowledge is “produced, consecrated, institutionalized, and naturalized” (Bhambra et al., 2018, p. 5). A decolonizing approach likewise recognizes that social work has long been experienced by many oppressed peoples as part and parcel of the colonial project of the state (Burnette, 2015). The hierarchical Western colonial epistemic frameworks in social work have often uncritically been transferred to different contexts and have been used to construct diverse populations as in need of management by experts (Gray, 2005). Decolonizing methods place the structures of empire, colonialism, and race as central objects of research while seeking alternative ways of imagining the world (Keet, 2014). In a social work webinar on racism in social work, Dr. Roberta Hunte stated: “They want our bodies but not our epistemologies” (University of Houston, 2021). By this, she referred to the performance of diversity without the genuine relational inclusion of multifarious communities as knowledge keepers and

collaborators. As I have suggested in this exploratory study, centering diverse ancestors of social work has the potential to open up new epistemologies of social work that can transform social work expertise and move our discipline further towards epistemic decolonization and social justice.


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