

Racism still exists in social work today – we need more Black faces in the profession

Australian academic institutions are full of white faces in black spaces today, and social work is no exception



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Social work has a fraught relationship with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Its origins in Australia stem from religious organisations such as the Sisters of Charity which was founded by Mary Aikenhead in Ireland. These charitable sisters were not professionally trained. Instead, they were religious, middle class, white 'do-gooder' women who often swooped in as saviours for the poor.

In Australia, we maintained the dichotomy between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving poor' in social work. Those who 'looked after' their own welfare were considered deserving of charitable assistance. Those who did not, were considered undeserving of any help and turned away by charitable organisations.

Except for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. We didn't ask for help, but we got it anyway.

Our way of living, our cultures and our child rearing practices rendered us 'inferior' to the coloniser. We were the souls who needed saving. The children, innocent and pure, could be moulded. They could have a brighter future. If only they were provided with the 'benefits' of a white upbringing. The white saviour mentality resulted in social workers at the frontline of child removals throughout the Stolen Generations. The Christian missionaries, the social workers – they had 'good intentions' and were acting on 'the standards of the time'.

Or so we're told. This is the fallacy that continues in our stories about social work's history.

The truth is that racism – and the desire for genocide – underpinned the historic child removals by social workers throughout the Stolen Generations. It's an uncomfortable truth, but I'm not pandering to anyone's sensibilities here. Racism still exists in social work today.

Our academic institutions are full of white faces in black spaces today. Social work is no exception. In places where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders should be leading teaching and research agendas, white academics continue to drive, and make, decisions.

Our social work students are not challenged enough to think critically about race and ethnocentrism. If they are taught 'Indigenous content', it's in a meek form. Hard hitting truths are not told.

The solution is not just to open the door and let people in – we still need white people to step aside and make space for Black peoples

The onus to teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and content is often reserved for Indigenous staff. But their intellectual labour mustn't be 'too confronting'. It must stay in the box that suits the stereotypical imagery of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in white imaginations.

Our presence as Indigenous peoples in academia is rendered performative. It's an attempt to fill the diversity quota and show symbolic commitment to Indigenous reconciliation. Social work is not exempt.

But the core values of social work have merit. A commitment to respect and dignity for persons, to social justice, advocacy, self-determination, equity and equality underpin the profession. As a Mineng Noongar woman, these values are what drew me to social work in the first place. The problem is, social work, like many academic disciplines is just too white. Our social workers on the ground who work face to face with people living in adversity are diverse. But this diversity is not reflected in university spaces among those who teach and research in social work.

Now is not the time for the federal education minister, Dan Tehan, to make social work education more expensive. Raising the price of social work degrees will only serve to exclude students with diverse backgrounds and life experiences. It will serve to homogenise those who complete social work education in Australia, pandering to the white middle-upper class elite. It will further reinforce the white, middle-upper class values and belief systems that 'explain' poverty, dictate 'appropriate' parenting practices, and justify punitive state intervention into the lives of marginalised and disenfranchised groups. Raising the price of social work education will also further entrench neo-conservative and neoliberal systems that perpetuate inequality.

Fortunately, social workers are advocating against this by calling on the government to change the funding stream for social work education.

Because for the most part, social workers are open to critical conversations, and we do want to do better. Many acknowledge that institutional racism exists, and many want to eliminate it. Many acknowledge the pervasive whiteness of social work is a problem. And some agree that we need more Black faces in social work in Australia.

However the solution is not just to open the door and let people in, it's also for some to step aside in social work academia. While we've started by opening the door for Indigenous peoples to enter the profession – as students, practitioners and academics – we still need white people to step aside and make space for Black peoples.

Now is the time for critical race conversations in social work. We need to blacken up the profession. Let's start with academia.

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