Racial Equity as a Human Rights Issue: Field Agency Practices and Field Instructors' Knowledge and Attitudes

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Abstract

Racial equity which, at minimum, is defined as the state in which health, social, and economic outcomes are no longer predicted by race has become a critical issue for social workers who work with and advocate for the rights of marginalized communities. Despite its importance, it remains to be seen if field instructors and the agencies they work for understand racial equity as a human rights issue. Through an anonymous survey, we assessed field instructor's racial equity awareness, knowledge, and understanding and examined actions agencies have taken to address and advance racial equity. It was hypothesized that field instructors who view racial equity as a human right would report promoting and advancing these important concepts with their students and organizations. A total of 170 field instructors accessed the survey through an emailed link in this exploratory effort. Descriptive analyses found that field instructors believe that racial equity is a significant human rights issue and that their agency's culture views racial equity as important; however, issues with time, resources, funding, and expertise to promote racial equity initiatives create obstacles to bring about change. The discussion emphasizes the importance of building capacity among field educators to address racial equity through a human rights lens, which is integral to advancing the collective social work goals of social justice and dismantling systemic oppression.

Keywords Racial equity · Field education · Field instructor · Human rights · Social justice

Human Rights, Social Work Practice, and Racial Equity

Racial equity is the state in which health, social, and economic outcomes are no longer predicted by race. Racial equity is aligned with the United Nations' well-established comprehensive approach to human rights for diverse communities. The United Nations has been instrumental in the creation of critical human rights documents including its most important guidepost, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948. While the UDHR addresses non-discrimination broadly, other conventions and principles explicitly address the issue of racial discrimination. For example, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination seeks to “adopt all necessary measures for

speedily eliminating racial discrimination in all its forms and manifestations, and to prevent and combat racist doctrines and practices in order to promote understanding between races and to build an international community free from all forms of racial segregation and racial discrimination” (Office of the High Commissioner, United Nations Human Rights, [n.d.](#)). Additionally, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; and the Convention of the Rights of the Child all call for non-discrimination based on race. Further, the Joint United Nations Statement on Ending Discrimination in Health Care Settings addresses the issues of racial discrimination and its impact on health. These United Nations' orientations to human rights are aligned with the social work profession's values of social justice and dignity and worth of a person.

Engaging social workers to include racial equity and human rights practice requires a common language to effectively integrate the concepts into social work field placements (Reichert 2011; Reisch 2002). The definition of racial equity is often misunderstood, but the agency Forward Through Ferguson developed a conceptualization that we have adopted: “A state in which a person's life outcomes cannot

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be predicted by race. When our regional systems (education, housing, healthcare, jobs, transportation, and more) work well for all people so that disparities are closed and all residents, regardless of their race and zip code, have justice and the opportunity to thrive” (Forward Through Ferguson 2018, n.d.). This conceptualization aligns with broader definitions that indicate racial equity is racial justice and should “... address root causes of inequities, not just their manifestation. This includes elimination of policies, practices, attitudes and cultural messages that reinforce differential outcomes by race or fail to eliminate them” (Center for Assessment and Policy Development 2019). Given the recent attention to the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and racial injustice, racial equity is an important concept that centers human rights through its examinations of disparate outcomes on communities of color. Racial equity moves beyond the individual level and encourages a deeper understanding of how to dismantle mutually reinforced systems, institutions, practices, and policies that perpetuate oppression, discrimination, and racism.

The United Nations Charter, the 1948 UDHR, provides a definition of universal human rights: “Rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status. Human rights include the right to life and liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of opinion and expression, the right to work and education, and many more. Everyone is entitled to these rights, without discrimination.” Although the Charter was not ratified by the USA, this definition provides a critical guide and framework for those engaged in human rights work, including social workers, to address issues of racial equity and social justice.

The Council on Social Work Education’s 2015 EPAS expanded the human rights competencies which challenge students in the field to “advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice” (CSWE 2015), specifically to “... understand that every person regardless of position in society has fundamental human rights such as freedom, safety, privacy, an adequate standard of living, health care, and education.” Social workers and students applying these concepts in their field placements should be able to articulate and describe how they are promoting racial equity and social justice into practice. However, when there is no consensus on definition, social workers often encounter confusion and significant challenges in demonstrating competence in these areas. Providing a common language is a fundamental first step to building a shared capacity among field instructors and students to integrate these concepts into field education. Once established, we can explore ways to synthesize complex social justice issues and implement and disseminate best practices.

Regardless of culture, human rights are often defined through the lens of equality and universal approaches to addressing basic needs. Racial equity is often defined as the state where outcomes are no longer predicted by race. The

integration of these concepts offers a unique opportunity to reframe and analyze social problems such as police brutality and health disparities. For example, using a human rights lens for police brutality may be helpful for communicating a deeply humanistic narrative of connection and safety with an emphasis of protection from violence. An additional strategy may be to help others understand the significance of how the dynamics of oppression impact us all. This strategy has been observed when recent examinations of COVID-19 mortality rates revealed racial inequities which have led to a broader conversation of structural and institutional racist practices that exacerbate health disparities in the USA.

Social Work Response

Racial discrimination greatly impacts the access to and availability of quality resources in health, education, and social services. Despite these challenges, social workers continually advocate for and promote the health and well-being of their clients experiencing the burden of these inequities. The social work profession is well positioned to advance human rights, racial equity, and social justice through teaching, research, and practice. Field education is the signature pedagogy of social work education and socializes students to professional knowledge, skills, and values (Miller 2013). Social justice and human rights are a central tenet of the social work profession. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) both emphasize a commitment to social justice, diversity, and human rights. Although there is alignment with our professional values and ethical codes, there are varied definitions and applications of social justice concepts such as human rights, social justice, and racial equity. In addition, there are very few programs that explicitly infuse these concepts throughout the social work curriculum. To this end, many social work programs provide only one social justice/diversity course in their entire curriculum. This presents a challenge in field placements where students are attempting to apply human rights and racial equity concepts to a variety of social work practice contexts.

Field education is vital to the professional development of social work students. However, there is limited empirical evidence that integrates social justice pedagogical approaches to human rights and racial equity across both social work curriculum and within field placements. Research has emphasized that field instructors are integral to helping students understand social and economic justice as a human right while navigating the dynamics of privilege and oppression (Havig 2013). Despite recognition of racial equity as a human right, social work educators (in both the classroom and field practicum sites) are often challenged with integrating these concepts into tangible student learning activities. A recent project

provided strategies to integrate racial equity practice into field education including patience, willingness to remain engaged during moments of discomfort, and tailored activities to promote collaboration with diverse stakeholders (McDermott et al. 2018). The effectiveness of such efforts remains unknown.

Social work agencies interested in implementing a racial equity lens with human rights principles can engage students in a unique learning opportunity especially in the areas of organizational and policy practice. It can also help both students and field educators gain awareness and deeper understanding of the inextricable link between social justice, human rights, and racial equity. Finally, students can apply the NASW *Code of Ethics* to field practice learning activities, specifically social justice (NASW 2017, ethical principle 2). Applying a human rights approach to racial equity not only aligns with this NASW principle but also connects evidence-based practices and practice-informed research frameworks with micro-, mezzo-, and macro-level field placements.

Contributions of this Study

These social issues are a call to action for social work practitioners and field educators to promote social justice and integrate human rights principles through a racial equity lens to prepare social workers to meet the needs of our most vulnerable populations. Building the next generation of social work leaders with the capacity to address complex challenges through a multifaceted approach is critical to ensuring anti-oppressive systems with a human rights emphasis. Efforts have been developed to facilitate the advancement of racial equity through training and educational opportunities for field instructors (McDermott et al. 2018). Despite such efforts, there are still gaps in knowledge regarding social workers' views of racial equity and its relation to human rights. This exploratory effort has two primary focus areas. First, we sought to examine field instructor's views of the importance of racial equity, whether they consider racial equity a human rights issue, and how they rank racial equity in comparison to other human rights issues. Second, we sought to understand agency culture regarding discussions of racial equity and determine what efforts are in place within agencies to advance racial equity and potential obstacles for promoting racial equity. It was hypothesized that field instructors who view human rights as a serious issue would report more knowledge of racial equity and view this equity as a human rights issue. It was also hypothesized that field instructors serving in agencies that view racial equity as a human right would report more agency practices to advance racial equity. Social workers who practice across a variety of disciplines and systems are uniquely positioned to bring about organizational and systemic changes utilizing a racial equity lens, given our

commitment to social and racial justice as captured in our *Code of Ethics*.

Method

Design

Data for these analyses were collected via an online survey seeking the perceptions of individuals who serve as field instructors to social work students within the St. Louis Region. Field education instructors were asked to complete an online survey that assessed their views of racial equity as it relates to human rights. The project was qualified for exemption by a university institutional review board. Other than agency affiliation (which was optional), no additional identifying information was collected from the participants. To protect their confidentiality, participants were informed that no identifying information would be collected, they could answer only those questions they felt comfortable completing, and all data would only be shared in the aggregate. Targeted respondents were sent an email which included a link to the anonymous Qualtrics online survey. Email addresses of field instructors who were registered with the St. Louis Field Collaborative were utilized to recruit participants to the study. The Collaborative shares a database of approved and qualified practicum agencies and field instructors. To be a qualified field instructor, individuals must have (1) a BSW with at least 3 years of practice to supervise BSW students, (2) an MSW with at least 2 years of practice to supervise a BSW or MSW student, (3) employed at their current agency for at least 1 year, and (4) a willingness to provide supervision to a practicum student. An initial email was sent to approximately 1100 viable email addresses in the database. A follow-up reminder email was sent 1 week later. We limited survey access to one completion per email address. A total of 170 unique individuals (emails) accessed and provided data for the study.

Measures

Professional Demographics One item was used to assess and confirm the professional characteristics of respondents. The item asked their affiliation with the organization, and options included administration, management, field instructor, task supervisor, and other. Respondents could select more than one affiliation.

Personal Perspectives To assess each respondent's perspectives on racial equity and human rights, several items were developed. The seriousness of human rights was assessed with the following item: (1) From your point of view, how serious is the overall human rights situation in the United States? Responses ranged from not a problem to a very serious

problem. Personal knowledge and investment in racial equity work were assessed with four items that utilized a strongly disagree to strongly agree rating scale (1–5). The items were as follows: (1) I understand how to assess racial equity in my organization, (2) I have a great deal of knowledge about racial equity initiatives in the St. Louis Region, (3) I have a great deal of knowledge about racial equity, and (4) I believe race equity to be a human rights issue.

To determine how each respondent viewed racial equity when compared to other human rights issues, respondents were asked: From your perspective, rank the following 10 issues based on their importance as a human rights issue in the United States. The issues were listed in alphabetical order and included climate change, disability rights, gender equity, healthcare, homelessness, human trafficking, LGBT rights, poverty, racial equity, and racism.

Organizational Demographics One item solicited the primary field of service the agency engages in, and options included direct practice, clinical, non-profit management, community capacity building, health, and other. Again, more than one response was allowed.

Organizational Climate To assess organizational climate around racial equity and human rights, respondents were asked to provide their agreement (strongly disagree to strongly agree) with the following statements: (1) My agency uses a racial equity lens in our work, (2) My agency has the time and resources to implement a racial equity lens to our work, (3) Racial equity is an important part of the work of my agency, (4) My organization has proposed strategies or policies aimed at addressing racial equity as a human rights issue, (5) My organization's collected race/ethnicity program data is disaggregated for distribution, (6) My organization values diversity by inquiring about the cultural competence of staff to work with diverse groups, and (7) My organization has awareness on racial equity issues but is unclear about next steps.

Additionally, respondents were asked to report how often (1 = not at all to 4 = very often) the following occurred within the agency: (1) Racial equity is discussed as a human rights issue, and (2) In the past 30 days, racial equity was mentioned or discussed. Utilizing the same scale, we also assessed the availability of agency support for staff training with 2 questions: (1) Staff at my organization have attended training on cultural competence, cultural humility, diversity, and/or racial equity *outside* my organization, and (2) Staff at my organization are provided trainings on cultural competence, cultural humility, diversity, and/or racial equity *within* my organization. Respondents were also asked what barriers to being engaged in racial equity work they would identify. Options included agency bureaucracy, lack of expertise, lack of resources, not an agency priority, not enough time, and other.

Analysis

Data were exported from Qualtrics into SPSS and analyzed using descriptive statistics to report on demographic data. Bivariate analyses using *t* tests compared means of variables assessing the importance of racial equity and human rights and reports of their organizational climate related to racial equity as human rights.

Results

For organization affiliation, a majority of the respondents reported their status as field instructor ($n = 140$) or task supervisor ($n = 25$) with overlapping roles of management ($n = 43$) or administration ($n = 23$). A few respondents ($n = 10$) reported additional roles such as social worker, counselor, or therapist. The agencies' primary field of service included direct practice ($n = 108$), clinical ($n = 82$), non-profit management ($n = 24$), community capacity building ($n = 25$), health ($n = 39$), and other ($n = 48$) which is inclusive of education, criminal justice, housing, and advocacy.

The majority of the respondents indicated human rights as a very serious problem (61.3%) or a fairly serious problem (38.1%). There was overwhelming (95.4%) agreement that racial equity is a human rights issue. In addition, the following order was given as a collective ranking of human rights issues by importance: (1) poverty, (2) healthcare, (3) racism, (4) racial equity, (5) homelessness, (6) climate change, (7) gender equity, (8) human trafficking, (9) LGBT rights, and (10) disability rights. Specifically, more than half of the respondents (52%) ranked racial equity in their top 3 in terms of importance as a human rights issue.

Though the importance of racial equity was indicated, less than half of the respondents (45.8%) agreed with knowing how to assess racial equity within their organization. A similar percentage (46.4%) agreed that they had a great deal of knowledge about racial equity, and fewer (26.3%) agreed that they had a great deal of knowledge about racial equity initiatives in their region.

Table 1 provides a comparison of personal perspectives on racial equity among those who believe human rights is a very serious issue compared to those who do not think it is a very serious problem. Respondents who believe human rights is a very serious human rights issue reported more agreement with having knowledge about racial equity and more agreement that racial equity is a human rights issue.

An assessment of organizational culture revealed that 64.9% of respondents report often discussing racial equity as a human rights issue in their organization and 57.1% indicated that racial equity was mentioned or discussed often in the past 30 days. About half (50.7%) agreed that their agency uses a racial equity lens for their work, and slightly more (59.2%)

Table 1 Means, standard deviations, and *t* tests comparing knowledge and attitudes

	Human rights is a very serious issue				<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
	Yes		No			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Understand how to assess racial equity in my organization	3.37	.92	3.14	.88	− 1.53	150 ^{ns}
Great deal of knowledge about regional racial equity initiatives	2.89	.91	2.75	.94	− .95	149 ^{ns}
Great deal of knowledge about racial equity	3.54	.88	3.08	.86	− 3.125	150 ^{**}
Race equity is a human rights issue	4.60	.82	4.36	.52	− 1.987	149 [*]

ns not significant^{*}*p* < .05; ^{**}*p* < .01

agreed that racial equity is an important part of the agency's work. Less than half (45%) agreed that the organization has awareness on racial equity issues but is unclear about next steps.

The commitment to staff training in areas of cultural competence was good. Over half (59.7%) reported that their agency's staff had often attended training on cultural competence and racial equity outside of the organization, and similar percentages reported staff were provided trainings on cultural competence, cultural humility, diversity, and/or racial equity within the organization (57.5%). More (63.4%) agreed that their organization values diversity by inquiring about the cultural competence of staff to work with diverse groups.

Efforts by the organization to implement initiatives were less frequently reported. When asked if the organization had proposed strategies or policies aimed at addressing racial equity as a human rights issue, only 38.6% agreed. Only 42.1% agreed that the agency had the time or resources to implement a racial equity lens to their work. And even fewer (26.5%) agreed that the organization's collected data is disaggregated for distribution.

Organizational efforts to address regional racial equity included sponsoring staff to attend a racial equity training (*n* = 75), conducting a racial equity audit (*n* = 25), and implementing the 10 Step Path towards Racial Equity (*n* = 1). Other efforts included required training for staff (*n* = 6) and internal capacity building such as the formation of committees to examine the issue (*n* = 12). A significant number of the respondents (*n* = 64) indicated their organization has *not* had the opportunity to participate in any of the activities taking place in the region. When asked about barriers to engaging in racial equity work, the most prevalent response was not enough time (*n* = 81), lack of resources (*n* = 73), lack of expertise (*n* = 68), not being an agency priority (*n* = 51), and agency bureaucracy (*n* = 37).

Further assessment of organizational culture revealed agencies that discussed racial equity as a human rights issue varied from other agencies in their efforts to address racial equity (see Table 2). Specifically, these agencies (1) proposed strategies or policies aimed at addressing racial equity as a human rights issue (*t* = – 3.24; *df* = 150; *p* = .001); (2) collected program data that was disaggregated for distribution (*t* = – 3.46; *df* = 148; *p* = .001); (3) had more recently (in the past 30 days)

Table 2 Means, standard deviations, and *t* tests comparing agency practices

	Agency discuss racial equity as a human right				<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
	Yes		No			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Proposed strategies or policies addressing racial equity as a human rights issue	3.25	1.02	2.69	.98	− 3.24	150*
Collected program data disaggregated for distribution	3.15	1.03	2.58	.85	− 3.46	148*
Recent discussions about racial equity	3.15	.69	1.69	.60	− 13.62	166**
Staff attended relevant trainings outside the organization	2.84	.78	2.34	.84	− 3.83	163**
Utilization of racial equity lens in agency’s work	3.55	.84	2.73	1.02	− 5.33	147**

^{*}*p* < .01; ^{**}*p* < .001

discussed racial equity ($t = -13.62$; $df = 166$; $p = .000$); (4) had staff who more often attended trainings on cultural competence, cultural humility, diversity, and/or racial equity outside the organization ($t = -3.83$; $df = 163$; $p = .000$); and (5) used a racial equity lens in their work ($t = -5.33$; $df = 147$; $p = .000$).

Discussion

Nearly all the field instructors surveyed identified racial equity as a human rights issue. Additionally, racial equity was ranked in the top four human rights issues among all respondents. The other three top-ranked human rights issues (poverty, healthcare, and racism) are often identified as arising from a system that is racially inequitable. Given that social workers are engaged with the most vulnerable populations and are trained at all levels of practice, we are uniquely positioned to utilize a racial equity lens to bring about systemic change. We found support for our hypothesis. Many respondents reported working for agencies that talk about racial equity as a human rights issue, feel that racial equity is an important part of their agency's work, and are offered racial equity training. However, obstacles to bringing about change continue to be a challenge. Respondents indicated most agencies have not had opportunities to participate in racial equity initiatives—citing lack of time, resources, funding, and expertise. This is an opportunity to plug students into systems change work in the agency which they are completing practica hours. Educational learning agreements allow students and agencies to develop a plan that benefits both student learning and agency desire to be more involved in such work.

Building capacity among field educators to address racial equity through a human rights lens is integral to advancing our collective goals of social justice and dismantling systemic oppression. Field instructors are pivotal in helping and preparing students to understand how to address social work competencies and social justice concepts in field practicum experiences. Although field instructors are discussing racial equity as a human right, additional support may be needed to guide and inform integration of these concepts into their social work activities. Previous studies have cited additional education and training as tools to address the gap between theory and practical application. However, integrating racial equity as a human right in social work agencies requires an incremental approach with significant time commitment and accountability measures to ensure outcomes are being met. McPherson and Libal (2019) found that support from field educators on human rights issues led to greater integration of these concepts in field education. To this end, field instructors can use the educational learning agreement, supervision time, and designated projects as learning tools for students to address racial equity in social work practice. Additional research

on how social work educators, including field instructors, can best infuse racial equity through curriculum and practicum is needed. These studies can prove beneficial to developing tools, measures, and educational learning agreements that will evaluate the effectiveness of human rights practices and racial equity approaches.

Conclusion

Engaging field instructors in a transformative learning process that shifts the conversation from cultural competency and diversity to racial equity is essential. Although most field instructors have identified racial equity as an important human rights issue, integrating those concepts explicitly into their social work teaching and practices is often challenging. Social workers have been at the forefront of addressing social injustices in diverse communities. The National Association of Social Workers' *Code of Ethics* states "social workers' social change efforts should be focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination and other forms of social injustice. These activities seek to promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity" (NASW 2017, ethical principle 2). Recognizing and addressing structural racism within institutions designed to serve diverse communities is the catalyst to social change. The Grand Challenges for Social Work has recently identified the elimination of racism as one of their grand challenges (Grand Challenges for Social Work 2020). To this end, it is imperative that social workers examine and identify approaches to redress the deleterious effects of racism on diverse communities while educating and building the capacity of emerging professionals to commit to social work practice with an emphasis on racial equity.

Authors' Contributions Not applicable

Data Availability Available if published.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declare they have no conflicts of interest.

Code Availability Available if published.

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