
Still Forcing Back the Color Line: Implications for Social Work Research and Practice

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Introduction

In 1903, William Edward Burghardt DuBois reported that the problem of the 20th century was the problem of the color line. The color line symbolized relations between the darker and lighter races throughout Asia, Africa, America and the islands (DuBois, 1903). Shortly after Emancipation, the color line facilitated the disenfranchisement of freed Blacks in the United States (U.S.). Slavery had been abolished but the color line continued to hold back justice for freed Blacks newly cast as wards of the state, requiring financial and social governance and protection. DuBois (1903) indicated that “despite compromise, war, and struggle, the Negro [was] not free” (p. 28). Instead, the social, economic, and political existence of freed black men was volleyed between the political positions of the divided North and South. Three years later, DuBois (1906) reported that Blacks had begun to force back the color line. A small number of Blacks formed independent groups, became land owners, and participated in unions. Numerous Blacks sacrificed immediate gratification and often risked their lives for social, economic, and political rights. However, these achievements and sacrifices were associated with negative social and economic costs. Aware of this quandary, DuBois (1906) stated “Negroes have forced back the color line, but undoubtedly increased the color-prejudice of workingmen by so doing” (p. 239).

More than a century later, it appears that the color line and the quandary remain. There are indeed implications for 21st century social work research and practice, but the problem of the color line is scarcely tended to in recent social work literature. Thus, the problem of the color line, the forcing back of the color line, and 21st century relevance are discussed in the following sections. Based on DuBois’ writings, the first section provides a historical overview of how Blacks struggled to force back the color line in the 20th century. The second section extends the color line discussion to the 21st century. It provides a critical review of a 2007 national conference on race and its salience for current social and economic issues. The final section discusses implications for social work research and practice.

Forcing Back the Color Line

DuBois (1906) projected that the economic future of Blacks hinged on the unhindered uplift of the independent group, comprised of educated and talented Black professionals. These Black professionals were former house servants who had become teachers, barbers, physicians and businessmen and whose clientele had been built from within the Black community (DuBois, 1906). DuBois proudly implicated the independent group as being equivalent to middle class White Americans. The independent group networked and established various self-help organizations with the expressed aim of building economic capacity within Black communities. Unfortunately, only having Black clientele limited the professional development and economic growth of the independent group (DuBois, 1906).

Unionizing was a very important impetus for economic betterment among working class Blacks. Black worker demands for higher, more equitable wages were met following protests

and strikes. However, economic battles were often won at the expense of social benefit, such that child labor and length of workday increased. This became a negative consequence for both Black and White workers. The Southern Black farmer was perceived to be well off because of his White and Black clientele and his status as a share cropper or land owner. DuBois (1906), however, revealed that if black farmers appeared to make too much money, White clientele took their business elsewhere. With regard to land ownership, the land was worth so little that from an economic standpoint, the farmers were still quite poor. Given these challenges, DuBois reported that racial uplift and union battles were not enough. Despite obvious advancement and hope, the negatives would soon outweigh the positives. It would seem that collaboration across difference, instead of independence was paramount to building the economic capacity of Blacks. In fact, DuBois (1906) asked:

How long will it be before the White working men discover that the interests that bind him to his black brother...are greater than those that artificially separate them? ...[T]hat discovery will not be made until the present wave of extraordinary prosperity and exploitation pass and the ordinary every day level of economic struggle begins. (pp. 239-240)

Forcing Back the Color Line in the 21st Century

Over 100 years later, scholars report that the problem of the color line persists. Squires and Kubrin (2007) report that urban metropolitan areas are characterized by sprawl, concentrated poverty, and segregation by race. These conditions are compounded over time and result in perpetual social and economic isolation. As a racial group, Blacks (12.6%) had the highest percentage of individuals below 50 percent of their 2004 poverty levels. According to Fronczek (2005), “[f]or those below 50 percent of their poverty level, being in poverty may be a chronic situation and they may have the hardest time moving out of poverty” (p. 18). How can social work researchers and practitioners help address this problem without fueling race prejudice?

In March 2007, the Applied Research Center (ARC) sponsored *Facing Race*, a national conference on racial justice held in New York, which began on Thursday, March 22, 2007 and ended on Saturday, March 24, 2007. The purpose of this conference was to go beyond pondering the concept of racial justice by facilitating strategy and successful model dissemination. ARC, which is headquartered in Oakland, California, is a public policy institute that focuses on racial justice research, advocacy, and journalism. Angela Glover Blackwell (PolicyLink Founder and Executive Director), Winona LaDuke (White Earth Reservation, 1996/ 2000 Vice Presidential candidate), and Juan Gonzales (co-host of *Democracy Now*) were notable panelists at the conference. Each panelist fielded impromptu questions from the audience instead of reading prepared speeches. To start, plenary panelists answered tough questions about race and in particular, if the problem of the “color line” persists in the 21st century. In addition, the audience asked panelists which issues “defined” racial justice, how to approach White House transition, and strategies for bringing structural racism into the policy arena.

Redefining the Color Line

Each of the panelists indicated that the color line is still the problem of the 21st century, but that the U.S. color line issue has been globalized and “digested”. Today, natural disaster relief, immigrant rights, criminal justice, community planning, child welfare, education, and healthcare inequities appear to be facilitated by a multi-dimensional color line. It’s no longer just about relations between Asia, Africa, America and the islands. The new color line represents

relations within and between the darker races as well between the lighter and darker races throughout the world and America. LaDuke (personal communication, March 23, 2007) commented that people of color have digested the dominant culture's Eurocentric worldview and are now "facing [the] need for decolonization". This point tied well with Blackwell's (personal communication, March 23, 2007) point that structural racism is "baked-in" to zoning, housing, transportation, healthcare, and policing strategies and related institutions. Gonzales (personal communication, March 23, 2007) indicated that each new generation of immigrants buys into unjust oppression toward other minorities.

Strategies for Racial Justice

Blackwell (personal communication, March 23, 2007) argued that it is extremely problematic that "where you live is a proxy for opportunity" and that the way citizens think of government needs to change. She posited that the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) be disposed of altogether. Although a bit idealistic considering the current bipartisan "affinity" to HUD, this comment was intriguing. Blackwell's position is very similar to the civic outrage that prompted civil rights amendments to the housing and community development block grant program during the 1970s. While these amendments codified civic participation, bureaucrats refused to put enforceable language in the law and certainly not in the regulations. Over 30 years later, not surprisingly, the every day citizen still has little voice. Gonzales (personal communication, March 23, 2007) displayed maps that showed how urban areas are being "re-designed" and then stated that it is time to "take back the cities for those who live in them". LaDuke summed up the discussion with her position on sustainability, "The U.S. Government is about conquest...we encourage refugees...a house based on conquest is not sustainable" (personal communication, March 23, 2007).

Fortunately, at least one strategy for forcing back the color line while building sustainability has proven itself to be fairly successful in both the 20th and 21st centuries. That strategy is indigenous participation and leadership. Efforts to force back the color line during the 20th century might have been impossible without indigenous participation, organization, and leadership. Current social work literature shows that indigenous engagement and leadership development is essential for sustainability. Facing Race provided two workshops on community organizing, which were facilitated by The Center for Third World Organizing (CTWO), based in Oakland, CA. These invaluable workshops fused 21st century self-help strategies with the political strategies used to resolve 20th century union conflicts. The first was entitled *Stirring the Pot: Introduction to Community Organizing* and the second was *How to Win: Developing Great Campaign Strategies*. These comprehensive "mini" trainings included a clear understanding of the distinct roles and limitations of service providers, how to mobilize existing and external human, financial and political resources, and finally, how to develop issue campaigns. Neither workshop romanticized the conditions of those with limited power. Instead, both helped workshop participants tease out variables critical to empowerment and consciousness-raising organizing tactics.

Implications for Social Work Research and Practice

The strategies presented in this paper are not only consistent with social work's history, but are in keeping with the National Association of Social Worker's (NASW) mission to enhance the well-being of people, while helping vulnerable populations become empowered to meet their basic human needs (NASW, nd). Today, unlike any other time in history, this mission is a

framework for social work research and practice worldwide. Nonetheless, it is likely that other worldviews may help inform Western world research and practice. Gonzales recommends that we look to other countries for models of social change, since of late; the U.S. has not been the leader. For instance, a little more than 2 years after the 2004 Asian Tsunami, an NPR (2006) reported that a resident said, "I arrived two days after the tsunami...I'm constantly amazed to see the extent to which reconstruction occurred". Although reconstruction in Indonesia is moving much slower than projected, initial relief efforts were reportedly "extraordinary". There is evidence that a considerable amount of progress was related to the grassroots and collaborative spirit of the relief effort. Thus, a rigorous evaluation of Indonesian relief and rebuilding programming following the Tsunami may yield helpful social work strategies, particularly for rebuilding post Hurricane Katrina.

Conclusion

Despite social and economic growth among people of color, there is considerable evidence that the problem of the color line persists in the 21st century. Because this problem does appear to be "baked-in" into the systems that govern daily life, racial prejudice is less obvious. However, statistics show that the effects are too profound to ignore. Forcing back the color line is certainly about social work leading the way in addressing broader socioeconomic inequities head on. It is about social workers being uninhibited in addressing root causes. Finally, social workers can help give meaning to the overused term "empowerment". This means going beyond facilitation and forging solidarity with people of color toward social, economic and racial justice. Without radical attention here, the forcing back of the color line will continue to be slow, resulting in greater harm than good for everyone.

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