

# Disrupting Whiteness in Social Work

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## **Why do I like this book?**

What I like about this book is that it is a call to action to confront the whiteness of our social work profession and to root out colonisation and racism or, more specifically, white colonialism. In social work, we are more likely to speak about colonisation and racism in a broader societal sense, if we talk in this space at all, but much less about whiteness and the problem of how it has largely taken over our profession. Thus, we have the goal summed up in this book's title—*Disrupting Whiteness in Social Work*.

The authors in this book affirm the voices of black, Indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC) and the vital role they have in leading the disruption of whiteness toward the transformation of social work. BIPOC readers are likely to see themselves well reflected in this text. The message to white readers is to confront our white privilege, and join with BIPOC colleagues in decolonising social work.

## **BIPOC and white social work authors**

Most authors represent indigenous voices from Australia, Oceania, Chile, Kenya, Uganda, and Brazil, bringing BIPOC voices to this text. However, a single white author also speaks to white engagement with decolonisation. The book is co-edited by Sonia M. Tascón, a descendant of the Chilean Indigenous Mapuche Nation, and Jim Ife, a white Australian well known to many social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand. Having outsider and insider relationships to whiteness illustrates the critical tension between these identities but also speaks to the collaboration across this divide

by insiders and outsiders. It offers the possibility of joint work toward the task of decolonisation and fighting racism.

The book follows a structure where a range of authors write different chapters, and one or two other authors respond to the chapter's author. BIPOC authors reflect on what others have written and note similarities and differences in their stories. It also presents an interesting situation where a single white author has Indigenous authors offering a response to their chapter and where the white author also gets to respond to some BIPOC authors.

## **What is whiteness?**

*Whiteness* is rooted in Western culture and its growing global dominance since the 18th century with the privileging of white people and, thereby, the oppression of people of colour, including Indigenous peoples. Whiteness highlights the way colour has become racialised through the process of Western colonisation. A vital feature of the book is a focus on knowledge as a core component of culture and a core of social work where "the whiteness of social work is a consequence of the whiteness of its knowledge" (p. 2). White knowledge arose from the development of modernity in Western culture and the notion of dualism made famous by Descartes with the conceptual splitting of the human mind and body as a binary approach to viewing knowledge. Modernity was grounded in empiricism, prioritising Western scientific knowledge over other knowledges and ways of knowing. Also associated with white knowledge is individualism with the separating of people from their context; the

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focus on the use of the English language to the marginalising of non-Western languages; neglecting the use of metaphor, story and history in constructing knowledge; side-lining art, music and dance within knowledge; and anthropocentrism with the degradation of the non-human world.

### ***White is right and West is best***

This book tackles colonisation and racism by prioritising the voices of BIPOC and focusing on the dominance of white culture, and the benefits white people get from the global power of white culture. The harmful aspects of white culture include the notion of white supremacy, which puts white culture at the top of the hierarchy with coloured, black and Indigenous cultures in descending order of merit. White supremacy fuelled the colonists who spread out from the West in recent centuries to conquer countries across the globe. We know the contemporary challenge of the white supremacy movement in the West and within Aotearoa.

Privileging white knowledge denigrates other cultural knowledge. By side-lining non-white knowledge, BIPOC communities are also side-lined and become forced to assimilate into the dominant white knowledge system. The oppression of BIPOC peoples and their specific knowledges forces them to assimilate into white culture with the consequent repression of identity. It leads to *epistemicide* with an attack on non-white knowledge.

### ***How white is social work?***

The focus is not just on whiteness but on its influence within the social work profession. The history of social work in the UK and the USA ensured it has strong white roots that have continued to the present. Confronting white colonialism also means addressing the social work professional identity and the infrastructure it stands on.

The foundation of any profession is knowledge, and the privileging of white

knowledge in social work has created its trajectory. Non-white knowledge has to fight against the dominance of the West. BIPOC social workers must fight to hold their knowledge or assimilate into white social work knowledge. In this way, white social work is guilty of epistemicide, marginalising and extinguishing BIPOC knowledge.

### ***Pasifika social work***

Pasifika authors include Tracie Mafile’o from Aotearoa New Zealand, who identifies as Tongan and white and also highlights the intersection of Indigenous and white heritage with the unique context it creates. Mafile’o has a delightful and quite different chapter to others: “Cake art as social work – creative, sensory and relational knowing”. Cake art is a highly creative practice that some of us would not immediately connect to social work, which only highlights the dominance of more traditional notions of social work practice. Mafile’o bases her practice on a Tongan *tā-vā* epistemology where symmetrical relationships are privileged with the goal of harmonious relations linked with the sensuality and beauty of artistic food. This practice contrasts with the Western notion of rational and technical knowledge.

“Cakes with love – sweet art with heart” is a further framing of her practice that centres love and focuses on relational knowledge, challenging the strict Western personal–professional binary where a *self-compartmentalisation* can undermine a strong relationality. This practice echoes the *tikanga pou* at the heart of our recently revised code of ethics (ANZASW, 2019), where *Aroha* (love, compassion) is a central feature of social work practice—highlighting an ethical quality that aligns more strongly with Indigenous knowledge.

The other chapter by a Pacific author is written by Jioji Ravulo, titled “Supporting the development of Pacific social work across Oceania – critical reflections and lessons

learnt towards disrupting whiteness in the region". Ravulo is a social work academic living in Australia who brings an Indigenous Fijian perspective to his work. He notes the enormous chasm between traditional Pacific cultures and the Western context that dominates social work. Along with other authors in this text, he not only works to decolonise social work but to Indigenise social work with Pacific epistemologies and ontologies. Ravulo uses the concept of *solesolevaki*, a traditional Fijian perspective that speaks to reciprocal well-being, emphasising collective responsibility central to their Indigenous world. This approach counters Western and white views that highlight an individual focus and a linear and less holistic approach.

Ravulo proposes an inclusive approach where Pacific ways of knowing and doing are centred on social work research and practice to serve Pacific people more effectively. He acknowledges the dominance of a Western context and opens the door for non-Pacific people to be part of this decolonising work. It is another application of *solesolevaki* where a shared approach allows for both Pacific and Western contributions toward more just societies.

### **White social work insiders**

What is the message for white social workers? Many social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand will be familiar with Jim Ife, a prolific Australian social work author. In his chapter, Jim Ife positions himself as a white, middle-aged male (just like myself), who has come to acknowledge his complicity with white culture and the predominant whiteness of social work.

Many of us white social workers will have been brought up and trained into thinking that we are friendly people who avoid the worst excesses of racism and are in a position to do good and work for change. We have struggled with the reality of white culture and its insidious power worldwide and within our lives.

This book, and Jim Ife's chapter, mainly speak to the white experience and the link to white social work. Given white social workers' enmeshment within the dominant discourse, highlighting this is a necessary action.

Jim Ife encourages white social workers to be active in decolonisation work. Still, this first requires us to confront privilege and the unearned benefits of being white in a white-dominant world and profession. Climate justice and survival are other reasons Ife gives for decentring Western knowledge.

### **White social worker action**

Ife proposes the following actions for white social workers: 1. Step aside—so BIPOC knowledge can take centre stage. 2. Fall in behind—so BIPOC social workers can become the leaders in reformulating social work knowledge. 3. Walk alongside—be in solidarity with BIPOC social workers, to be part of the review of white social work knowledge and what parts of it should be saved for decolonised social work.

Further advice is offered to white social workers by an Indigenous colleague about entering an Indigenous space and engaging in decolonisation: am I wanted? Am I needed? Am I doing this for me or authentic reasons? Can my ego handle it? Also, that cultural responsiveness for white social workers involves: self-awareness, an understanding of privilege, learning about Indigenous peoples' past and their lived experiences, needing to seek guidance, developing cultural awareness and communication skills, a commitment to advocacy, maintaining accountability, and relational reciprocity.

Facing up to being white includes grasping significant challenges. Rossiter states "I want my white students, for example, to be able to tolerate the knowledge that they will be dangerous to people of colour all their lives" (p. 101). The social work profession should also "reflect on itself as potentially contributing to structural racism" (p. 101).

### ***Pākehā social workers***

Those of us in Aotearoa New Zealand who are white Pākehā have the dual challenges of facing up to settler colonial privilege and white privilege more generally. These two closely related forces have led to a social work profession that remains dominated by Western knowledge despite change led by Māori, Pasifika and people of colour.

### ***Gaps for application to Aotearoa New Zealand?***

While this book includes a majority of Indigenous authors, including some from

Aotearoa, it does not directly speak to our context and our profession's commitment to honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi. The theme of disrupting whiteness and Pākehā culture is essential in addressing colonisation and racism within Aotearoa; however, we need another text that builds on *Disrupting Whiteness in Social Work*.

### **References**

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