

# The dynamics of race and its impact on real social work



**Shannon Singleton**

Shannon Singleton has worked in homeless services for over 12 years, the past 6 in Portland. Prior to that, she worked with social action groups in Philadelphia.

The topic of race and social work is a conversation that could take many paths. We could discuss the dynamics for professionals of color in Portland (and the sad trend of emigration from Portland); or the experience of people of color within our dominant culture organizations.

Instead, I would like to focus on what I think are some useful questions and ways of thinking about race that social workers can ask and employ within their practice. The over-professionalization of social work can lead people to believe that their work is done, that they are "culturally competent" professionals with little need for further reflection and dialogue.

Social workers are called to be empathetic, to walk in the shoes of the people they serve, to align themselves with people, bear witness to their stories, offer support. I would argue that we cannot fully do this until we reflect on the dynamics of race in our relationships. Can you find a space of empathy for a person whose story you interpret through the lens of your own race and ethnic identities?

I have had long-time professionals label black men as "angry," "scary," "violent;" yet, these same professionals did not attribute the same labels to white men who had actually been violent. At one agency, we had two men with similar body frames and types, one identified as black, the other as white. Over time, I noticed that the black gentleman was being discussed as "scary," "difficult," and needing "anger management." When asked, the staff said

they did not really know this man, what he liked to do, or what his goals were. The white man, who had threatened staff, had a history of violence, and was struggling in the program, was discussed by the team as "strong," having a "difficult life," and, needing to "feel safe" to excel in the program. Both men had traumatic histories, both exhibited the symptoms associated with a schizophrenia diagnosis, and both had goals of healing. This is a systemic problem because it has occurred on multiple occasions, with multiple agencies, and with multiple social workers.

I have gone through this process myself. Using the above example of the two similar men—one white, one black—I had to first ask myself why I had not spent as much time listening to the black man's story. I was operating out of a space of knowing and assuming that I knew his story—a life of racism, constant micro-aggressions and poverty. For the white man, who had acted out violently towards me, I responded with anger and aggression—two coping skills that have helped me survive some violent racial attacks in my life. My interactions with both men were being controlled by my unexamined racial socialization. By being honest and bringing these to light, I was able to consciously change the way I viewed these two men. I spent time with the black man, listened to his story, learned what he liked, what he wanted to do, what he needed from us as a staff. I was able to have a conversation with the white man, apologize for being angry and aggressive in my

responses to him, and ask him how we could avoid the violence and threats in the future.

It is easy to put people on the defensive when discussing race, so I ask that everyone be brave and handle a few moments of being uncomfortable. We are socialized in a racist society so it is impossible to grow up and not have internalized racism. If we neglect to ask ourselves the hard questions though, aren't we personally responsible for perpetuating racism and oppression? The principles of social work demand that we ask ourselves, why do I have fear for this black man? What are the messages that I received about the intrinsic value and worth of people who look like this person; what about those who look like me? Do I place faith and trust in this person's story, or do I think they are being manipulative or lying. Why do I feel this way about this relationship and how does my socialized understanding of race impact this decision? There are so many questions we can ask ourselves when we consider the problem of race; the key to social work as I believe it should be done, is to be courageous enough to ask ourselves these questions.

**Can you find a space of empathy for a person whose story you interpret through the lens of your own race and ethnic identities?**

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