F or the most part, students entering social work programs want to serve poor and oppressed populations. They see themselves as well-meaning and politically liberal, and view racism, sexism, and heterosexism as intolerable. They are highly offended by assertions that they may suffer from these “isms.” However, to ready social work students to effectively serve diverse and oppressed communities, educators must coach students beyond their individualized world-view and help them gain self-reflexivity in the context of social realities. And yet, despite our commitment to its importance, many social work educators still search for effective strategies to teach about race and oppression.¹

For the past five years, the social work program at a medium-size public, urban California institution has engaged such well-intentioned students to enhance their understanding of race and oppression in a required first-quarter course called *Race, Gender, and Inequality*, in which the objective is to achieve student commitment to multicultural competence and to assisting historically disadvantaged, disenfranchised, and underserved populations. Although delivered in the social work program, we believe our approach, which requires students to explore their own values,
beliefs, and behaviors, and makes them aware of their own biases, has merit for other fields that tackle the topic of race, gender, and inequality. This paper presents concrete recommendations, including explorations of student responses, suggestions for equitable presentation of material, and strategies for transformative learning.

Invariably, when confronted with this course, students experience an intense emotional response to what might be considered a cultural humility “boot camp.” Many falter initially and interpret their reaction to be indicative of an inability to master multicultural competence, rather than understand it as part of the process itself. White students are often especially perplexed when presented with the issue of white privilege and asked to explore how they have benefited from it. Superficially, students respond with questions, such as: Why do we have to talk about race? Why are we always talking about blacks, what about other groups? All we do in here is bash white people! or Why can't we just all get along? Encouraged by Barack Obama's election as the first African American president, they ask, Aren't we done with this issue yet? The specific questions change with the evolution of race-based current events, such as the growth of the “Black Lives Matter” movement since 2012. The poignant affect behind these questions challenges us to develop more effective ways to engage in these difficult dialogues.

RACISM AS AN ILLUSTRATION OF OPPRESSION

While the course aims to sensitize students to all forms of oppression, due to time limitations we focus on racism as a primary injustice. Viewing racism as the bedrock for understanding other forms of oppression is supported by the work of Garcia and VanSoest.2 As they quote from Hopps’ 1982 Social Work editorial, “Although many forms of exclusion and discrimination exist in this country, none is so deeply rooted, persistent, and intractable as that based on color.” Pharr and Collins, focusing on homophobia and feminism, respectively, also argue that all oppressions share a common origin and are interconnected.4 Thus, using racism, we teach a framework of analysis that also can be applied to other oppressive phenomena. The framework teaches students to complete: a Historical analysis of the oppressed population; an assessment of each Individual’s self-definition; and an assessment of the Person-in-environment (PIE) with emphasis on factors of oppression.5 Faculty reinforce the use of this HIP framework through the remainder of the social work curriculum.

In deconstructing racism, it simply is not enough for students to absorb course content, examine themselves, and understand the impact of racism.6 Rather than stop prematurely where students feel most comfortable, studying “those people” and the effects on “others,” we nudge them to delve into their complicity in the functioning of racism. This fosters a more genuine and useful understanding of ethnic/racial groups and how racism has impacted both whites and people of color.

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Creating an enlightened historical foundation

A root cause of resistance to difficult dialogues about race and oppression relates to miseducation and socialization. Students do not come to us out of a vacuum. They come from families, educational systems, and communities that have, consciously and subconsciously, overtly and covertly, provided substance for the formation of racial and gender understandings. The lyrics from the musical South Pacific capture this process, “You’ve got to be taught to hate and fear. You’ve got to be taught from year to year. It’s got to be drummed into your dear little ear. You’ve got to be carefully taught.”8
Early on, children of all races and ethnicities are taught a selective U.S. history. This, along with familial and media socialization, creates a distorted worldview, fostering biased perceptions of women and people of color. Hence, to facilitate honest discussion, expanded accounts of U.S. history are explored, attending particularly to the exploitation of minorities. The extent of historical misinformation often appalls students. Some experience disbelief and anger, while others embrace this new reality but feel deeply hurt that loved ones, teachers, and role models have participated in this big lie.

ACKNOWLEDGING CHALLENGES FOR STUDENTS

Armed with a new historical understanding, we then explore modern expressions of racism and its sometimes subtle manifestation in American lives. The embedded nature of racism, sexism, and other social inequalities often make them undetectable—most notably, the subtleties of white and male privilege. For this reason, moving white students to see racism and oppression as more sinister than the “No Blacks Need Apply” or as marriage defined only as a heterosexual union is critical (often referred to as microaggressions). On this point Trepagnier notes:

The white definition of racism also ignores acts of everyday racism: routine actions that often are not recognized by the actor as racist or that uphold the racial status quo. For example, black women report that whites often seem surprised to find that a black person has a college degree or is a professional. This form of everyday racism—marginalization—is based in the white assumption that blacks are not educated or successful.

Power and privilege enable whites to define, and to include and exclude. This creates a propensity for whites to assume racism, sexism, or other forms of inequality are blatant acts carried out occasionally by aberrant fanatics like Dylann Roof during the 2015 Charleston, South Carolina, church shooting. Such assumptions hide the everyday institutionalized oppressions that systematically exclude so many from full, safe social participation. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) appealed to its members to learn about, face, and combat this threat in a task force report, *Institutional Racism and the Social Work Profession: A Call to Action.* The report provides action steps for individuals and NASW chapters, but education must also attend to this injustice.

Speaking as a white academician, Robert Jensen observes what he calls “the dirty secret” of white privilege. “In a world of white privilege, some of what we have is unearned. I think much of both the fear and anger that comes up around discussions of affirmative action has its roots in that secret.” Having to confront this reality can produce emotional upheaval among students, which, if not managed well by educators, interferes with learning. Garcia and Van Soest point out that fear and anxiety can impede discussions of social power. They also suggest that a lack of a “coherent framework that speaks to basic human experiences and that is truly inclusive of diversity and social justice” inhibits comprehension of the realities of oppression. This socio-historic roadblock helps sustain a false sense of superiority in whites and a false sense of inferiority in students of color/oppression.

Providing an educational forum that acknowledges students’ internal struggles, yet discourages an “us vs. them” climate is the instructor’s challenge.
there is no comfortable bridge from one’s social experience to one’s understanding of the complexities of diversity and the multicultural experience. These are uncharted waters, filled with uncertainty.

PROVIDING AN EXPERIENTIAL CLASSROOM-BASED EXPERIENCE

Scapegoating or singling out of individuals or groups cannot be tolerated. However, this does not mean the instructor should avoid conflict.

A Safe Learning Environment

Because of the sensitivity of the subject matter, it is imperative that students feel safe while exploring race and oppression. Scapegoating or singling out of individuals or groups cannot be tolerated. However, this does not mean the instructor should avoid conflict. Meaningful learning comes from the skillful modeling of conflict management, finding common ground, and accepting points of disagreement. The underlying teaching philosophy stems from a post-modern view of subjectivity and co-existing “truths.” Thus, we carefully craft classroom behavior guidelines that are presented, discussed, and accordingly modified during the first day of class. The list includes rules such as respecting others’ opinions and boundaries, active listening, and committing to participation. We enhance the process using the following strategies:

- applying the person-in-environment (PIE) framework
to understand how and why a person might hold certain perspectives, while developing strategies to deal with such views;
- sharing personal experiences in human diversity by class members and the instructor;
- maintaining a delicate but clear balance between professional and personal views about human diversity, and
- experimentally donning different “hats” such as “a critical thinking hat” or “devil’s advocate hat” to facilitate and participate in class discussions.

In a class survey, 87 percent of students responded that these specific instructions provided helpful structure for meaningful discussions about these complex issues.

A Focus on Student-Centered Self-Discovery

Toward the objective of cultural competence, the importance of self-awareness, self-reflexivity, and self-discovery are well documented. To achieve student insight, we invite a focus on internal implications rather than merely external empathy. To introduce students to the realities of unfair racial treatment we reference accounts such as the Kerner Commission Report, Banfield’s *The Unheavenly City*, and *The State of Black America* series, but we do not stop there. We move on to white privilege. We ask students to explore the impact of racism and sexism on white people and how, and to what extent, whites are involved in the current expansion and refinement of these twin inequities. We help students discover how they are in the environment and how the nature of their “in-ness” impacts their thinking, attitudes and behavior. We move beyond the notion that a person is either a racist or not, to a view of oppression as ranging from the blatant to the subtle—that we are mutually entangled in this web.

Suggesting that racism and oppression are somewhat like the air we breathe helps students grasp its insidious presence.
Creation of Opportunities for Success

A central task of the course is a three-part assignment in which students research and write about historical and current oppression of, (1) black or Latino groups in urban U.S. communities (the student is requested to research a group other than their own membership group, unless he or she is mixed race from both of these groups); (2) a second U.S. group of their choice; and (3) a synergistic analysis of these two selected populations. The initial focus on urban black or Latino groups provides a common discussion topic.

The second part allows students to pursue an oppressed group of their particular interest, whether that is as broad as the aged, or as narrow, say perhaps as transgender Asian Americans. Students must interview a member of the selected group to inform their papers and present a summary of findings to the class, and more importantly, to staff at their field practicum.

In the third task, the synergistic analysis, we instruct students to pay particular attention to the intersectionality of oppression, racism, sexism and other forms of inequality. Students apply the HIP framework described earlier to compose these papers. In totality, this assignment provides students the opportunity, in a controlled manner, to experience mastery in talking about racially sensitive matters, to synthesize results, and to present findings as part of an advocacy effort.

The Claiming of Cultural Competence

Development of multicultural competence is a lifelong journey and requires critical steps of: self-reflective understanding, appreciation of the intersectional nature of oppression, and a solid grounding in the meaning of social justice. The self-reflective understanding of racism, Berry’s Hidden Wound, and the role of white privilege, as discussed earlier, lay the ground to apply these insights to the vast realm of oppressions.

To approach multicultural competence, students also need an intersectional lens to more clearly see oppressed clients in all their lives’ complexity.

Instructors must take care to ensure that white students do not shut down and students of color, women, or otherwise oppressed do not “pile it on.”

Students break into 30-minute groups to discuss reflective questions about the reading: does it change your overall approach to understanding and dealing with race and racism; how do you believe it will impact your work with women and populations of color; how does the culture, family, and social environment of the author influence his world view; how do your culture, family, and social environment impact your world view; and what overall impact did it have on you? Next, the class reconvenes for a general interchange about the book. Supervised discussions offer a safe environment to self-reflect, take risks in learning, and hone critical thinking skills. These steps compel introspection, preparing students as better practitioners of social change and justice.

Another important, personal and powerful expectation is that students keep a confidential course daily journal. They reflect on reactions to readings, class discussions, and assignments, and must provide only proof of journaling. Over time, however, students develop a confidence about their journals and often share their personal discoveries.

Finally, students have the option to participate in a small, three-session self-discovery group coordinated through the campus psychological counseling services—and almost all do. These self-exploration experiences provide a foundation for understanding others’ point of views.

nated, despite the damage to our well-being. We visit Essed’s concept of everyday racism, which privileges one group above another. These include the assumed competence afforded white males over people of color and women; or the racially influenced passersby responses to staged thefts or denials of service on the popular ABC show, What Would You Do? Typically, when participants in oppressive behavior are accused they are surprised, offended, or hurt. Instructors must take great care to ensure that white students do not shut down and students of color, women, or otherwise oppressed do not “pile it on.”

Many useful books help with self-discovery, but our students read Wendell Berry’s The Hidden Wound, demonstrating the suffering racism has inflicted on all. Students break into 30-minute groups to discuss reflective questions about the reading: does it change your overall approach to understanding and dealing with race and racism; how do you believe it will impact your work with women and populations of color; how does the culture, family, and social environment of the author influence his world view; how do your culture, family, and social environment impact your world view; and what overall impact did it have on you? Next, the class reconvenes for a general interchange about the book. Supervised discussions offer a safe environment to self-reflect, take risks in learning, and hone critical thinking skills. These steps compel introspection, preparing students as better practitioners of social change and justice.

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ity. Though a person’s race, gender, ability, religion or any other potential condition of oppression may appear to be central to one’s identity, it is never quite that simple. Miller and Garran note that “nobody is defined solely by race. This dimension of social identity interacts with gender, social class, sexual orientation and other axes of identity.” To fixate on any one characteristic—even one as important as race—borders on stereotyping and produces a one-dimensional view. To prevent such tendencies, students are urged to incorporate an intersectional view of the client. Figure 1 illustrates a model of “Intersecting Dimensions of Oppression.” For example, while we may be tempted to view a gay client as though that status determines all he is; at any given time other segments of identity such as race, age, or ability may supersede. Clearly, more dimensions could be added to this layered model, including ableism, religion, cultureism, heightism, sizeism, lookism, or rankism. Consequently, students come to see the intersection as a dynamic, living model allowing for a combination of issues and conditions of oppression that constantly interact and compete to define an individual’s identity and life circumstances. Working with clients holistically requires the examination of this intersectionality.

Last, multiculturally competent social workers must be armed with a sound theory of social justice to facilitate truly cultural competent interventions. The Educational Policies and Standards (EPAS) of the Council on Social Work Education addresses this in its call to “Advance Human Rights and Economic and Social Justice.” In The Color of Social Policy, Davis and Bent-Goodley define social justice as:

a basic value and desired goal in democratic societies and includes equitable and fair access to all societal institutions, laws, resources, opportunities, rights, goods, and services for all groups and individuals without arbitrary limitations or barriers based on observations or interpretations of the value of differences in age, color, culture, physical or mental disability, education, gender, income, language, national origin, race, religion or sexual orientation.

We introduce this concept of social justice to students and ask them to read chapters of John Rawls’ book, A Theory of Justice, and to pay attention to the concept of distributive justice. In break-out discussion groups, we challenge them to:

• define social justice;
• articulate a personal theory of social justice;
• discuss how one would advance a theory of social justice;
• anticipate changes in attitude and behavior expected after developing a theory of social justice; and
• identify what allies would be needed to assist in pursuing social justice.

This exercise motivates students to contemplate a strategy of engaged practice in which they could envision effective results. Thus, using a solution-focused approach, we explore with students what successful practice would look like—this is our “miracle question” to students.

Though a person’s race, gender, ability, religion, or any other potential condition of oppression may appear to be central to one’s identity, it is never quite that simple.
Often amazed by the personal stories and meanings held by students, instructors are kept “honest” on their own journey toward cultural competence.

Over time, students discover that the classroom is a safe place and they develop comfort in dealing with difficult dialogues about issues of race, gender and inequality. An overwhelming majority of students surveyed at the exit point reported that their learning in this class was valuable in building their multicultural competence. Anecdotally, in a 2014 graduating group, asked to reflect on their university experience, the 24 students overwhelming viewed the “Race, Gender and Inequality” course as the pivotal step in their development of a professional social work identity.

**INSTRUCTOR SKILLS ARE KEY TO SUCCESS**

Imparting the HIP framework, while establishing safety, success, and self-discovery, in the service of cultural competence, the teaching of race, gender and inequality must be student-centered and interactive. It requires a uniquely skilled instructor who is comfortable acting as guide, model, enforcer, encourager, and learner.

The instructor-as-guide creates the syllabus, bibliographies, assignments, as well as facilitates discussions. She recommends readings and materials, and inquires about student reasoning in selecting certain sources. Helpful questions include: What have you learned in reading these sources, what questions do they raise for you, or if you had to tell your life story again, what would you include?

As a model, instructors demonstrate methods of understanding and dealing with racism, oppression, and conflict. Some do so by telling life stories, others through humor, and still others through patience shown in working with students in difficult dialogues. All demonstrate that it is possible to address calmly and intentionally a very volatile subject. Additionally, we use ourselves as a resource, sharing experiences, books, films, and stories. While this starts in the classroom, some of the most growth-producing interactions occur during office hours, or in the halls, or even in the cafeteria. Students thrive on personal attention from faculty and space to ask questions, experiment with ideas and receive feedback without the critical eyes of fellow students—these personal encounters are invaluable to embracing difference.

Instructors also act as enforcers, an important responsibility when teaching about race, gender, and inequality. If not managed carefully, discussions can explode and drive some students underground. The professor must balance between allowing an organic flow to discussions, while also making sure students do not dominate, intimidate, or “check out” because of discomfort. Student silence can be a coping mechanism for those who have never before engaged in an in-depth discussion of oppression, especially in a diverse classroom setting. Hence, the professor becomes the encourager, and must look out for reluctant participants and give them physical and verbal clues that it is alright to contribute, that their voices are valued, and that interactions will not get out of hand. The enforcer/encourager serves as a limit setter, protector and advocate. Office hour discussions can also urge cautious students to share valuable thoughts in class.

Finally, as a learner, the instructor gains invaluable experience from taking on this subject and witnessing student growth. Often amazed by the personal stories and meanings held by students, instructors are kept “honest” on their own journey toward cultural competence. Oppressive dimensions possess temporal elements. Students link instructors to social changes in the realm of cultural competence, whether that be through new norms, meanings or creations of words, music, life on the web, YouTube, and evolving communities. Here, the teacher and student roles welcome bidirectional learning; creating a partnership and moving beyond oppression on the path to social justice.

**END NOTES**

1. Ortiz and Jani, “Critical Race Theory: A Transformational Model for Teaching Diversity.” Oppression, in this context, relates to biases toward various perceived or actual differences associated with dimensions such as race, ethnicity, culture, religion, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, socio-economic status, immigration status, health or mental health, abilities/disabilities, rank, and so on.
5. Germain, “An Ecological Perspective in Casework Practice.” Person-in-environment (PIE) is a fundamental perspective taught in social work that suggests individuals cannot be understood without also considering their surrounding social realities. It embraces the idea that one’s environment impacts the individual and vice versa.
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8. Rogers and Hammerstein, South Pacific.
11. In the academic quarter following this course, this enlightened historical foundation is further detailed in relation to social welfare using Day’s provocative feminist and oppression-exposing text, *A New History of Social Welfare.* (The film “The People Speak” can also complement integration of material from this text.)
14. See, for example, Appuzzo, “Dylann Roof, Charleston Shooting Suspect, Is Indicted on Federal Hate Crime Charges.”
17. Ibid.
19. Ibid., p. 29.
31. Fuller, *Somebodies and Nobodies: Overcoming the Abuse of Rank.*
34. Davis and Bent-Goodley, *The Color of Social Policy.*
36. See DeJong and Berg, *Solution Focused Interviewing,* where solution-focused work is explained as a short-term, goal-directed intervention strategy to create behavior change. One specific query presented to clients is often the “miracle question” which asks the person to describe what life would look like without their current problem, envisioning as if a miracle had taken place.
37. Phan, op cit. 2013. An exit survey found that 81 percent of the students found the experience valuable in a class of 95.

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Steffoff, Rebecca and Howard Zinn. 2009. A Young People's History of the United States: Columbus to the War on Terror. New York: Seven Stories Press.