

socially conscious

voices

on difference

**A student-led journal focusing
on issues of social justice**

**Graduate Social Work Department
West Chester University**

Photo by Carrissa Griffing, in Washington D.C. on January 21, 2017 at the 2017 Women's March.



IN THIS ISSUE

| | |
|--|----|
| Appropriating Authenticity in Hip-Hop | 2 |
| <i>Amber Caldwell</i> | |
| Anxiety's Worst Enemy | 3 |
| <i>Jordan Cunningham</i> | |
| Experiences of the Other: Personal Reflection | 4 |
| <i>Anne Marie Jordan</i> | |
| 12-Step Privilege: Unpacking the Recovery Knapsack | 6 |
| <i>Adam Sledd</i> | |
| I. Am. Free. | 8 |
| <i>Carrissa Griffing</i> | |
| Tolerance | 10 |
| <i>Mary Wilson</i> | |
| Education Policy Brief | 11 |
| <i>Tatiana McCoy</i> | |
| Black Suicide: The Tragic Reality of America's Deadliest | 13 |
| <i>Kiersten Fravel</i> | |
| Mother | 15 |
| <i>Suzanne Sellers</i> | |
| New Job | 17 |
| <i>Ginneh Akbar</i> | |
| Contributors | 18 |

EDITORS' NOTES

Look deeply. Look deeply at your own life, your pain and your joy. Look deeply at the structures and systems in which you live. Look deeply at where you've come from. Look deeply at where you're going. Look deeply at this very moment.

In this issues of *Voices*, the peer-reviewed student social work journal of West Chester University, our authors are committed to looking, and writing, deeply. The authors here are willing to examine common, often unconscious, assumptions about public policy, recovery, ethnicity, culture, race and racism, exploitation, the arts, and grief and healing. These analyses are not just intellectual exercises, although there is plenty of original thinking contained in these pages. No, the thinking here arises from a specific set of values and is dedicated to a certain set of hoped-for goals. The values are those of the social work profession, grounded in the commitments to respect, justice, and empathy. The goals are to help foster a more free, open, and liberated society in which all people, and the communities in which we live, are better able to express our innate capacity for growth and freedom.

These are aspirations that are often diminished and denied in this country right now. Because of that, we consider the work of our authors to be even more important. It is why we, the editors of this journal, are proud to lift up these voices and offer them to you for your thoughtful engagement. Together, may we work toward making the hopes articulated here become a greater reality in all of our lives.

EDITORIAL BOARD

Student Editors

Carrissa A. Griffing, RN, BSN, MCIS, *lead & design*

Kenneth Beldon

Candace E. Simmons

Jessica L. Borelli

Faculty Advisor

Ginneh Akbar, DSW, LSW, MSW

Mia Ocean, PhD, MSW

Copyright: 2018 VOICES This work is licensed under the Creative Commons

Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 United States License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA. VOICES is a publication of the Graduate Social Work Department of West Chester University of Pennsylvania. All correspondence should be directed to mocean@wcupa.edu.

VOICES is available online at:

<http://www.wcupa.edu/education-socialWork/gradSocialWork/voices.aspx>

APPROPRIATING AUTHENTICITY

N HIP HOP by Amber Caldwell

Hip-Hop's need for authenticity speaks to the urgency with which African Americans aspired to establish cultural identity and distinctive traits separate from that of their white counterparts. The formation of Hip-Hop culture is recognized as a civil rights movement in that dating back as early as the 1600s, African American culture was nonexistent due to colonization, which stripped African Americans of their natural identities. As a result, mainstream society proceeded with social, economic, cultural, and religious control of African Americans. Colonizing the mind enabled the control of the African American individual and African American culture. African Americans were being conditioned to relinquish inalienable rights, ideologies, and religious practices. Consequently, White ideology ratified themes of inequality, disrespect, and hatred towards African Americans. Furthermore, the authentic black culture experienced a demoralized lifestyle of displacement from their cultural norms, communities, and teachings. Varying cultural experiences and geographical displacement induced African Americans to learn new languages, traditions, and ideological beliefs while losing sight of their own. There is power in one's environmental origins and community. Diacritic traits within the African American communities such as, religious beliefs, morals, values, and cultural understandings were being stripped of its potency while being replaced with white cultural norms, which were deemed as a more appropriate way of living. Hitherto, post-colonization did not relieve African Americans of social degradation by mainstream society. Newer forms of discrimination came in the form of segregation. Segregation placed African Americans in marginalized communities separate from that of their white counterparts. Additionally, Jim Crow laws helped to establish laws designating public areas for white people while refusing services and use of these same public places by black people. Amid turmoil, African Americans skillfully found a way to appropriate social systems constructed to disempower and destroy the African American community. Therefore, music during the era of slavery dating to today's society has always allowed African Americans to create an area of identity distinctly different from prescribed identities of blackness.

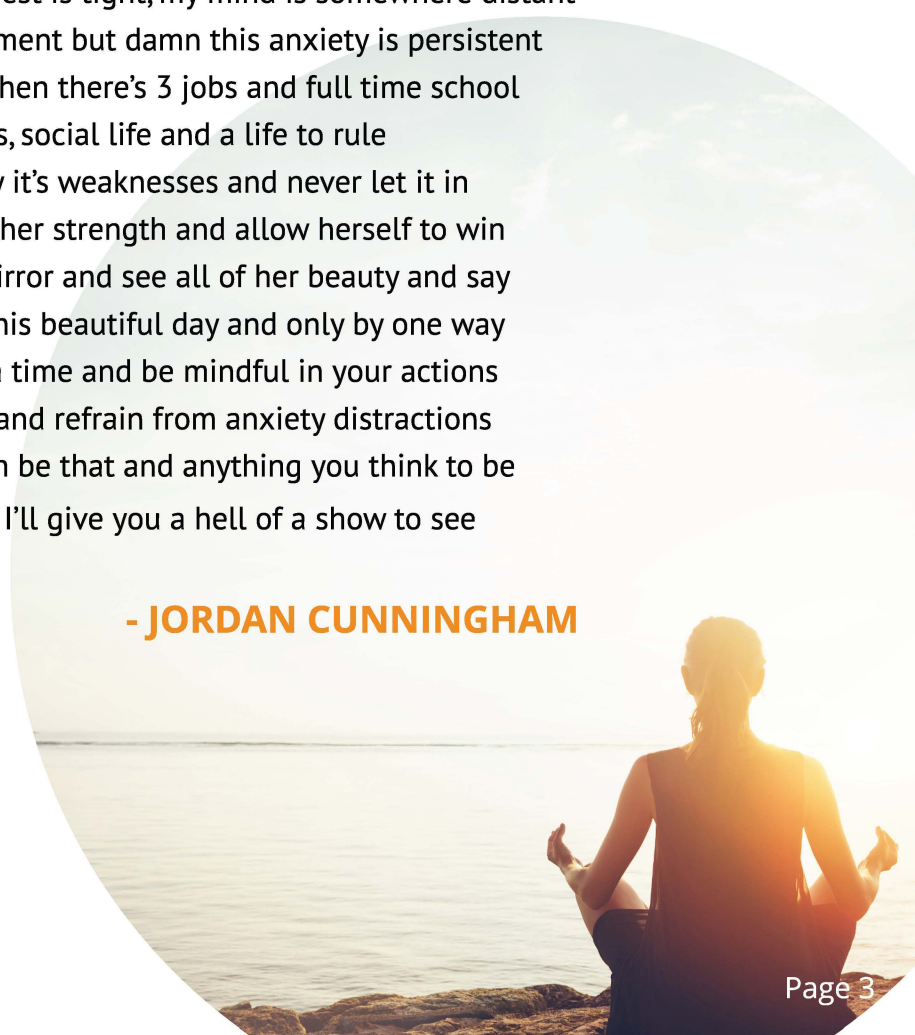


Men carry the coffin of Jim Crow through the streets to protest racial discrimination in 1944.

Anxiety's Worst Enemy

I hear the alarm sounding, it seems too soon
I could think the same thing even if it's noon
My heart is beating faster that I can catch
This anxiety I'm facing is just a rough patch
Except I'm having a hard time believing just that
Because I can't breathe, can't move, can't combat
I don't want to go to work, or school, or get out of bed
I can't seem to get the racing thoughts out of my head
But foot by foot and inch my inch I make my way down the hall
I have to keep going, keep moving and don't give up at all
The exhaustion of just the first five minutes of my day
Is enough to make me just want to go away
Because no one understands the pure brutality
Of trying to keep up with the "it's all in your head" mentality
My breaths are taken, my chest is tight, my mind is somewhere distant
I try my best at every moment but damn this anxiety is persistent
So what's a girl to do when there's 3 jobs and full time school
Family, friends, social life and a life to rule
A girl is to take it by it's weaknesses and never let it in
So she can shine with her strength and allow herself to win
She is to look in the mirror and see all of her beauty and say
You will get through this beautiful day and only by one way
Taking it one step at a time and be mindful in your actions
Work hard, be strong and refrain from anxiety distractions
You can do this, you can be that and anything you think to be
So watch out anxiety, I'll give you a hell of a show to see

- JORDAN CUNNINGHAM



EXPERIENCES OF "THE OTHER"

a personal reflection

By Anne Marie Jordan

In order to begin to understand oppression, the first step is to examine and dig deep into one's own identity. You must be clear about your sense of self, beliefs, and status in the world to understand oppressive powers and where you fit in. I am a white woman, a United States citizen, and this has afforded me a lot of privilege in the world. It is important to acknowledge that this privilege has opened doors that are closed to many people. I can only owe this to characteristics I happened to be born into such as the color of my skin, my socioeconomic status, or the region of the world I grew up in. It is easy and natural to feel guilty about one's privilege when studying and learning about oppression. You have to begin the process of opening and examining possibly painful aspects of your identity and heritage. However, I hold fast to the belief that knowledge is power. In unpacking these painful truths, you can begin to do something with that information. Though there may be pain, there may also be growth.

It has been a very personal and painful journey to look at my own family and to acknowledge the racist and anti-immigrant sentiments that lurk in the shadows of our collective history. I love my family deeply and it is hard to embrace that these systemic biases have shaped the mindsets and lives of some of those I love most. Studying Social Work has helped me to understand that, in some ways, my family's ignorant feelings are a byproduct of our immigrant history in the United States and of the oppression experienced by my ancestors. These feelings have roots in a cultural history that is shared by many. I think it's important that those of my generation within my family become the ones who break this cycle. By reading, learning, and examining these painful elements of our lives, we can begin to dissolve the biases passed down through generations.

Ronald Takaki (1993) speaks about the Irish as an immigrant group in his article *A Different Mirror*. He talks about the tumultuous history of the Irish in America and in a matter of one paragraph, seems to sum up the story of my Irish in America. The Irish came over in large waves and they were the first immigrants to live in the crowded tenement apartments of the Lower East Side, where whole families were cramped together in one or two rooms. The Irish were considered uncivilized savages by Americans and faced a lot of discrimination. However, Takaki says that the Irish had an advantage over other ethnic groups who came to the United States because they could blend into white American society more easily due to their complexion, features, and native English-speaking. From the first wave of Irish immigration the Irish banded together and saw themselves as very separate from other minority groups. They gained power politically and took over many of the blue-collar jobs, edging out any other immigrant workers.

Although Takaki is talking about the Irish immigrant experience as a whole, it is almost exactly my grandpa's story. It sparked my interest to hear that the Irish isolated themselves because this is what I know of my grandpa's life

in New York. Other ethnic and cultural groups were more supportive of each other and could relate to each other's struggles, but the Irish could not embrace this idea. My Grandpa could not embrace this idea.

The mentality seen in early Irish Immigrants as well as Takaki's descriptions of how the Irish were perceived also reminded me of *A Pedagogy of The Oppressed* by Paulo Freire (1998). The Irish were oppressed by the English during their rule of Ireland and considered themselves enslaved by the English. One of the things Freire talks about is how humankind is caught up in a vicious cycle where the oppressed eventually become the oppressors-- this is due to the fact that the oppressed have no authentic identity and consider the oppressors to be the pinnacle of success and power. Thus, the oppressed cannot be truly liberated because gaining freedom and power means turning into the oppressor. This theory reminds me of the Irish immigrants turning their backs on other groups facing discrimination. In their efforts to reverse their oppressive circumstances, they wound up isolating themselves and becoming a dominant group that shut others out and disempowered them (Freire, 1998).

From the moment my grandpa set foot in the United States, he dreamed about going back to Ireland. Moving to America was a necessity, because there was no money in Ireland, but it left him longing for a home he could not rejoin until much later. I wonder if his own sorrow about the loss of his roots and identity caused him to close in on himself and turn against others. I think this illustrates a common thread of loss in immigrant stories. My grandpa's story is one that reflects the reality of many immigrants from all over the world who are forced from their homes.

Unfortunately, my grandpa's story has had a trickle-down effect on our family values and history. His children, my father and his siblings, have their own identity issues as first-generation Americans. My dad has often expressed feeling unsure of his cultural identity because he has always been caught between two worlds, Ireland and New York. Ethnicity, like race, is a social construct, or a common assumption agreed upon by society to be true. There are four elements that make up an ethnic identity, one of which is ethnic pride (Sisneros, Stakeman, Joyner, and Schmidt, 2008). In thinking about my dad, I can see how his ethnic identity has always been confusing and amorphous -- should he honor his Irish roots or his American ones? Is it possible to honor both? The model of my grandpa's fearful views of the world were at odds with his children's more diverse experiences of other cultures and people living in Brooklyn in the 1950's and 60's.

Just as my father's identity is a reaction to his growing up as a first generation American, my identity is a reaction to my own upbringing. I grew up in a very affluent area in Long Island, New York, and led a very privileged early life. We were well-off and lived in a series of medium large houses, I went to private school and received top-notch education, and had access to everything I could have ever wanted.

Some of the pressure my father faced as a first generation American was the pressure to be well educated and financially successful, which he was and is-- he was one of the first in his family to go to college, and went on to get a master's degree as well as a law degree.

My early childhood is marked with a sort of apathy and blindness to my own privilege. I was not exposed to much diversity as there was not much to be had close to home. This all changed when I was 12-- that year, I traveled to India with my mom for five weeks and my parents got divorced. Traveling to India was an invaluable experience that turned my life upside down. I witnessed many beautiful and amazing things on this trip and also saw many people suffering and living in inhuman and dangerous conditions. It was the first time I broke out of the bell jar of my own small world and realized how much more was out there. I did not know exactly how I would help anyone, but that trip instilled in me a desire to work for those whose basic human rights have been compromised. My parents' divorce was an emotional relief for me, but caused a few years of financial stress. We were still not poor by any means, but it gave me a much clearer sense of how much I had been afforded up until that point.

Starting with my trip to India, exploring the world has been a meaningful part of my life and identity. When I travel I prefer to pick a place and get to know it well. In 2009, after a semester in grad school that did not go as planned, I moved to Ecuador on a whim with no knowledge of the country and limited Spanish language skills. I had planned on staying for 3 months but wound up staying for almost three years. They were three amazing, trying and very profound years in my development that provoked me to think differently about myself, both as an individual and as an American.

I loved living in Ecuador and getting to know about its history and many different cultures. Ecuador is a very small country, roughly the size of the state of Colorado. It is one of the most bio-diverse countries on the planet and has much cultural diversity as well. As an outsider, it is much easier for me to look at another country's history and struggles because I have no prior personal attachment to it and can be more objective than I find it to be with my own country. Ecuador's small size also made politics and history much more palpable and accessible to the general public, which was exciting and intense.

The history of Ecuador's native cultures has much in common with the United States' own history. As in the United States, indigenous cultures in Ecuador (and much of South America) were decimated by European conquerors. Even before the European conquest, the Incas arrived in Ecuador and conquered many of original native tribes. As in the United States, the Spanish forced religion and Christian culture upon the indigenous groups. Much of their wealth was stolen and taken back to Spain. Many indigenous people living in Ecuador currently live in extreme poverty and face much discrimination in mainstream society, although most Ecuadorians have some percentage of indigenous heritage. Because of Ecuador's size, I was able to interface with and learn much more about indigenous groups there than I have been in my own country (Zinn, 2003).

Another thing that moving to Ecuador forced me to consider was the privilege inherent in being an American. My birthright felt like a super power. If I overstayed my visa, I could just bribe a man in the visa department and I would be

legal again. I could hop borders without thinking. There is nowhere in the world I cannot go. Being a white American allowed me to get away with many things regarding my legal status in another country, and this feels painful in light of all of the current issues surrounding immigration in the United States and abroad.

Finally, living in Ecuador gave me taste of what it's like to feel like an outsider in a place one considers home. For me, Ecuador was and will always be a home of mine. I did not feel a connection to the predominantly white expat community in Ecuador or the also predominantly white community of people traveling around South America. I had an Ecuadorian partner, an unofficial Ecuadorian family, I worked for Ecuadorians, and I lived in an Ecuadorian neighborhood. I studied Spanish and learned to speak well enough and had Ecuadorian friends.

It was devastating for me to realize that no matter how much Spanish I learned or how good my accent was or how much I knew about the different regions or indigenous groups, I would never be an Ecuadorian. I would always stick out-- tall, blond, fair. People would always speak to me in English first. People would always be surprised when I understood them and answered them in Quiteño street slang. I would never not be American. On one hand, my nationality afforded me many opportunities in Ecuador, but it also isolated me. I identified more with Ecuadorians than with Americans, which left me feeling confused and part of no group.

I think that living in another country was an extremely important experience that has led me to social work. Through my experiences in Ecuador, both positive and negative, I feel I have really honed the ability to see myself in others as well as to look at the many invisible factors that come into play in people's lives and circumstances. As mentioned before, the only way to understand and approach difficult stories in my own life as well as in my family's is to examine them and pick them apart. I feel that it is important to embrace that change cannot happen retroactively, I can feel sad and angry about the past and about negative sentiments others in my family have held or currently hold, but know that it will not do much good in the present. I believe that the first step towards liberation is in knowing where these things come from and giving them a context through which to understand them. It is only by moving forward and bringing this knowledge into the future that change can come about.

References

- Freire, P (1997). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum Press.
- Sisneros, J., Stakeman, C., Joyner, M., & Schmidt, C. (2008). *Critical multicultural social work*. Chicago: Lyceum Books.
- Takaki, R. (2010). A different mirror in Adams, M., Blumenfeld, Castañeda, C., Hackman, H.W., Peters, M. L., & Zúñiga, X., *Readings for diversity and social justice* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Zinn, H. (2003). Chapter 1 – Columbus, the Indians, and Human progress; Chapter 2- Drawing the Color Line. In, *A people's history of the United States abridged teaching edition*.

12-STEP PRIVILEGE: UNPACKING THE RECOVERY KNAPSACK

by Adam Sledd

The recovery community, in spite of our advocacy in the macro-systems, contains its own microcosmic system of privilege and oppression. Many of my colleagues have written about privileged groups within our ranks; we are affected by white privilege and systemic racism, sexism, and other well-established sources of systemic oppression. We who champion recovery are agents of social change; as such, we flaunt our recovery in the face of stigma, challenge social injustice, advocate for equitable public policy and shine a spotlight on oppressive systems of privilege. Many of us are currently taking action to combat these injustices. However, one of the most blatant systems of privilege is right under our noses, and has been virtually un-addressed for nearly a century.

The 12-step community as a privileged group, by definition, enjoys particular systemic benefits that others among us do not. This group's philosophy was nearly indistinguishable from the accepted definition of recovery for decades. The fundamentals of this program and their relevance to recovery have been largely unchallenged since their inception. Their textbook was named by the Library of Congress as one of the "books that shaped America". Currently, any person seeking treatment or recovery is virtually guaranteed to be exposed to their program, and no discussion of treatment or recovery is complete without their mention. Their network of affiliates and support meetings spans the globe. There are hundreds of offshoots using their philosophy and method. Their principles have shaped the methodology of treatment and recovery, and have influenced public policy, medicine, and popular culture. Individuals who identify with this group have their beliefs reinforced and their experiences validated instantly and repeatedly in a multitude of settings; they are more than adequately represented and enjoy an abundance of resources and fellows. Treatment programs that follow the 12-step program have been legitimized by the expenditure of millions of healthcare dollars, and the recipients of these services have, in turn, filled the coffers of the 12-step organizations.

While this privileged program has saved many lives, those for whom it was not a viable solution have been the casualties of the systems which it dominates. The most damaging manifestation of this group's privilege has been its ideological domination of the recovery paradigm. For years, people who did not agree with this program's philosophy have been disparaged, shamed, and told that they were unable to recover, while its Traditions have shielded it from liability and absolved it of accountability. The singularity of the program's purpose and its devotion to exclusive self-propagation have diminished other pathways to recovery and crowded out innovation. This has resulted in an undue burden on any pathway to recovery which seeks to prove its legitimacy, as well as a psychological encumbrance on any already marginalized individual who would seek another pathway. While they take advantage of every opportunity for inclusion in the larger community, gaining access to government agencies and public institutions, there is no reciprocity. A 12-step member who seeks another pathway in recovery, according to Traditions, cannot be given information about other programs. In clinical settings, millions of people, many compelled by the legal system, have been provided clinical treatment built around this program, which has long been touted as the panacea for recovery, with few alternatives. Individuals who do not embrace 12-step philosophy have been labeled as resistant and non-compliant. The long-term outcomes of our treatment system are self-evident, and they, along with their casualties, lie at the feet of the 12-step community.

Those 12-step members who hold positions of power and influence in our systems must step outside of the relative safety and comfort of their privilege and advocate for the minority; they must advocate for recovery without condition; recovery, as William White writes, "by any means necessary" (2015). The ramifications of this injustice extend beyond mere principle. At the end of the day, they translate into human lives. For many, reparations will come too late. We must not allow the preferences of those who seek recovery to be trampled under the parade celebrating those who have found it. Our systems must be transformed; the cycle of regurgitating our institutional memory

must be interrupted. Jingoistic revelry must be abandoned in favor of risk and innovation. The mold must be broken.

Peggy McIntosh's seminal work, *Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, has helped a generation of white people understand and begin to address their privilege. I have altered a few of McIntosh's elements of privilege for the 12-step community, and provided examples for some.

1. I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people in my recovery pathway most of the time.

Anywhere you look for people in recovery, you will find 12-step members. This is because they are churned out by the thousands by rehabs who favor the 12-step pathway. (see below)

2. When I look for a recovery meeting in my community, I can be sure to find one from my recovery pathway.

There are 12 step meetings held every day, from early in the morning to late at night. Other programs are not as widely available to their participants. As a result, people who prefer other pathways often have to attend 12-step meetings.

3. If I talk to a non-recovering person about my recovery pathway, they will have heard of it and have some idea of how it works.

People on the outside of the recovery community are familiar with the 12-step process, especially the part about making amends. This sets up everyone in recovery as owing something back to society, whether they do or not.

4. When I tell people I'm in recovery, they assume my pathway correctly.

Most people, when they think of recovery, think of people sitting in a circle of chairs in a church basement, listening to someone tell their "story". People in 12-step pathways will usually ask a "test" question to see if you are in a fellowship; if you don't answer correctly, you may get a funny look or nervous comment.

5. I can assume that people in positions of authority who are in recovery share my recovery pathway.

Have you ever met a cop, a judge, or other person in authority who was in recovery? There's an excellent chance that they were 12-step members.

6. I can talk to other recovering/recovered people and they will not doubt the quality or stability of my recovery based on my recovery pathway.

This is called gaslighting, and it happens to people who don't subscribe to 12-step programs. The dominant paradigm is that people in recovery have to have a "program" in order to have good recovery.

7. If I want to be of service to others in recovery, I have many opportunities to do so through my recovery pathway.

It's one of the most admirable aspects of the 12-step community; however, opportunities to volunteer outside of the 12-step fellowship are few and far-between. This is also a double-edged sword and source of stigma, as people in recovery are expected to be "in service" to atone for their shameful behavior.

8. If I ask to participate in any community discussion about substance use issues, I can be assured a seat at the table.

Bereft of any professional qualifications, a person who holds themselves out as active in the local 12-step community is automatically considered an expert on substance use disorder and recovery.

9. I can be pretty sure of getting a job in the treatment field with other people in my recovery pathway.

Dog whistles happen in job interviews too; a person from a 12-step fellowship is undoubtedly well-connected to others in recovery who

staff the local treatment center. In addition, 12-step members rarely have to go against their own personal beliefs in the workplace, since 12-step philosophy dominates the treatment system.

10. My recovery pathway is commonly given free or heavily discounted rates on rental spaces and other materials in order to function.

Most churches and other community spaces rent space to 12-step groups at unheard-of rates that another organization would be hard-pressed to obtain.

11. I can shop for recovery literature, materials, accessories, or paraphernalia and be sure that my recovery pathway will be represented.

Have you ever shopped at a store that sells recovery paraphernalia? Try to find a recovery t-shirt, keychain or medallion that doesn't have 12-step slogans or imagery on it. Go ahead, I'll wait.

12. I can view movies and TV shows about recovery and be sure that my recovery pathway will be represented.

12-step fellowships and their members are featured in nearly every book, film, or other media production depicting people with substance use disorder. This adds to the common public perception that everyone in recovery is in a 12-step fellowship (see #3 and #4). Dog whistles to 12-step members are also ubiquitous. The TV show *My Name is Earl* was one huge dog whistle.

13. When nationally recognized figures in the recovery community speak publicly, I can be sure that they will use recovery language with which I can identify.

If you attend any kind of rally or public event dealing with recovery, even if speakers are careful about their own anonymity, 12-step language, slogans and concepts will undoubtedly be part of the presentation.

14. When I learn about the history of the recovery movement, I am told that people from my recovery pathway made it what it is.

Most of the early pioneers of recovery were 12-step members. These people are to be admired and respected; however, this does result in privilege for their descendants in recovery.

15. My recovery pathway contains concepts and language from a privileged spiritual pathway.

The basic texts of 12-step programs are replete with language from the most dominant, privileged spiritual pathway in the country. Therefore, people who were already spiritually and culturally privileged have that privilege reinforced when they enter a 12-step pathway. Those from other faiths, or from no faith, are forced to adjust their thinking to the language used, and this is the most frequent reason people give for seeking alternatives to 12-step programs.

16. If I present myself for substance use treatment, I can be sure that the treatment facility I attend will embrace and endorse my recovery pathway.

People from 12-step pathways who come to treatment are familiar with the content of the clinical programming at most rehabs. Those who come to treatment from other pathways are likely to be told that they were "doing it wrong".

17. If I should need recovery housing, I can easily find a place that accepts my recovery pathway as valid for the requirements of the residence.

The vast majority of recovery houses require daily 12-step meetings, as well as sponsorship and attendance at in-house meetings. Those from other pathways are either not admitted to the house or forced to adapt.

18. I can travel to another country and be sure of finding a recovery meeting in my pathway of recovery.

It's a strength, no doubt; there are 12-step meetings in nearly every civilized country.

19. I can openly criticize other pathways of recovery and others will support me.

Spend a little time on social media, and you will see this in action. Medication-assisted recovery and other "alternative" pathways are regularly disparaged, and there is nearly unlimited support from fellow 12-step members.

20. I can dismiss criticisms of my recovery pathway and

others will support me.

Sure, 12-step recovery is criticized too; but again, there are thousands of people who will rush to its defense.

Similarly, in white privileged communities, there are members of the 12-step community who will call this idea divisive and make impassioned calls for unity to avoid the discomfort of acknowledging their privilege. This is a normal defensive reaction; however it is important to move past it and get to the real work. The whole point of understanding and acknowledging one's privilege is not to feel guilty or defensive; but rather, to promote equity in the recovery community so that more people can find recovery through diverse pathways. So, now that you have recognized your privilege, how can you take responsibility for it? Again, I have compiled some commonly accepted ideas from a number of sources and modified them slightly to fit the context.

1. Educate yourself. Learn as much as you can about other pathways, and don't automatically expect people from those pathways to do the work of educating you.

2. Really get to know people from other pathways in recovery. Know them as people, not just avatars for their recovery pathway.

3. Listen to people and advocates from multiple pathways in recovery when they speak. Listen without responding.

4. Empathize with people from oppressed pathways. This does not mean sympathize. Empathy means being with a person and understanding and sharing their feelings and concerns.

5. Amplify. After listening and feeling, use your privilege and access to amplify voices of those in oppressed recovery pathways.

6. Challenge others in your privileged group who perpetuate stigma and stereotypes about other pathways in recovery. Let them know that this is not OK.

7. Work to offset, counteract, and neutralize your privilege and the systemic inequity. Use your privilege to open doors, forge new paths, and lift up members of the oppressed recovery pathways.

Harry Brod (1998) best put it, "We need to be clear that there is no such thing as giving up one's privilege to be 'outside' the system. One is always in the system. The only question is whether one is part of the system in a way that challenges or strengthens the status quo. Privilege is not something I take and which therefore have the option of not taking. It is something that society gives me, and unless I change the institutions which give it to me, they will continue to give it, and I will continue to have it, however noble and equalitarian my intentions."

We in the recovery community are some of the most passionate advocates there are. In our relatively short history, we have removed many obstacles to treatment and recovery. It is important that we do not become the obstacle.

Brod, H. (1989). Work Clothes and Leisure Suits: The Class Basis and Bias of the Men's Movement" in *Men's Lives*, ed. Michael Kimmel, M.S. and Messner, M. New York: Macmillan

McIntosh, P. (1988). Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack: Working Paper 189 in *White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies*.

Personal Failure or System Failure? (2013, December 14). Retrieved January 14, 2018, from <http://www.williamwhitepapers.com/blog/2013/12/personal-failure-or-system-failure.html>

I. AM. FREE.

by **CARRISSA A. GRIFFING**

Over the last month I have been trying to get back into the groove of things, minus Aaron. One of the steps of rejoining the world was to sit in Starbucks on Five Points and read a book with a nice cup of Joe. I had marked this locale off my places to visit since Aaron's passing as it was always a meeting place when he was living on the streets. Located just off the SEPTA 104 Bus Route, he and I could meet up for an hour. He would call from a payphone at 69th street and tell me which bus he'd be on, and I'd free up my schedule simply to place my eyes on him and dash off to Starbucks. Hoping it would not be the last time and that he would make it.

Today, I was reading a book for school, *Gang Leader for a Day* by Sudhir Venkatesh. A book written detailing Sudhir's ethnographic research for his Ph.D. at the University of Chicago. A novel riddled with real stories of Chicago project poverty, hunger, drugs, gangs, prostitution and abuse. I am halfway through this very enthralling text, trying to savor as it helps me remember that I am truly blessed.

After reading for an hour or so, a man walks into the coffee shop. All the tables are occupied; I am at one. And he stands before the group of white ladies, including me, and says nothing. He just stands. He looks at a space between my bag and another lady and her bag, sitting on a long bench. We all know how Starbucks are situated; long benches in an L-shape with round 36" tables scattered in front, adorning the interior wall. I immediately recognized the look, paid credence to not stereotypically "grabbing" my purse and scooching over so this gentle man could sit beside me. He pulled out a pretzel from the Pretzel Factory (located next door), an old bag of Herr's potato chips, and a large Arizona iced-tea - "poor nutritional quality" I found myself thinking. He positioned them in his lap and leaned over to place his tea on the table that was in front of me. I saw the long stretch and exerted some thought and brawn into moving that frickin' heavy, community, 36" table to rest just in front of both of us. "He needs a table too".

He quickly looked up from his lap snack, staring only at my shoulder (avoiding eye contact) and said "Thank You". I attempted to come up with a normal giddy response, "No problem, sir", but in hindsight I know he could sense my emotional response to him sitting next to me. I wasn't alarmed that there was a black man sitting next to me, who was obviously homeless and

trying to get out of the rain. I was emotionally brought back to my times of sitting with Aaron at the same locale. Watching every move, facial reaction, assessing clothing pieces that I knew I hadn't bought him, and wondering what the story was behind the duffle bag du jour he was carrying; all the while, I would hold back tears so that I wouldn't prevent him from calling me again when he could scrounge up the payphone toll.

The amazing part of today's encounter was multi-fold. I could smell this man. He smelled of body odor and car fumes. This was how Aaron smelled. Petroleum and car exhaust was in his skin, hair, clothes. It would take weeks of bathing for him to get this out and off of his body. Sitting on corners, pan handling, this is one of the less subtle marks the streets leaves behind. I believe at some point Aaron stopped being able to smell it. I think the gentleman next to me was in that inoculated part of his homelessness as well. He may not smell it, but he certainly was aware that anyone could.

While I vainly attempted to continue reading, a song came on the overhead speaker and I felt the man moving to its beat. I shut out the book and its words and honed in on the song. My heart skipped a beat. It was "Sitting on the Dock of the Bay". A song, I would hear Aaron playing on YouTube early in the morning while he drank his coffee at 5AM. The same song, I remember hearing his father sing, too, early in the morning. Was this Aaron trying to talk to me? Communicating that he was with me? Was it the Universe telling me it knows what is twirling through and dizzying my mind? I began to hum, then softly sing the words to his moving and weaving with the tune just beside me. "Watching the tide roll away..." I believe we bonded.

At the end of the song, the man crumpled up his Pretzel package, downed his last sip of tea and began to get up. I placed my hand on his as he grabbed his bag. He didn't even notice my touch. I grabbed harder and placed my fingers and \$8 in his palm. He looked up at me. Locked eyes. Looked back at the money, my face, the money, and my face again. He said "thank you" while looking into my eyes, perhaps even my soul. He slowly turned, placed the bag on his shoulder and walked toward the door. I looked at my watch and it was 12 minutes until the next 104 bus would come to return this man from whence he came. I know the route well. He paused at the door. Looked at the rain outside, then at the \$8 and then walked over to the counter to get a cup of Joe. He had a

smile.

I then tried to look around at all the patrons. All were white. All had "work" they were going to, coming from, or settling into the bench to clock-in. All looked up from their goings-on and watched as this man walked to the counter. One shallow gal, who was sitting on the other side of the man, was holding her nose. I closed my book and watched the employees just as intensely as I observed the other characters in my sight. They too were looking at the man, then at the patrons, scrutinizing how much he was "disturbing" their privilege. I simply and slowly began to weep. I then progressed to sobbing. I was full on crying by the time I got to my car. I didn't want the man to see me crying. That would not be right. This was about me grieving Aaron, not about him. I am appreciative to him for allowing me the memories of Aaron to slam back into my active thoughts. I do fear of forgetting him.

Here is a second aspect of today's encounter that makes it amazing. All the times, I sat with Aaron at Starbucks, WaWa, street corners, or park benches, I never knew anyone else was around us. I only paid attention to him. How he was. What did he need? Was he hurt? Was he sick? Was he hungry? The rest of the world simply didn't exist. The "Fuck 'em if they have a problem" attitude was fully integrated into my psyche – reflexive versus voluntary – when Aaron was involved. While I hate to admit how entrenched Aaron and I were – as in the social work, psychology and health worlds "entrenched" is a bad word. We were. My well-being was based on his well-being. I smiled if he smiled. True enabling at its best. The concept riddles me with guilt over his demise as it is just too painful to think about further. I have had A LOT of people tell me these last few months that Aaron is in a "better place", "this happened for a good reason". These normal human responses to his ending piss me off and have scorched a portion of my heart with innocent relay. I hate hearing these phrases, because I want him here with me. I am lost without him and thinking about him and hugging him, and hearing his voice. I am lost not trying to "fix him" and/or "fix the problem of the day". So world... I am letting you know that I hear you I now see you. The good, discovered today, that has happened from Aaron's passing is that I am paying attention to the world, and my surroundings. I am no longer chained to Aaron. I felt somehow I was a horrible person to think that, to even let it enter my mind... but today this man beside me and Aaron within my soul and on the overhead speaker was telling me to participate in my own life and pay attention to the world around me. I am free.



TOLERANCE

BY MARY WILSON

It seems today the roles of tolerant and intolerant have been reversed
As we watch the children go by in a hearse
We scream and yell about our 2nd amendment right
And the thoughts of the future of our children seem nowhere in sight

The average person does not need to shoot hundreds of rounds
The result of what should be a few, turns in to multiple bodies down
We chant "Guns don't kill, People do"
The truth is, it is the difference between 50 and 2

On social media we are intolerant of opinions different than our own
We spend hours reading and writing replies just so we can have our opinion known
We fight over the NFL peacefully taking a knee
And look the other way when the cop who shot the innocent man is set free

Then the good cop comes out to investigate
but is shut down fast with jeers of hate
The shooting was done in broad daylight
But not a person saw, no witness in sight

We are intolerant of those who bully our kids in school
But elect and praise a bully as our President. We look like a fool
Families become divided, Friendships shattered
In the scheme of it all, over nothing that mattered

In the mean time territory the devil is taking becomes more and more
When we should be spending this time with our knees on the floor
Crying out to Jesus to come heal our land
But when he shows, we refuse to even take his hand.

I'm trying to hold on but what can we do?
Then I remember this is not our world, we are just passing thru
So I hold on to my faith and continue to pray
That sometime soon it will be a better day

I know my God never wanted such division
So spreading the Gospel has become my new mission
God's not real, he doesn't exist ...they said
But God said through James that Faith without works is dead

Oh Lord what works are you speaking of. We need a helping hand
He said if man would humble himself and seek his face, he will heal our land
We never know where the next evil thing lurks
But continue to pray because Prayer still works.



Photo by Pier Cicerelle, *untitled*

EDUCATION POLICY BRIEF

by *Tatiana McCoy*

The Problem

Education in America is one of the utmost important things each citizen has to acquire in order to achieve success. However, quality education is one of the hardest things to come by, thus receiving an education is a social problem that needs to be addressed. Due to the high importance of getting an education, policy makers have taken strides to address and rectify the issue, or merely make Americans believe that this is what they are doing.

The Proposed Solution

In 2001, President George W. Bush introduced No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act to instill hope in Americans that the somewhat failing education system would go through a transformation and place America in the top ranked of educators worldwide. NCLB was a reformation of The Elementary and Secondary Education Act that was passed under Lyndon B. Johnson's administration. This was passed to hold schools accountable for the success of their students. The initial act by President Johnson was passed in order to meet requirements for Title I to help states education policies concerning disadvantaged youth (Klein, 2015). NCLB was put into place to boost each states responsibility in educating students by putting intense focus on schools' performances in math, reading, and science subjects. It also decreased funding to schools that were not performing at the nationally selected academic levels.

NCLB also had several requirements that proposed to hold each state accountable for educating students. It was required that students be tested annually in grades 3-8 and once in high school to ensure that they are learning nationwide required material in math, reading, and science. It also included a school by school break down of demographic information, proficiency in the English language, and income status. NCLB had other components that were said to decrease the educational gap and educate youth through the U.S. (Karen, 2015).

From No Child Left Behind to Every Student Succeeds

After years of schools having to live up to the expectations of the NCLB, the Obama administration decided to reform the NCLB and pass Every Student Succeeds act (ESSA) which is the current education policy in place. This updated educational act gives the power to each state to create its own assessments for academic success and to close state-wide educational gaps (Camera, 2015). The goal of this is to ensure that children are progressing academically at their pace instead of penalizing schools. It is each states job to set up goals for their schools and to make exceptions for schools that are behind. Once goals are determined, states must turn them into the department of education and can push plans if denied by setting up appeal hearing dates (Klein, 2016).

Benefits, Stake Holders, Duty-Bearers

One of the benefits of ESSA is that states no longer have to adhere to high nationwide education standards. They are allowed to make their own rules in a sense, which should help students in the long run, because each school can be held to a standard of success that they can meet. Also, states no longer have to fight for educational funds based on nationwide tests. With each state having their own standards, they can keep the funding they have and not have to do away with programs and teachers because of a lack of money. While the states and students are benefiting from this act, the states also are duty-bearers. It is now each state's job to ensure their students' needs are being met where they are academically and moved to the next level at their own learning pace. It is also the duty of the state to seek out resources because

there are no more overly-stressed national policies they have to meet to receive help.

Key Forces That Shape Policy

History

When determining how policy is created, passed, and implemented it is important to examine the history that lead up to new legislation. Any policy pertaining to social welfare in America is always designed questioning what equality means during the time period and which citizens are entitled to it (Blau & Abromivitz, 2014). With respect to the education policy, it is important to know that during each presidential administration changes were made to the initial policy, however the base and reasoning remains the same. Providing quality education has always been the goal, but who received it changed over time. Prior to the mid 1950's education was only provided to the wealthy white people. The start of these changes to education policy can be linked back to 1954 when the Brown v. Board of Education case desegregated schools. This can be seen as the beginning of America determining all citizens are worthy of a quality education. In 1957, the National Guard was sent to Little Rock, Arkansas to desegregate Central High School (Blau & Abromivitz, 2014).

Economics

The economy plays a huge role in policy implementation as well as history. During the time period in which the NCLB act was passed, the economy was focusing on several principles that were assumed to self-adjust the country's finances at the time. Two principles connected to the NCLB were taxation and prison privatization and deregulation. In 2001 income taxes were cut from 70% to 35% over a span of 20 years (Blau & Abromivitz, 2014). Along with privatization the economy was moving toward privatizing prisons in order to make profits off of housing prisoners. Having private prisons saves the country money because private facilities cost less money. As of now the Corrections Corporation of America has 60 facilities in 16 states with 80,000 beds (Blau & Abromivitz, 2014). With the economy trying to cut costs as much as possible it makes sense that the passing of the NCLB was no different than the other policies made during the time. The country needed to save money and although education was important, policy makers did not want to allocate money to schools if they were not teaching their students.

Politics

Policies are also heavily dependent on political concerns and public outcries. During the time when the NCLB was passed two key political issues were at the forefront: the politics of taxes and politics of race (Blau & Abromivitz, 2014). Any politician trying to get elected had to have plans to address these two topics in their platforms to receive any public attention. The NCLB act fell perfectly within these two topics because half of the low performing schools in America had minorities enrolled which took care of race politics. Also, taxpayers wanted to feel fulfilled in knowing that the money they were paying was being used effectively, which made sense for the act to stop funding lower academically performing schools.

Ideology

The country's ideology is consistent with the policies that legislatures choose to pass. When NCLB was passed President Bush adopted the conservative viewpoint on the country's political issues. He had rejected the affirmative action in college

administration, which covered the racial politics issue at the time. President Bush was also antiabortion and promoted virginity pledges (Blau & Abromovitz, 2014). The idea of the country at the time was to save money and push education. Due to this the NCLB was formed with this idea and understanding.

Social Movements

One movement that can be seen as reasoning for the NCLB act, now the Every Student Succeeds act, is the Education Reform movement of the 19th century. Prior to this movement education was seen and used as a privilege. Not all children were honored enough to be educated. As an outcome of this movement regular children were able to attend schools, including African American children. The African American children were also given more options as to what schools they choose to attend. Also, this was the beginning of educating people who were mentally ill, which came after this movement. If this movement were to have never come about, the legislation and acts made to enhance education may have never happened. The idea of education would have still been seen as a privilege and not a basic human right.

Human Rights Principle

Participation

According to Shirley Gabel's analysis on the Right's Based Approach any social protection program created should involve participation from rights-holders and duty-bearers during every stage (Gabel, 2014). This means that policy makers should be polling the public when classifying social problems to pass a policy to address it. Minority and marginalized groups should be heavily considered and taken into account when creating and implanting a policy as well (Gabel, 2014). When we look at NCLB we see that it was passed without congressional update or reauthorization (Klein, 2015). This means that there was no consulting with rights-bears or the duty-bears to keep the law in place or revamped. President Bush pushed this policy and failed (to) ensure that basic human rights standards were met.

Accountability

The policy makers are responsible for the actions and decisions they make during the process of creating and implementing a policy. They must also ensure that citizens have the opportunity to appeal decisions and hold policy makers accountable for mistakes (Gabel, 2014). Looking at NCLB and ESSA it can be assumed that policy makers had stronger connections to the human right based approach because of the shift in accountability. The NCLB held schools accountable for educating and gave little funds to support them (Blau & Abromovitz, 2014). There was no way to question or refute appeals to shut down schools that were not performing well. Also schools could not question where funds went. ESSA put more accountability on the states and provided a better checks and balance system. States can make appeals on the Department of Education's denials on school curriculum decisions (Klein, 2015).

Nondiscrimination and Equality

The nondiscrimination and equality principle in the rights-based approach ensures that policies are made with vulnerable citizens protected first. These vulnerable citizens include, but are not exclusive to women, children, people living with disabilities, older aged and others (Gabel, 2014). NCLB Part D includes requirements to educate and implement prevention and intervention programs for delinquent and neglected youth (U.S. Department of Education). While by right this Act covers its bases in putting priority on a vulnerable population, however there was no measurement of how effect NCLB was in protecting its vulnerable population at the time. ESSA on the other hand has provisions to provide funds to lower performing schools to assist with educating them as well as having LEA funds allocated to students (U.S. Department of Education).

Conclusion & Recommendations

The No Child Left Behind Act had very good intentions, however policy makers weren't effective enough in the delivery. In analyzing

the Act I can say that I do agree with several points. One of the points being that low performing schools were, and still are, in need of improvement and resources. Schools in low in-come areas suffer more because of the never-ending cycle of lack of funding and support. However, the type of help NCLB provided was more detrimental than helpful. Closing schools that were not progressing at the speeds that the U.S. government wanted them to was not the solution. Instead of taking away funds immediately, an assessment of how funds were used and how funds played a part in the schools progress should have been done first. Displacing students by shutting down schools in turn caused more rates of lower academic success because there were more students than teachers could teach. I am in full support of the Obama's administrations transforming NCLB to Every Student Succeeds. President Obama said "With this bill, we reaffirm that fundamentally American ideal—that every child, regardless of race, income, background, the zip code where they live, deserves the chance to make of their lives what they will" (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). This act gives a voice to the students and funds and control to the states that know them best.

References

- Blau, J., & Abramovitz, M. (2014). *The dynamics of social welfare policy* (4th ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Camera, L. (2015). Proposed New Education Law Shrinks Federal Footprint. Retrieved from <https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/12/03/proposed-new-education-law-shrinks-federal-footprint>
- Gabel S. G. (2014). Analyzing social policies from a rights-based approach. In K. R. Libal, S. M. Berthold, R. L. Thomas, & L. M. Healy (Eds.), *Advancing human rights in social work education* (pp. 293-310). Alexandria, VA: Council on Social Work Education.
- Part D - Prevention and Intervention Programs for Children and Youth Who are Neglected, Delinquent, or At-Risk. (2005, December 19). Retrieved December 11, 2017, from <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/pg9.html>
- Klein, A. (2017, August 30). The Every Student Succeeds Act: An ESSA Overview. Retrieved September 17, 2017, from <http://www.edweek.org/ew/issues/every-student-succeeds-act/index.html>
- Klein, A. (2017, April 10). No Child Left Behind Overview: Definitions, Requirements, Criticisms, and More. Retrieved December 11, 2017, from <https://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/no-child-left-behind-overview-definition-summary.html>
- Karen, D. (2015). No Child Left Behind? Sociology Ignored!. *Sociology of Education*, 78(2), 165-169



Photo Credit: Illinois State Board of Education. Retrieved from <https://www.isbe.net/essa>

BOOK ANALYSIS

Black Suicide: The Tragic Reality of America's Deadliest Secret

By KIERSTAN FRAVEL

Black Suicide: The Tragic Reality of America's Deadliest Secret

Black Suicide: The Tragic Reality of America's Deadliest Secret is a non-fiction book written by Dr. Alton R. Kirk. Dr. Kirk is an African American psychologist who has studied the causes and effects of suicide since the 1970's. In his writing, Dr. Kirk focuses on the social, economic, political, psychological, and racial forces that contribute to suicide within the black community. Dr. Kirk is also able to address different types of suicidal behaviors that affect the black community and ways that they can be combated. These behaviors include drug abuse, high risk sexual behaviors, poor diet, and lack of physical motivation. The examples that Dr. Kirk provides, explain how social and economic injustice directly correlate with increased suicide rates within the black community. He also reflects on how oppression contributes to the increased suicide rate within the black community.

Social Justice and Black Suicide

Suicide can be viewed in many aspects. However, the reading focuses on how suicide is considered to be a social justice issue within the black community. One issue that Dr. Kirk addresses is that there is often a divide in the quality of health or mental health treatment that African Americans receive because of their race and the cultural barriers of the healthcare system. The lack of cultural awareness can cause disparities in treatment within the black community, and that is where the importance of cultural sensitivity becomes important in all professions.

Although many African Americans have a positive experience when navigating through the healthcare system, there have been many individuals in black communities that suffer from the lack of cultural competence of the professionals that they deal with. In *Critical Race Theory: A Transformational Model for Teaching Diversity*, the authors discuss the importance of teaching diversity to other individuals who are not part of a marginalized group. This practice addresses the power differentials when it comes to providing treatment to marginalized populations and how the treatment techniques can be improved with effective diversity training. African Americans need the security of knowing that service providers are culturally sensitive, in that, it may cause increased trust in the healthcare system knowing that someone else other than family is interested in their well-being.

Another issue that is prevalent within the black community is the lack of education and support when providing African Americans with the essential resources that contribute to preventing suicidal behaviors substance abuse, high risk sexual behaviors, poor diet, and lack of physical motivation. Although many underserved communities experience lack of education and support, the issues seem to be more common within the black community. This is said to be due to the ongoing disparities that African Americans face when it comes to quality education and healthcare. Dr. Kirk expressed that black communities experience these issues due to their poor environmental factors and economic status.

Economic Justice and Black Suicide

Throughout his writing, Dr. Kirk highlights the economic factors of suicide within the black community. Previously, it was mentioned that African Americans do not receive quality health care due to the cultural barriers of the healthcare professionals. However, one important economic factor that contributes to increased suicide rates in the black community is lack of quality care due to it not being affordable. Dr. Kirk mentioned that about 25 percent of African Americans do not have health coverage, which is an important aspect to receiving quality care.

Due to these disparities, many African Americans are working under large amounts of stress because of the inequalities they face within the system. Families within underserved black communities are continuously working hard to provide for their families, but it is difficult when the financial responsibilities can be unattainable. Working under these conditions can cause families to feel a sense of loss and discouragement when they are not able to make ends meet, and that can be considered a precipitated event that leads to increased suicide rates. African Americans have to deal with many forms of oppression when it comes to social and economic injustice, and that is not conducive to ensuring positive mental health when they are constantly facing adversity just to survive in their communities.

Oppression and Black Suicide

Throughout his writing, Dr. Kirk discusses the correlation between oppression and suicide within the black community. African Americans are continuously being oppressed through many channels in society whether it is in the media, the education system,

or the healthcare system. Being oppressed as an African American can lead to continuous stress when trying to navigate through life. As mentioned previously, Dr. Kirk reflects on how African Americans are not being treated fairly or given proper care within their communities due to the cultural barriers of the service providers they deal with when addressing physical and mental health issues. For many years, people of color have not trusted the healthcare system due to past experiments that were used to eliminate the black population (Tuskegee Experiment), and that can be an issue for individuals within the black community who are in need of assistance when they are in times of physical or emotional distress.

The authors of *The Challenge to Equality: "We made it, why can't you?"* discuss the role of oppression within the black community. The reading reflects on the colonization of the African American and Native American communities, which highlights the history of where oppression began for these communities and how they have evolved over centuries. Particularly for this reflection, it is important for individuals who serve these communities to be educated on the oppression that African Americans experience so they can help them overcome the adversity it brings.

Role of Social Work in Suicide and Social Justice

Social work practice plays an important part in suicide when dealing with suicidal clients and the families who have been affected by it. It is always important for service providers to connect with families through community involvement or counseling to ensure that they are providing the best service to clients no matter what their race or economic status is. It is very important for social workers to take the time to advocate and educate individuals on proper ways to preserve their physical or mental health due to experiencing generations of oppression, trauma, and inequality. Social work is providing excellent service to people from all backgrounds and being able to provide genuine and exceptional service to individuals and families can result in saving someone's life.

Excerpt: Mental Illness and Black Suicide

Throughout the reading, Dr. Kirk shares the stories of families who were affected by the suicide of a loved one. The most common theme of these stories was suicide by a mental illness associated with depression, where Dr. Kirk explains that it is the most common psychological state associated with suicide. Numerous mental illnesses of African Americans have gone undiagnosed and untreated. This goes back to the mistrust that African Americans have with the healthcare system as a whole. In times of distress, African Americans seem to rely on familial and religious support. There are also instances when individuals of the black community mask their mental health issues with substance abuse and other risky behaviors.

In the reading, there was a particular family who lost a son and brother to suicide. This family did not know how to cope because they never suspected for anything to be wrong. The mother of this gentleman described her son to be happy but always noticed that he was also "hungry" for more money and material possessions. When she received the call that her son committed suicide, she was blindsided and immediately felt that it was her fault. Dr. Kirk helps families and individuals cope with the suicide of a loved one by helping them recognize the behaviors that can potentially lead to suicide and reminds them that they are not to blame.

Educating individuals, families, and the community about the relation between mental illness and suicide is an important practice as social workers. This particular excerpt focuses on mental illness and how it can be used with families or individuals to give African Americans the opportunity to understand different ways to preserve their mental health when dealing with the many stressors that they can face.

References

- Bhavnagri, N. P., & Prospero, J. D. H. (2007). The challenge to equality: "We made it, why can't you?" *Multicultural Education*, 14(3), 56. Retrieved from http://proxy-wcupa.klnpa.org/login?url=http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/bic1/AcademicJournalsDetailsPage/AcademicJournalsDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=&displayGroupName=Journals&currPage=&dviSelectedPage=&scanId=&query=&prodId=&search_within_results=&p=BIC1&mode=view&catId=&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CA163265168&windowstate=normal&activityType=&failOverType=&commentary&source=Bookmark&u=west85252&jsid=6d441a9fb4badf3ff753c6dd4cfded37
- Kirk, A. R. (2009). *Black Suicide: The Tragic Reality of America's Deadliest Secret*. Silver Spring, MD: The Beckham Publications Group.
- Ortiz, L., & Jani, J. (2010). CRITICAL RACE THEORY: A TRANSFORMATIONAL MODEL FOR TEACHING DIVERSITY. *Journal Of Social Work Education*, 46(2), 175-193.

Mother

By Suzanne Sellers

On November 5th, 2014 I lost my best friend, who was also my mother. My mother had been my best friend from the time I was a pre-teen. I was blessed to have a close and loving relationship with both of my parents, but my connection with my mother was a once in a lifetime type of connection. We were different in so many ways. She was ambitious, stylish, graceful and had a presence. She was not one to be ignored, people just naturally gravitated towards her with respect for who and what she was. Even strangers knew she was someone special just by the way she carried herself. I on the other hand, am much more concerned about comfort than style, and can easily be overlooked. Yet for our differences, we were often on the same mental wave-length. For years it was very common for us to have a conversation where we would say the same thing, at the exact same time, using the exact same words, tone and cadence. Although at first this seemed a little eerie, in time we became use to it and would just laugh it off. I tell this story to illustrate that my mother was not just important to me, but in many ways, she was a big part of me.

Approximately eight years before her death, my mother was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. Two years before her death she had a stroke. Two years prior to her stroke, she had sold her home and moved into a nursing home with my father. The night they moved into the nursing home, my father's health took a turn for the worse requiring him to have several hospitalizations. When not at the hospital, my father lived in the assisted living section of the nursing home while my mother lived in an apartment. My mother continued to live her pre-apartment life, driving to conduct her errands, attend cultural events at the local community college, and hosting her book club. She also visited my father daily in his room. After a year of being in the nursing home my father died. My mother spent the next six months handling my father's estate. Without my father she was lonely, but she continued to immerse herself in her social life and communing with family and friends. After her stroke, her life changed drastically. Her illnesses affected her balance and due

to several falls, she was moved out of her apartment and into assisted living. Initially she had a roommate who interfered with her ability to sleep and move around her room comfortably. We moved her first chance we could to a private room, but this room was located on the wing that housed the residents with dementia and Alzheimer's. It was hard for her to participate in a stimulating or intellectual conversation with the other residents. Also, her movements were curtailed. No longer independent, she needed a chaperone if she wanted to leave the wing she lived on. With the loss of my father and the loss of her independence, my mother was not a happy person. Her persona changed in ways she did not like and there was little we could do to make her life what she wanted it to be.

On the last Wednesday in October 2014, I got a call from the head nurse on my mother's wing, telling me my mother's vital signs were not where they needed to be and she was being sent to the hospital. I got to the hospital shortly after she did and sat with her in between tests. I fully expected to take her back to her room at the nursing home either that night or the next morning. Instead, we were given the news she had cancer and needed to either enter hospice or have surgery the next morning. We talked and she wanted to have the surgery. We made arrangements to have her moved to a different hospital for the surgery. I then had to make the phone calls to my family members telling them of her situation.

The next day I went to the hospital and everything was set for her surgery. I stepped away to get something to eat while she was having the surgery but got called back to the hospital. The surgeon was saying that he would not do the surgery because she was too old. I argued that this was not an adequate reason not to perform the surgery. She was still a vibrant woman who should have all of the days she had left regardless of her age. He then said he did not think she was strong enough to withstand the surgery. If things did not go well she could go into a vegetative state. My mother and I discussed what her doctor said and she decided to go

SELLERS CONTINUED...

into hospice, as long as she could go back to her room at the nursing home. That night she went back to her room. Over the next few days she had a steady stream of visitors as word of her condition became known. Her brother and sister came from Virginia twice. Some of her friends were harder to reach than others, but on the day that her last special friend visited her, she died. I had asked her a few days earlier to please not die while I was in the room because I did not think I could handle it (maybe that was selfish on my part). I visited her the night she died. Approximately fifteen minutes after I left her room, I got the call that she was gone. They asked me if I wanted to come back and see her before she went to the funeral home, I declined. My son, however, did go to the nursing home to ensure she was taken with the respect due her and to say good-bye. I don't really remember what I did next. But knowing myself and how I operate, I am sure I made the necessary phone calls to family members, comforted my son upon his return and then attempted (unsuccessfully) to go to sleep. For my mother, it was exactly one week from diagnosis to death. I wasn't fully prepared and I was not ready. Yet I am glad she was mentally alert almost to the very end and was able to make the decisions about how she wanted to live her last days. I truly believe she went out on her own terms, when she had been able to say good-bye to all she cared about. She was truly a class act!

After my mother died, I first coped by taking care of others and taking care of business. I had helped my father prepare his memorial service. I was also the executrix of my mother's will. Thus, I ensured everyone who needed it had the information of my mother's death, I cleaned out her room, prepared for her memorial service and attended to my son's and brothers' emotional needs. As time went on, I also coped by talking to/about my mother, looking at her pictures and taking the opportunity to pay tribute to her and my father in different fashions. This was also the time when I decided to go back to school.

My significant others at that time were my older brothers and son. My brothers participated in one meeting at the funeral home with me. After that, they let me handle everything. While they did not do a lot to proactively help me, they did help me by not causing obstacles or standing in my way. They believed I was better equipped to handle both the emotional and administrative duties resulting from my mother's death and supported me in doing so. Even though I am the youngest, with mom gone, I became the head of family. It is now my responsibility to keep the family together and provide support to others. My brothers help out

with these duties and they both work to ensure the three of us stay regularly in touch. I still take most of the responsibility with the younger generations.

My religious belief tells me that my mother is now in a better and happier place. Prior to her death, she missed my father and her independence. Now she is with her husband, parents and many other friends and relatives. My mother is more herself now, than she was her last years on this earth. Also, I know she is now watching over me.

I still miss my mother on an almost daily basis. I know my issues are a result of the void that is now in my life where my mother used to be. I further know that no connection to another person or new activity can fill that void. The place in my heart that belonged to my mother can never be filled. I still get angry when I wake up from dreams where my mother is still alive. I would rather continue to sleep and be with her and my father, than wake up and deal with my life. That being said, I cannot sleep forever. My son and my nieces can still benefit from my presence on this earth. Therefore, until God chooses to call me home, I will continue to do my best to be of service to others. I do not fear death. Deep in my heart I believe that when I die there will be no pain. God will take any pain from me. In January 2018, I took a course on the end of life. During that course I learned once again how truly blessed I am and how exceptional my parents were. I was astounded to learn that many families do not discuss death. Unlike my mother, my father had a slow death. We saw it coming and were able to prepare for it as much as anyone can. We knew each time we saw each other may be the last, so we left nothing unsaid. I will never forget my father's last words to me "I love you honey." My father and I spent several afternoons planning his memorial service. This ensured that his service reflected the person he had been. I had also discussed death with my mother. Although her end came quickly, I knew how she wanted to be laid to rest. The time immediately following the death of a loved one is stressful and surreal. The earlier discussions we had regarding death made the decisions I had to make so much easier. Also, both of my parents were in hospice when they passed. They were as comfortable as possible and surrounded by their personal and treasured possessions. As a result of our discussions I was able to give my parents the gift of the type of death and service they desired, and they gave me the precious gift of making my mourning period more manageable.

THE NEW JOB

or "If you're gonna have a nervous breakdown because you're newly separated and the HR rep at your new job was your husband's mistress, it helps that your co-workers are also therapists trained in how to deal with people in messed up relationships"

by Ginneh Akbar

My therapist told me not to make any sudden moves. She said, "when you're in the middle of a crisis, you are running on emotion and not rationality. You absolutely should NOT make any big, life altering decisions because when the smoke clears, you are likely to see things differently!" Makes perfect sense. I'm a trained therapist, I understand these things. So what do I do? Quit my job. I QUIT MY JOB.

Aside from the regular annoying stuff you have to deal with just simply because you have a job (having to wake up, put on pants, the expectation that you have to be places at certain times, the occasional obnoxious coworker or client) there was nothing terribly wrong with my job. It paid well, I liked it, and I got along with my coworkers. I worked from home and made my own schedule and worked as little or as much as I wanted. It was kind of perfect, particularly for someone going through a crisis who was often depressed and couldn't get out of bed to work a 40 hour work week. But, nevertheless, here I go making my already complicated life more complicated, by quitting. So on top of adjusting to being separated, a single parent and new mother of 2 children, I was also now adjusting to a new job and new work schedule, and new coworkers. The new job was a good opportunity too, good location, downtown, and I envisioned myself eating sushi outside, meeting handsome strangers at happy hour, or maybe talking with a business man on the train on the way home from work. The reality, not so much, but what actually happened I could have never planned for.

I have always believed that sometimes you end up places for some other reason than you *thought* you were there. And from my very first day there, when Nina, a complete stranger aside from the 3 hours we had spent in orientation that morning, had to talk me off the ledge at lunchtime, because by another random twist of fate, I'd have to spend my first week of work in close proximity with the woman my ex-husband had an emotional affair with. From that day on, it was clear that these women would somehow play an important role in my journey. At lunch, I contemplated not going back. How the hell was I supposed to spend a week in orientation being trained by this woman? But also as fate would have it, Nina was a marriage and family therapist, so after I poured my heart out to Nina at that first lunch, she reeled me back in and we got back to work.

For some reason, in a dingy, poorly ventilated office space, "working" on a research project, The Creator saw it fit for my path to cross with an amazing group of talented and beautiful women. Calling Nina, Kiri and Kathy "coworkers" is vastly understated and almost insulting. By pure demographics, it makes no sense that we would have anything in common - separate stories, various backgrounds, races, religions, sexual orientations, marital status and ages. In fact, if we hadn't been working together, we probably would never run into each other anywhere.

We spent so much time laughing, that I'm sure people in offices close by would wonder what was going on. Sometimes they'd peak their head in. And we wouldn't stop, we'd try to bring them into the fold. Our humor wasn't for everyone... it was crass, and you had to be quick because if you slacked for one second, you'd be lost, and there's no catching up. We were hilarious! We were Internet researchers! We were matchmakers! We were fine lunchtime diners! We were sushi connoisseurs! And in our spare time, we'd actually do what we were paid to do - treat children and families who experienced trauma. And we were amazing at that too.

Sometimes the universe gives you just what you need at just the right time. I thought I was taking a new job as a trauma therapist. But what I actually got was support, safety, empowerment, love, healing and what I'm sure will be lifelong friendships. They taught me about authenticity. They taught me that it's ok to be vulnerable. By working with them, I realized that I had spent much of my education and career thinking that how I felt about the nature of humanity was an anomaly. They helped me to see that as one of my social work professors put it, it's ok "to take the human condition home with you." It doesn't make you weak or a bad social worker or therapist to feel deeply for coworkers or clients. It makes you real and authentic. It makes you a genuine person. They were such an important part of my development as a single woman, a social worker and a feminist. Although our time together was short, I value those memories and friendships and pay forward the lessons I learned from those amazing women. I will forever be grateful for my time with them.

THE CONTRIBUTORS

GINNEH AKBAR currently Dr. Akbar serves as an Assistant Professor of Graduate Social Work at West Chester University where she teaches classes in advanced social work practice methods, mental health/mental illness, as well as a few electives she recently developed, one on the intersection of social work, social movements and social media and one on radical social justice. She recently started Akbar & Associates, a consulting and training firm on a variety of topics.

KEN BELDON is the Founding Minister of WellSprings Congregation in Chester County. A mindfulness teacher, he is also in long-term recovery. In this third and final year of the MSW, Ken is a member of the Phi Alpha National Social Work Honor Society and is one of the recipients of the HRSA Integrated Health Project grant stipends. He is also married to Teresa, a professional journalist, and they live together in Conshohocken with their pet bunny.

SAVANAH T. BENNETT is a MSW student at WCU. She enjoys traveling the world,

and seeking out new experiences. Her passion for capturing life moments through photography started around the age of 4. She enjoys sneaking around her childhood home and finding disposable Kodak camera to snap pictures.

JESSICA BORELLI is a second year MSW student, who is also working towards a Certificate in Gerontology, and is expected to graduate in 2020. She is currently completing her practicum as a research assistant and was recently inducted into Phi Alpha Honor Society. Jessica is also very passionate about animal welfare and volunteers at an animal shelter in Philadelphia during her free time

AMBER CALDWELL is currently a second year MSW student and intends to graduate in May 2019. After graduating Amber will continue on to earn her Doctorate of Social Work. She is currently interning at the Chester County Veterans Affairs and hopes to be employed with the VA by the time she graduates.

JORDAN CUNNINGHAM is an MSW candidate to graduate in

2019. She carries experiences in wide ranges from working in prison settings, probation and parole settings, working with children and families in poverty and currently working with children in the medical health field, working with children experience autism and other behavioral health needs and helps facilitate the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at Chester County Hospital. Jordan has found she loves working in all avenues and is excited to become an MSW graduate in May to further enhance society.

KIERSTAN FRAVEL is a third-year MSW student. Kierstan's interest in the field consists of family work and family preservation. She is passionate about diversity and making a difference in the community. She lives in Wilmington, Delaware with her husband and dog.

CARRISSA GRIFFING is a third-year MSW student (2019). She is a Registered Nurse who holds a Master's degree in Communication and Information Studies from Rutgers University (1998). During her 3 years at WCU she has been a graduate assistant for the Frederick Douglass Institute and is

clinically placed at Paoli Hospital's Intensive Care Unit working in care coordination. She is a member of Phi Alpha Honor Society and a 2018-2018 recipient of Dr. Nadine Bean's HRSA Integrative Health Stipend. She has been married for 14 years and is the mother of two children (Morgan and Maddox). She ardently works with Pennsylvania nurses and doctors with Substance Use Disorders and is a public recovery advocate for adolescents and young adults.

ANNE MARIE "NAN" JORDAN

is in her third and final year of the MSW program at West Chester University. She has thoroughly enjoyed her time in the program and is excited for the next chapter out in the real world. As a student, she is a member of Phi Alpha Honor Society and a 2018 recipient of the HRSA BHWET grant. If free time were a thing, you would find "Nan" tap dancing, doing yoga, cooking and reading for pleasure.

TATIANA MCCOY is a second year MSW student at WCU. She holds her B.S in Human Development and Family Studies from the Pennsylvania State University. A dedicated person to ensuring the betterment in the lives of children in urban

neighborhoods. Tatiana participated in a year of service with City Year Philadelphia where she developed a greater sense to cause of equal educational opportunities. She continues to volunteer her time at inner city schools in Philadelphia.

CANDACE SIMMONS is a part-time Masters of Social Work student at the WCU Philly campus. She is slated to graduate in May of 2019. Candace is a member of Phi Alpha National Social Work Honor Society. She entered the MSW program with a wealth of field knowledge and experience, having worked in various behavioral and mental health settings for 13 years. This summer she will be taking time to study abroad in Germany. While there, she will be emerged in educational activities related to human rights and social welfare implications of nationalistic, populist, and religious political movements in immigration. Candace will also participate in a research based service learning project. Post graduate school; she intends to pursue ongoing studies, licensure, and venture to establish a non-profit organization for children and youth.

SUZANNE SELLERS is a third-year, part-time MSW student. She completed her

undergraduate degree in Psychology and Economics at Bucknell University and her JD at Temple University School of Law. She became a single parent through adoption in 1991 and retired from a career in government service in 2012. Currently she serves on the Board of Directors of Together as Adoptive Parents and is working towards enriching the experiences available on the Philadelphia campus by serving as a member of the Student and Community Engagement Committee, a student representative to the MSW Department meetings and the Vice-President (Philadelphia campus) of the Phi Alpha Honor Society. Her passions include her family, reading, learning and being of services to others.

ADAM SLEDD MSW '18 is the Coordinator of Recovery Support Services in Chester County for the Council of Southeast PA. Adam began the collegiate recovery effort at WCU in 2015 with the establishment of Ram Recovery, a recognized student organization, and the College Recovery Task Force, which is still working to obtain institutional support for students in recovery.

voices



WCU
WEST CHESTER
UNIVERSITY