

Dear Research Community,

As we wrap up the 2020-2021 academic year – some of us together for its entirety and others catapulting in at halftime and totally rocking our worlds – I feel compelled to write you this letter about our time together and its impact on our individual and collective lives. My hope is that this letter provides us with an archive, however partial and incomplete, that reminds us of what we've been through as a community and sheds a hopeful light on what is yet to come.

This year has been unprecedented. Covid-19 is drastically changing how global societies function by redefining how people go to school, work, and engage in leisure activities among other things. Our lives have become consumed by video conferencing technologies (some of us in the class spending over 48 hours a week on Zoom); we've all been grappling with profound isolation, loss, and the myriad lived through experiences associated with this global pandemic.

The Black Lives Matter movement erupted the summer of 2020 when the nation took to the streets in peaceful protest demanding a revolution following the murder of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. We were given a glimpse of what could be possible if differently positioned people stood in solidarity against the ongoing violence toward people of color (oftentimes at the hands of the State and other institutions). We welcomed a new administration with Vice President Kamala Harris making history as the first woman and woman of color to be Vice President of the United States. Yet, the swinging pendulum reminds us that our work as critical social workers is far from over, as we also witnessed white supremacy groups storm the Capitol in violent protest against the new administration and our budding hopes for a nation redefined by equity, unity, justice, and reparation.

As the next generation of social workers, I leave you with a few mediations derived from our conversations in Social Work Research 1 & 2, which I hope that you take with you on your journey through the field. I write to honor the wisdom of Black feminist theorists like Junelle Addei (2021) and Sara Ahmed (2017) who remind us about the politics of citation by acknowledging the community of scholars with whom we align our thinking with and learn from.

As a community, we've been grappling with how to build a knowledge society that is accessible and inclusive of multiple perspectives. We've deliberated the insidious ways that colonialism (along with racism, ableism, classism, patriarchy, ageism, cisism, xenophobia, heteronormativity) seeps into research, and we learned from scholars like Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) about decolonizing methodologies (also see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1ZXQC27tvq>). Evelin Henriquez (2020) wrote an essay about ideologies of domination that marginalize Black frameworks, paradigms, and ways of knowing within social work education (see also Rogers & Turner, 2021). Henriquez (2020) provides a compelling argument for centering Black frameworks in social work education, practice, policy, and research to develop and evaluate Afrocentric interventions for communities from the African diaspora. Doing so may enable social work to tap into the strengths of these communities and dismantle structural inequity from both within and outside of the profession.

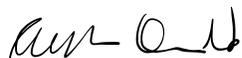
Junelle Addei (2021) astutely notes that social work research also needs to study privilege to disrupt longstanding research traditions that focus on studying the “Other” from Eurocentric perspectives while hiding the intractable aspects of privilege that manifest in peoples’ everyday actions and reactions, such as white silence. We’ve become sensitized to the ways that privilege runs through bodies and institutions creating educational disparities, as evidenced in the findings from our community survey which demonstrate that students of color are deeply affected by these contentious times and are feeling less supported by professors, internship supervisors, the field department, and administration when compared to their white counterparts. We’ve also been reckoning with how social workers and social work institutions, though committed to the goals of social justice, are not necessarily immune from the circuits of privilege and dispossession that produce inequalities among different people and groups (see Weis & Fine, 2012).

We hear in the inklings of our desires a need for more. What else might be possible for social work research, education, and practice? How might we reimagine the profession in light of what we know about history and yet-to-be futures that we’re all longing for? Will radical solidarity with people from distinctly different standpoints save us from our personal and disciplinary shortcomings (Oswald, Bussey, Thompson, & Ortega-Williams, 2020)? Do we follow the radical wit of abolitionists like Lucy Parsons (1905) and Nyra Serrant (2021) who demand we “burn it down” and rebuild by centering the needs and desires of those most affected by injustice? Or perhaps we take a less radical approach, though still powerful, and demand that our governing bodies like CSWE include in their audits of social work programs a metric to assess the degree to which students from different social locations feel supported by their institutions (De La Cruz, 2021).

As we move forward on different paths, I hope that we are always an ally for the “Other” whether that be Black women and people of color, queer folks, Indigenous Peoples, women, elders, people with disabilities, or immigrants. We cannot as a community dissociate ourselves from the events that have transpired over the past year or they will persist. Please maintain your critical, reflexive stance and “work the hyphen” that separates and joins us within the politics of everyday life in order to challenge the structures, ideologies, and practices that enable “Othering” (Fine, 1994). Together, we can build the version of society and social work that we are all reaching for.

This imperfect historical record was created in solidarity and with a profound dedication to disrupting hegemony in social work research and education. It does not account for all of the nuanced conversations that we’ve had, nor does it represent all of the voices, ideas, and perspectives within our community that have shaped our thinking. It provides a glimpse into our lives at one moment in time from one person’s perspective. I will miss our Tuesday mornings.

With sincerity and in solidarity,



Austin G. Oswald

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Personal Communications

- Junelle Addei, personal communication, March 16th, 2021 and May 11th, 2021.
- Kiara De La Cruz, personal communication, May 11th, 2021.
- Nyra Serrant, personal communications, April 20th, 2021 and May 11th, 2021.