

Truth, Reconciliation, and Social Work: A Critical Pathway to Social Justice and Anti-oppressive Practice

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Abstract

The truth and reconciliation movement has received little attention in the social work literature in the United States yet holds great value as a pathway to the realization of the social justice goals of the profession. Truth and reconciliation commissions have been utilized internationally and have more recently emerged in the United States relevant to issues of historical trauma and oppression of indigenous people. The truth and reconciliation model is well-aligned with social work values and aims connected to human rights, culturally-sensitive practice, and an anti-racist stance. Proactive engagement in a truth-telling process that examines the role of social work in past and present injustice is a social work imperative. A commitment to anti-oppressive social work practice requires self-examination and self-awareness from our own social location and positions of relative privilege, as individuals and as a profession. As a teaching tool, an area of empirical inquiry, a framework for action, and a lens for self-examination, truth and reconciliation is of great value to social work and holds much untapped potential in the United States. This article offers information about truth and reconciliation, and its aims, processes, and benefits. Implications for social work education, practice, research, and policy advocacy are discussed, along with a call for social work leadership on the path toward authentic truth-telling and reconciliation within and outside the profession.

Keywords: Truth and reconciliation; social justice; social work ethics; anti-oppressive practice; oppression

Only the truth can put the past to rest...reconciliation means working together to correct the legacy of past injustice.

—Nelson Mandela

The Truth and Reconciliation Movement has received little attention in social work literature in the United States yet holds great professional value as a pathway to the realization of social justice goals. Truth and reconciliation commissions (TRCs) have developed internationally in areas such as post-Apartheid South Africa, New Zealand, South Korea, and Canada over the last few decades (Chung, 2016; de Costa, 2017; Dong-Choon, 2010; Parker, 2017). The work of TRCs is frequently focused on indigenous and colonized groups (Parker, 2017), with the recent inclusion of those with mental illness (Spandler & McKeown, 2017) and populations impacted by criminal justice reform (Meyers, 2009; Norris, 2017). TRCs are formed in response to persistent oppressive systems marked by human rights violations aimed at targeting populations through forced assimilation, violence, and persistent discrimination.

Internationally, TRCs are generally supported by government policy mandates and financial allocations (Roper & Barria, 2009) with

major aims including the redress and restoration of relationships damaged by a history of violence and its consequences for both the privileged and the oppressed; building understanding and empathy; democratization, and the decolonization of both knowledge and action (Ben-Josef Hirsch, MacKenzie, & Sesay, 2012; Parker, 2017). TRCs utilize strategies such as investigation into past human rights violations, eliciting the voices of those impacted and recording testimony, facilitating community dialog, offering policy recommendations, and education and training to policymakers and professionals (Parker, 2017). Sharing foundational concepts with restorative justice, the aim is not punishment but healing (Androff, 2010; Beck, 2012). Similarly, transitional justice concepts suggest the importance of meaningful and full, cross-sectional community participation and truth-telling to socially-just change (Clark, 2011; Mollica, 2017).

TRCs have emerged more recently as a tool of social justice in the U.S., and the model is in line with social work values and aims connected to human rights, culturally-sensitive practice, and an anti-racist stance (Androff, 2010). U.S. examples exist in Detroit, MI and the State of Maine, along with the exemplar, which was organized by community members in Greensboro, N.C., and which operated without government support (Bermanzohn, 2007; Inwood, Alderman, & Barron, 2015). However, the international community has more fully developed and utilized the model to drive social work theory, policy, and practice (Schames, 2003). Also, in contrast to truth and reconciliation models internationally, state support via legislation and resource allocation is less common in the U.S. (Inwood, Alderman, & Barron, 2015). The lack of resources is clearly problematic in the face of the historically state-sanctioned violence and oppression that lies at the heart of the movement. A challenge to the TRC model is a lack of accountability on the part of the state and the resulting mistrust in communities seeking such healing (Inwood, 2016). The TRC model, objectives, and overall movement hold great value for social work practice, advocacy, education, and research and remains a

largely untapped tool for the U.S. in confronting and addressing the harms of the past.

Truth-telling in the Social Work Profession: Turning the Lens Inward

True reconciliation exposes the awfulness, the abuse, the hurt, the truth. It could even sometimes make things worse. It is a risky undertaking but in the end it is worthwhile, because in the end only an honest confrontation with reality can bring real healing. Superficial reconciliation can bring only superficial healing.

—Desmond Tutu

A prerequisite to reconciliation is the process of truth-telling. Social work professional preparation places a strong emphasis on self-awareness at the micro level, challenging us as individuals to closely examine our own biases and experiences and their potential impact for our client relationships and decision-making (Urdang, 2010; Yan & Wong, 2005). Such self-awareness is frequently associated with concepts such as cultural competence, but rarely is it examined as a pathway for critical, anti-racist practice (Feize & Gonzalez 2018). The social work literature places less emphasis on turning the lens inward at the macro level and confronting the injustices inherent to the United States and the history of our profession. For social work, this includes participation in the oppression and social control of vulnerable people across time and space. Such examples in the profession, if unacknowledged, create barriers to the realization of our social justice mission, and we risk continued whitewashing of our own history. Attention to our role in past and present injustice, along with work toward reconciliation, is a social work imperative. Key to this process is the acknowledgement that the past is not just the past, and those harms are best understood as a continuum that exists and manifests in the present day, regardless of one's own

direct participation (Androff, 2010; de Costa, 2017; Jones, 2006). This consciousness-raising process is critical, in particular for social workers for whom social location provides advantage (Czyzewski & Tester, 2014).

Unfortunately, alongside our profession's legacy of activism is a history fraught with examples of social work as a tool of social control and social workers as the purveyors of oppression. Essential elements of this history include the forced assimilation and violence perpetrated on Native Americans in boarding schools as well as social workers' participation in the Indian Adoption Act, marked by efforts to eradicate Native cultures (Jacobs, 2013; Parker, 2017; Regan, 2010); public assistance caseworkers' enforcement of oppressive and punitive policies aimed at exerting state control of poor women utilizing public assistance (Abramovitz, 2018; Durbin, 1973); a mental health system rooted in inhuman practices (Spandler & McKeown, 2017); continued application of a pathology-medical model to services for people with disabilities (DePoy & Gilson, 2012); racial segregation in social work education and practice (Platt & Chandler, 1988), and alignment with the goals of eugenics (Kennedy, 2008). This historical knowledge is essential to professional awareness but is often missing in our texts.

Concepts such as race-related stress (Utsey, Chea, Brown, & Kelly, 2002) and historical trauma provide vehicles for better contextualizing and understanding the aggregate and longitudinal impact of mass and prolonged group-based trauma. Historical trauma refers to the generational pain for groups that have been targeted for systematic oppression through acts such as colonization and relocation, resulting in reports of "historical loss" and associated symptoms such as grief, alienation, loss of trust, and social marginalization (Braveheart, Chase, Elkins, & Altschul, 2011; Whitbeck, Adams, Hoyt, & Chen, 2004). Historical trauma is a concept that has also been utilized in tribal communities in the United States to contextualize the past and build on cultural strengths for shared healing. The concept of coloniality also helps to frame the impact

of the legacy of colonization and the oppression/suppression of Native cultures in the U.S. Coloniality is the systemic oppression of cultures and ways of being through suppression and control by the dominant, Western culture. While the colonization period is over, colonizers are still present, and this history is a continuum that connects to the present, the impact of colonization still a reality (Mignolo, 2005). Present day discrimination builds on this loss and manifests as inequities in health, mental health, socio-economic status, and violence. This legacy remains, often unspoken, as a barrier between social workers and the vulnerable or disadvantaged groups we aim to serve. These contexts must be considered in social work across levels and fields of practice, and engagement with colonial history and its impact is an ethical imperative (Czyzewski & Tester 2014).

A timely example will illustrate. The issue of sexual violence against women has come to the forefront recently across the globe, and that is best understood through an intersectional lens that accounts for collective historical trauma. Given the fact that American Indian and Alaskan Native (AI/AN) women (26.9%) have the highest percentage of sexual violence (attempted or completed rape) in comparison to other groups (non-Hispanic Blacks 22% and non-Hispanic Whites 14.6%), (Black, et al., 2011), we must account for those disparities and their roots in our efforts to prevent and respond. Not only are AI/AN women and girls disproportionately represented in reported statistics related to sexual violence, the dynamics of these offenses are different from those experienced by members of other populations. The connection to the use of sexual violence as a tool of warfare and genocide against Native people in the U.S. must be considered when working with current day survivors. This context is critical to both a true person-in-environment perspective and for culturally-informed therapeutic work. A social worker directing a Tribal Family Violence Prevention Program makes clear the connection between colonization and the experiences of Native women today:

In looking at violence against Native women, it's important to look at historical traumas and history. The legacy of colonization has had a tremendous impact on our people for generations...We have to look at the impact of colonization and the sexual violence perpetrated amongst native children at boarding schools. It's as though we've been conditioned to accept this kind of victimization (S. Partridge, as quoted in Nagle, 2015).

The lessons we can take from the Truth and Reconciliation Movement should not only be lessons of remediation, but insight into prevention. As we turn the lens inward on our own history, we are further implicated in the marginalization and oppression of less powerful others in the present day: for example, the treatment of sexual and gender minority people in social work educational and practice settings (Dentato, et al., 2016). As noted by Jeyapal (2017), the paradox for social workers committed to social justice is that we are frequently anchored within, and limited by, the very institutions and practices that have shaped injustice over time (e.g., the criminal justice system).

At the same time, contemporary practice also reveals policies and practices aimed at truth and reconciliation. In one of the only state-sponsored initiatives in the U.S., The Maine-Wabanaki-State Child Welfare TRC has mandated the process in statute. In a move beyond the protections set forth by the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978, the Commission has created the structures and processes necessary to amplify and bring the voices of Native people to the forefront, including those directly impacted by harmful practices of the past such as the Indian Adoption Project (Attean, et al., 2012). The goals of the Maine-Wabanaki project are threefold: to uncover and acknowledge the truth about what happened to Wabanaki children and families; to create opportunities for healing; and to change the child welfare system through training and culturally-informed practices aimed at just

and sensitive treatment of Wabanaki families today. A major outcome has been a truth-telling process about the impact of past child welfare practices for generations of Native people, as well as a disruption to the accepted narrative about Native families that has tainted the system and its services for decades (Bjorum, 2014). Testimony, records, and stories are now available, and though the goals of the legal mandate have largely been met, the work of the TRC continues as a mechanism for healing and change in the community (Maine-Wabanaki Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2018). Also available are guiding documents and information relevant to the process, making such resources accessible for others to utilize. Particularly in areas such as child welfare, social workers have a major role to play and the opportunity to bring the processes and goals of truth and reconciliation to their work across the U.S.

Moving Forward in Truth Toward Reconciliation

Reconciliation is a part of the healing process, but how can there be healing when the wounds are still being inflicted?

—N. K. Jemisin

A commitment to anti-oppressive social work practice requires a commitment to self-examination and self-awareness (Feize & Gonzalez, 2018) from our own social location and positions of relative privilege. Self-understanding can impact change and offers a kind of empowerment in critical consciousness (Gutierrez, DeLois, & GlenMaye, 1995). We echo here Jeyapal's (2016) call to social work action and the need for social workers to intentionally confront racism and other oppressive structures through proactive efforts, leadership, and vigilance in the face of the violence and discrimination still so present in our society. An intersectional perspective is also required if we are to truly understand the complexity of privilege and oppression as it manifests for each of us according to our own unique social location.

We offer another example of the importance of truth and reconciliation currently unfolding in Oklahoma, the site of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre that occurred almost 100 years ago (Brown, 2018; Ellsworth, 1982), creating a legacy of segregation and racial inequality that persists in that community today. On May 31, 1921, a riot erupted in a racially and gender oppressive context where lynching of African American men and women was a common reality. It was against this backdrop that an interaction between Dick Roland and Sarah Page was interpreted as a sexual assault by the White population, resulting in his lynching. As news of the lynching spread, African American veterans from World War I gathered in front of the courthouse to protect him. A confrontation between the veterans and Whites escalated. The White mob grew, continuing to shoot and kill people as it marched into the thriving African American community of Greenwood, once known as Black Wall Street. Once in the community, the mob set fires leveling Greenwood (Ellsworth, 1982). Initial reactions within the dominant society were to deny the devastation. Greenwood residents' claims to replace property were denied by insurance companies. Suits brought against the City of Tulsa were dismissed. The African American community was blamed for the riot and a decades-long coverup began (Oklahoma Commission to Study the Race Riot of 1921 [OCSTRR], 2001).

As the 100th anniversary of this horrific event approaches a Centennial Commission (CC) was formed in 2017 that is dedicated to education, remembrance, and economic development. The CC has state-level bipartisan backing and the support of the Tulsa Mayor (Centennial Commission, n.d.) with funding from a local community foundation. The CC has made significant contributions toward truth and reconciliation in the community, including: 1) the expansion of education specific to the massacre to discussion of the impact on the state and national level, 2) placing remembrance of victims and descendants as a prominent factor, and 3) attending to economic development within Greenwood. Most importantly the CC has been foundational in the renaming of the riot as the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre

which represents an accurate portrayal of the horrific event. The pathway to the realization of the CC was lengthy and fraught with the previous attempts to seek justice that were denied.

In 1996, House Bill 1035 created the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Race Riot of 1921 [OCSTRR] which began research in 1997 (Gates, 2003) and produced a final report on February 5, 2001. Specific restorative actions were listed in the report, including reparations to survivors, listening to the voices of the descendants of survivors, a scholarship fund, economic growth in Greenwood, and a memorial for the reburial of victims found in mass graves (OCSTRR, 2001). When the state passed the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot Reconciliation Act, it included 300 college scholarships, a memorial, and economic development plan only. Over 10 years later, the Oklahoma Senate passed S.B. 1381 that would have required education regarding the Tulsa Race Riot in public schools, however, the bill failed in the House based on arguments that the Department of Education required this teaching. The argument for the sponsoring representatives was that it was still not being taught by many educators.

OCSTRR (2001) indicated that the American Association of Social Workers (AASW) studied the housing of African Americans in Tulsa not long before the massacre. The report noted that the majority lived in poor conditions, under segregation. These findings were shared at the 56th AASW national conference in 1929 and are no other known reports or studies exist from the profession. It is regrettable that there was no follow-up study conducted at that time, or since, that would have documented the devastation and continuing impact of this event on current biopsychosocial well-being of Black Americans in Tulsa. Collectively, those in power distorted the cause of the massacre, denied the extent of the injuries, the deaths, the property destruction, and placed the blame on the survivors themselves. The oppressed kept the stories alive and spoke truth in their community newspapers, agencies, and churches. This dedication was the foundation of the OCSTRR report that ultimately documented the horrors of that day and the subsequent coverup, and catalyzed efforts toward a

more complete process of truth-telling and creating pathways to reconciliation. Key to this process has been legislation supporting the aims of truth and reconciliation as well as community efforts toward truth-telling; however, missing in this process is a fiscal commitment by the State to devote funds to these efforts and much work is yet to be done in terms of broad education about this history as well as an accounting of the harms incurred by the community, paid in the currency of historical trauma. Social workers have a critical role to play in this process, as well as in similar efforts in the United States to confront and address past harms.

As a profession dedicated to social justice, social work can utilize this event as an example of extreme oppression and the need for truth and reconciliation toward thwarting the damage done by decades of denial. The above-described actions related to the Tulsa Race Massacre do reflect many of the key elements of truth and reconciliation, including investigation into past human rights violations, eliciting the voices of those impacted and recording testimony, facilitating community dialog, offering policy recommendations, and education and training to policymakers and professionals (Parker, 2017). While a missed opportunity for the profession of social work to take a justice stance immediately following the Tulsa Race Massacre, today social workers can assist in confronting that past and in translating the lessons learned to the social welfare issues of today through research and education.

In addition to the initiatives utilizing a TRC model at the community level, the spirit of the truth and reconciliation movement also calls upon us to tell hard truths and act on smaller scales, including a disruption of continuing oppression. Social work educators must teach about the past as they help create our future. Teachable moments abound for social work educators to offer concrete examples that connect history to the present and opportunities for reconciliation at the local level; examples from one of the authors' institutions will illustrate: Thirty-nine tribal nations exist today in Oklahoma; over 30 of those were forcibly relocated from traditional homelands (Hamill, 2000).

Perspectives such as critical race theory (Kolivoski, Weaver, & Constance-Huggins, 2014) and anti-oppressive practice (Burke & Harrison, 1998) provide additional platforms upon which to uncover the realities of our shared past (and present) and to critically examine the roles we may play in perpetuating injustice within the profession and should be included in social work curricula. A number of teaching tools and strategies also exist to aid the social work educator in these aims including: documentaries that represent the truths of history; case histories that illustrate historical trauma as a cultural context for practice; use of assessment and measurement tools that include an accounting of injustice experienced at the individual and collective levels; policy analysis through an anti-oppressive lens; advocacy and leadership around truth-telling (e.g., establishing October 10 as Indigenous Peoples Day in lieu of Columbus Day); and activities outside the classroom such student groups and community events.

In practice, education, and research, social workers can use foundational social work practice tools like adapted ecomaps and genograms as well as measurement scales to help promote both self-awareness and a deeper understanding of others. Examples include the Culturagram (Singer, 2008); the Color-Coded Timeline Trauma Genogram (Jordan, 2004); the Transgenerational Trauma and Resilience Genogram (Goodman, 2013); the Historical Loss and Associated Symptoms Scale (Whitbeck, Adams, Hoyt, and Chen, 2004); the Internalized Racial Oppression Scale (IROS) for Black individuals (Bailey, Chung, Williams, Singh & Terrell, 2011); the Index of Race-related Stress (Utsey & Ponterotto, 1996); and the Urban American Indian Identity Scale (Walters, 1999) which may aid in assessment with clients in practice; educators may also employ these in relation to case studies and researchers to guide inquiry.

An understanding of historical trauma and its impact today is critical when working with individuals and in communities impacted by collective past oppression. Further, efforts toward individual and cultural empowerment are supported by the process of truth and reconciliation. Members

of historically oppressed populations become empowered by acknowledgement of the harms of the past, as eloquently noted by author Maya Angelou: “There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you”. Additionally, as we recognize past harms, we also come to understand the collective resilience and strength present in impacted populations. DeGruy, in her work on posttraumatic slave syndrome offers this perspective as key to healing. This lens allows us to:

...gain a greater understanding of the impact centuries of slavery and oppression has had on our lives. With this understanding we can explore the role our history has played in the evolution of our thoughts and feelings about who and what we are...While it is true that some of this evolution has resulted in behaviors that have become both destructive and maladaptive, it is also encouraging that in spite of the oppressive conditions our ancestors endured, they were able to pass on their phenomenal powers of resilience and adaptability” (DeGruy, 2005, p. 16).

For a strengths-based profession, this insight is invaluable to social work, helping allies to be better equipped to promote and support the empowerment of oppressed groups.

Strier and Breshtling (2016) offer the concept of professional resistance as an opportunity for social workers to confront and, when possible, refuse participation in oppressive practices, programs, and policies. This tension was noted as well by Jeyapal (2017) between the goals, ethics, and values of social work and the realities of practice places practitioners in a bind. Functioning as “translators of state power” (Strier & Breshtling, 2016, p.111), social workers are often called upon to enforce the very policies and procedures that run counter to the aims of anti-oppressive practice. Referencing moments in history such as the rank and file movement of the

early 20th century, the authors recognize a tradition of professional resistance. Resistance is defined not as noncompliance, but as an act informed by a critical and contextualized analysis of social control and oppressive forces aimed at supporting social justice goals (Fook, 1993; Singh & Cowden, 2009). Professional resistance to oppressive systems may manifest as: opposition to or offering alternatives to the application of Eurocentric interventions for diverse populations; focusing social work analysis and change efforts on the oppressors rather than the oppressed; empowering client populations to guide research and practice; and promoting strategies such as truth and reconciliation to expose the lived realities of oppressed people and spark change informed by those truths (Strier & Breshtling, 2016). Not without risks and challenges, professional resistance to historical amnesia/denial and the practices and policies that perpetuate human rights violations is a stance that social workers should consider, as they also consider reasons why clients may be labeled resistant to intervention that may further marginalize them.

There is a need for research aimed at further operationalizing TRCs and understanding their impact (Ben-Josef Hirsch, MacKenzie & Sesay, 2012) as well as in social work practice specifically (Androff, 2010). In addition to their potential roles in the work of TRCs, social workers’ use of records, testimony, and public events offer springboards to better understanding the impact of historical, collective civil and human rights violations for individuals and families. For example, Abdullah (2013) highlights the utility of South Africa’s TRC documentation of national trauma as “a guide for multicultural social work” (p. 46) that also provided accounts of gender-based and police violence and their community impacts, a true person-in-environment perspective inclusive of the collective past. Similar benefits can be cultivated from efforts such as the Centennial Commission’s work around the Tulsa Race Massacre as described above. Exploratory research into social workers’ knowledge of oppressive practices within the profession, of historical trauma, and anti-oppressive

practices is also needed. Historical trauma must be a primary element in culturally-sensitive, culturally-responsive research. Researchers should consider the history of funding streams, research design, data ownership and sharing, the interpretation and sharing of results when working with or on behalf of historically oppressed populations as efforts toward the decolonization of knowledge.

Participatory, qualitative methodologies are well-suited for work with historically oppressed populations. Such a contextualized, reflective, and reflexive approach is crucial, lest we risk perpetuating the same oppression we seek to alleviate: loss of voice, disempowerment, decontextualized knowledge and resulting exploitation or colonization of knowledge. Further, intervention with historically oppressed people must be rooted in the perspectives and lived experiences of those impacted. Trauma-informed research with a macro-level focus is imperative to the promotion of social justice for oppressed groups, and qualitative research offers an essential pathway. Exploratory research aimed at better understanding social workers' knowledge of and response to issues related to historical trauma is also needed to help guide social work education. Lastly, research to identify the short- and long-term impact of interventions aimed at historical trauma and loss is needed in order to support the development of culturally-informed practice and build the evidence base.

Social workers also have the professional skills, knowledge, and values to be instrumental in policymaking related to the formation of TRCs that include state participation/accountability, along with implementation of changes based on their work. Policy analysis through an anti-oppressive lens, advocacy for state-supported truth and reconciliation commissions, and the translation of policy into rules and procedures that reflect social justice goals provide opportunities for social workers to promote truth-telling, healing, and change. Related, truth and reconciliation may serve as both a goal and a process in community organizing work (Beck, 2012).

As a teaching tool, an area of empirical

inquiry, a framework for action, and a lens for self-examination, truth and reconciliation is of great value to social work and holds much untapped potential in the U.S. In our efforts to operationalize the value of social justice, we must start with the process of our own truth-telling. By engaging in the sometimes painful process of truth-telling about our own participation in the oppression of others, we empower ourselves and others for healing and reconciliation.

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