

DECOLONISING SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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Abstract

The debate on decolonisation was reignited by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which itself was generated by the unlawful killing of George Floyd, by police in May 2020, in the USA. The date is significant because the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, which was spreading rapidly across all countries of the world, were still unknown. The UK in particular was deep into its first lockdown and people felt isolated, lonely and in need of meaning and purpose. The rising death toll was compared to that in the two world wars.

In response to the pandemic, emergency measures were enacted through the Coronavirus Act (HM Government 2020), empowering the British government to withdraw the basic rights and civil liberties of all its citizens. Schedule 5 of the Act allowed social work regulators, in the four countries of the UK, to fast-track social workers' registration. This was a rare recognition of the important part social workers played in safeguarding society during times of crisis. However, most employing bodies received limited resources, particularly during the early stages of the pandemic, to ensure the personal safety of front-line staff in community settings.

The impact of the pandemic on the BLM movement led to a sense of urgency amongst those interested in the continual challenge of racism, but who were also concerned to learn new ways to embed anti-racism in institutions, structures and systems. The emphasis on decolonisation offered an alternative lens and point of view.

The aim of this paper is to explore the perspectives emerging from such thinking and to promote approaches which empower practitioners. Anti-racism in social work has been under scrutiny for decades, so no conclusive results are offered. However, there are suggestions and examples of good practice which may inform developmental processes.

Key words

Decolonisation; Black Lives Matter; anti-racist practice; social work practice.

Introduction

Measures to address racism are set out in universal principles of race equality and social justice (Bhatti-Sinclair, 2011). Colonisation is defined as invading and governing another country and holding significant power and privileges over the inhabitants. Decolonisation is the withdrawal of the colonising power from a territory in order that the country can act independently. History suggests that those who subjugate apply divide and rule techniques, but individuals and groups seeking a unified voice on racism promote the use of the word black as it is in this paper. Black perspectives stem from the shared experience of racism and powerlessness both past and present (Naik, 1995), which in turn can be used to respond collectively and challenge institutional structures.

In relation to social work, decolonisation is the development of education, training and practice standards, rooted in professional codes and scrutinised for independence from colonial influences. Examples of good practice, albeit led by committed individuals within selected higher education institutions, include scrutiny of the social work qualifying curricula content for elimination of bias and improved reading lists/library resources.

Understanding colonisation within contemporary society requires interrogation of meanings past and present. There is little doubt that processes used by colonial powers were genocidal in every way. However, there has to be acknowledgement that the colonised and colonisers have shared histories and that those who were colonised may also have been the colonisers and perhaps contributed to colonisation. An updated analysis may conclude that

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