NOFSW Past President Presents a Compelling Argument for Social Work Leadership in Keynote Address at NASW-Metro DC Conference

The theme for social work month 2017 was “Social Workers Stand Up” and the typical interpretation brings to mind the many things social workers stand up for on behalf of their clients. But, NOFSW Past President (2008-2010) Dr. Stacey Hardy-Chandler recently urged social workers to also stand up for themselves as a central message of her March 16, 2017 keynote address titled, Standing Up for Ourselves: Resilience-Driven Social Work Leadership.

In her speech, Stacey posited the notion that it isn’t just ‘a good idea’ or ‘nice if we have the time’, but that we as social workers have no less than an ethical obligation to learn, grow and value ourselves. “This is hard for some of us – we’re givers and helpers”, she emphasized, “but, because we are the instruments of our work, taking the time to honor ourselves and attend to our professional needs is an imperative. Not only does it benefit us, but it ultimately helps us serve our client populations better”. Throughout her address to attendees at the 9th Biennial Metro District of Columbia conference, Stacey cited provisions from the ethical code that support the need for our individual and collective self-care and reflection.

With a focus on application, Stacey proposed what she calls “R.E.A.L. Tools” (Resilience, Ethics, Advocacy and Leadership) for attending to our own needs as professionals and leaders. She developed the concept of “Resilience-Driven Leadership” which is grounded in the research on trauma-informed systems, care and practices. Her speech, which was met with a very positive and enthusiastic response from conference attendees, previewed work Stacey is doing in collaboration with NASW-Virginia Chapter. Stacey has developed a 5-part Resilience-Driven Leadership Series that launched April 28, 2017. “The beauty of the program is that participants can attend a single day-long session or complete the entire series within two years and earn a Leadership Certificate from NASW-VA. The modules complement each other, but they can also completely stand on their own if someone is only interested in one or two sessions.”

NOFSW would like to introduce its’ newest Executive Board Member, John P. Cocco, MSW, LSW. John is a third year doctoral student at the Indiana University School of Social Work as well as a practicing therapist at Step Up, Incorporated in Indianapolis, Indiana.

His focus of practice and research is on how to reduce recidivism among people who have committed crimes. While he implements evidence-based practice during his work with clients, he also seeks to expand the knowledge base of best practices by evaluating new interventions in the community. He is particularly interested in sex offense policy as well as the increasing use of community corrections in lieu of incarceration and how both of these areas shape those who are subject to these restrictions.

John lives in Indianapolis, Indiana with his wife, Amber – who is also a licensed social worker and therapist – and enjoys spending time with her and their two dogs and two cats.
What's going on in our nation?

Though most of our systems aspire to fairness, people of color consistently experience disparate outcomes, compared to Whites. Racial disproportionality occurs across all systems – education, child welfare, health care, housing, employment, banking and finance and the justice system – just to name a few.

For example, students of color are suspended more often than Whites but not, in many cases, because they misbehave more often or commit more serious offenses. A 2011 longitudinal study in Texas by the Council of State Governments examined almost a million student records and found that mandatorily reported offenses were committed proportionately by race/ethnicity. In other words, if Whites made up about 57 percent of a school’s enrollment, they committed about 57 percent of the mandatorily reported offenses. Yet, for discretionary offenses, when students were matched by offense type, age, grade, type of student, income, family structure, etc., researchers found Black students had a 31 percent higher likelihood of disciplinary action compared with otherwise identical White and Hispanic students.

Why are police at the forefront?

Although disproportionality and disparity are common throughout the aforementioned systems, law enforcement often bears the brunt of the criticism.

Why? Because police officers are the most visible, and their actions carry the most direct and immediate consequences. We have seen videos and live Facebook streams of some egregious interactions, with fatal outcomes. And when these awful events happen, we want someone to blame. But blame cannot bring back Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile and the many others.

So we grieve. And yet more die: In Charleston, Cynthia Hurd, Susie Jackson, Ethel Lance, DePayne Middleton-Doctor, Clementa Pinckney, Tywanza Sanders, Daniel Simmons, Sharonda Singleton, Myra Thompson; in Dallas, Lorne Ahrens, Michael Krol, Michael Smith, Brent Thompson, Patrick Zamarripa.

What else is going on? The desire to blame someone furthers our binary thinking – the pattern of seeing things as right or wrong, black or white, with no grays in between. So we categorize the good guys and the bad guys (often by the color of their hats). This categorization, however, relies on brain heuristics, that is, on mental shortcuts, as well as explicit and implicit biases.

Research from MacArthur genius award winner Jennifer Eberhardt has shown the depth and pervasiveness of implicit bias. Her studies found that when individuals are shown photographs of White Stanford University faculty, staff and students (at 30 milliseconds – a speed undetectable to the participants), they take longer to recognize emerging, crime-relevant images such as a gun, a knife and handcuffs.

But shown photographs of Black Stanford faculty, staff and students (at the same undetectable speed), the participants recognize those same images statistically significantly more quickly – suggesting that our brains draw conclusions without our awareness. The book Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People, by Mahzarin Banaji and Anthony Greenwald, further explains implicit biases and how to measure and address them.

Is there anything we can do?

Why not hire police officers, teachers, social workers and judges, etc., who don’t have these biases? Because people without biases don’t exist.

Most of us are aware of some of our explicit biases and can usually quell them to make polite cocktail-party conversation. But we are unaware of our implicit biases. They result from our history, tradition and upbringing, from media messages and from our lifetime experiences. We all have these implicit biases, Black, White, Latinx, etc. Our work needs to be threefold: identify our biases; purposefully re-write these biases in our brains and stop perpetuating them.

What else is going on? There are individual implicit biases multiplied by all persons multiplied by all states in the U.S. But can they explain these disparate outcomes? No. We must also examine our systems.

In 1999, North Carolina became the first state to legislate collecting traffic stop data. Professor Frank Baumgartner, a political scientist at UNC Chapel Hill, analyzed the data (over 18 million stops) from 2000 to 2015 and found Black drivers were more likely to be pulled over and more likely to be searched – but less likely to be found with contraband. Baumgartner identified and removed the proverbial “bad apple” law enforcement from the sample and re-analyzed the data. But the results did not change in any statistically significant way.
Again, why?

Because it’s not just about individual players – good cops or bad cops. Some of our institutions, policies and laws inherently advantage some while disadvantaging others. Even if we were to eradicate the influence of individuals, many outcomes would stay the same because of systemic factors. So, although we work to minimize the role of implicit biases, we must also stop looking for the “racist” in the room and focus on the systemic factors that contribute to disparate outcomes by race and ethnicity. These factors include our history of structural and racial exclusion and the effects of institutional racism.

What else is going on? We look for the easy solution. Africans were kidnapped and enslaved for 250 of our country’s 400-year history.

Then for nearly 100 years there was legalized discrimination, and that leaves roughly 50 years of something else. Four hundred years of history can’t be fixed by one policy change.

(I was recently asked if legalizing marijuana would address mass incarceration.) Equal opportunity and equality are not equity. These factors include our history of structural and racial exclusion and the effects of institutional racism.

Although not seeing color may appeal to some, as long as people continue to be treated differently based on their “color” we need to continue to collect and analyze data on these categorizations; plus, colorblindness devalues all that color and culture add. Being “color brave” means we have courageous conversations about the role of race in our world. And we recognize that race-based problems require race-based solutions. We must work separately and together as people of color and White allies to purposefully dismantle racism.

We cannot merely be reactionary to the most awful and sometimes even fatal actions. Why? Because we cannot fire all the “bad apples,” nor can we hire only employees who have no implicit biases. I’m not saying we can’t get mad (we should) and we can’t act (we should). I just recommend evidence-based, positive action directed at root causes.

This includes acknowledging that yes, of course, all lives matter. Binary thinking suggests that saying, “Black lives matter,” means they matter more than or in place of White lives. That is not the case. Yes, all lives matter, but right now let’s take a minute to focus on the houses that are burning, the people who are dying, and the fact that parents of Black teenagers have to have very different conversations with their children than I have to have with my three teenagers. Be informed about Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi’s ideas before you frame your opinion about #Blacklivesmatter.

Again, what should we do?

Effective long-term reform should start as collective prevention rather than visceral reaction. For more than two decades I’ve studied DMC (Disproportionate Minority Contact), looking at the overrepresentation of minority youth in the juvenile justice system. Only in the last five years have I begun to see real root cause analyses and change – nationally in Seattle through the Race and Social Justice Initiative and here in Charlotte through an organization I help lead called Race Matters for Juvenile Justice.

Race Matters for Juvenile Justice is a collaborative leadership group from the courts, law enforcement, schools, social services, city/county, nonprofits, etc., working within our community to reduce disproportionality and disparate outcomes for children and families of color. We employ six evidence-based initiatives:

1. Workforce training including a two-day intensive race analysis workshop in Dismantling Racism.

2. Communication and fostering courageous conversations about implicit bias and institutionalized racism.

3. Research analyzing national empirical evidence and facilitating data-sharing by local systems.

4. Practice change

5. Legislative reform

6. Youth, parent and community partnerships

RMJJ’s efforts are producing demonstrative and sustainable change and are unique in our nation. Promoting education and public awareness, and building trust and rapport go a long way when people are losing their lives and we’re looking for the bad guys to blame.

Albert Einstein said, “No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it.” We can debate gun violence prevention (yes) and whether officers should wear body cameras (yes), but these are mere Band-Aids. Until we address the root causes of what’s going on (namely, racism), we’ll continue to read the headlines and Twitter feeds – and grieve.

Susan McCarter is an associate professor in the School of Social Work at the UNC Charlotte College of Health and Human Services. She also serves on the leadership team for Race Matters for Juvenile Justice and serves as Vice President of the National Organization of Forensic Social Work.

A 2014 protest and march in south Minneapolis. Photo: Fibonacci Blue via Creative Commons
Social Justice Rising
34th Annual Conference of the
National Organization of Forensic Social Work
July 26-29, 2017
Omni Parker House Hotel
Boston, Massachusetts

In the United States, and all across the globe, socio-cultural changes are fundamentally altering how people and communities connect to each other to share, discuss and address social problems, and momentum is growing. Most specifically, everyday citizens are calling for collective action to address social justice issues that differentially impact our most marginalized citizens…and ALL of us. For forensic social workers these issues are not new, but the growing call for action to support social justice initiatives is greater than ever.

Join us at the 2017 NOFSW Conference to explore how we, as forensic social workers, can harness this momentum to lead our communities toward real systemic change.

New This Year! Pre-Conference Forensic Social Work Certificate Program
The Forensic Social Work Certificate is a program sanctioned by the National Organization of Forensic Social Work. Graduates who have successfully met program expectations are identified as having received training (6.5 CEUs) in topics deemed foundational to sound forensic social work knowledge.

All conference information is available on our website, including Workshop and Conference Schedules, Registration and Lodging Information, Continuing Education Credits and Sponsorship and Volunteer Opportunities
www.nofsw.org
2017 Plenary Speakers

The Parent-to-Prison Pipeline: The Link Between Corporal Punishment and Racial Disparities in Criminal Justice

Dr. Stacey Patton is a journalist and assistant professor at Morgan State University School of Global Journalism and Communication. She is also the author of the recently published Spare the Kids: Why Whupping Children Won’t Save Black America.

Dr. Patton received the Barbara Boggs Sigmund Award from Womanspace in 2012 and was the recipient of the Vernon Jarrett Medal for Journalistic Excellence for her reporting on race in 2015. She has also won Reporting Awards from the William Randolph Hearst Foundation, National Association of Black Journalists, Scripps Howard Foundation and the Education Writers Association.

Dr. Patton has authored two other works; That Mean Old Yesterday – A Memoir and the forthcoming book Strung Up: The Lynching of Black Children and Teenagers in America, 1880-1968.

From Cultural Competence to Social Justice

Dr. Lisa Aronson Fontes is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, University Without Walls. She is the author of the new book, Invisible Chains: Overcoming Coercive Control in Your Intimate Relationship, as well as Interviewing Clients Across Cultures: A Practitioner’s Guide and Child Abuse and Culture: Working with Diverse Families. She has written numerous journal articles on child maltreatment, violence against women, cross-cultural research and ethics and she is the editor of Sexual Abuse in Nine North American Cultures: Treatment and Prevention.

Dr. Fortes has worked for the last 20 years within the mental health, social service and criminal justice systems to enhance the systems’ responsiveness to culturally diverse populations; her prior experience includes working as a family, individual, and group psychotherapist and conducting research in Chile and the United States with Puerto Rican, African American and European American cultures.

Dr. Fontes completed a Fulbright Foundation Grant in Buenos Aires, Argentina and as a volunteer, she worked for three years with Somali refugees in Springfield, Massachusetts.
Stacey is passionate about the topic of leadership and suspects that social workers tend to have an artificially narrow definition of it. When we carve out the time to take a long look at ourselves, we are able to better tap into the true leaders within us as social workers and take advantage of everyday opportunities to express leadership qualities. As described in the keynote synopsis: “When most people think of social workers, the word ‘leader’ might not be the first thing that comes to mind. However, we as social workers - by virtue of our training, ethical responsibilities and the tenets of our profession - are in fact primed for exceptionally high leadership capacity…but we must first stand up for ourselves!

Dr. Hardy-Chandler distinguishes between mere positional leadership (granted by title) and the more meaningful, functional leadership that is truly transformative in our work with individual clients, families, organizations and communities. Whether at the micro-level directly delivering services, or at the macro-level in management working with larger systems or policies, across the entire social work practice continuum our challenge is to rethink our traditional notions and to nurture our own talents and abilities as evolving leaders.

She believes that social work training in general lays the foundation for broad leadership capacity, but feels the field of forensic social work is a particularly ripe area for leadership development. In addition to serving in a wide array of leadership capacities herself, Stacey currently serves on the NOFSW Executive Board. See more on “Resilience-Driven Leadership” at www.naswva.org