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Transformation of social work in South Africa: perspectives and experiences of social workers in the Free State

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ABSTRACT

Social work in South Africa had its roots in the poor white problem and as a discipline developed around this specific context. Within the post-apartheid South African context, social work is said to be a transformed non-oppressive and non-racist profession, however, power relations are present at every level of society and these power relations shapes the social constructs encountered also in social work. Through the narratives of the participants, the study explored the experiences of social workers in their training and professional lives around the transformed nature and oppressions of social work education and practice in South Africa. Through a qualitative research approach, the extent of this transformation in social work education and practice, as a reflection of social justice, was explored. The postmodern paradigm that allowed for the inclusion of multiple theoretical and literature perspectives laid the foundation to the research process. Eighteen registered black social workers were selected through purposive non-probability sampling. The data from nine participants that took part in face to face interviews and nine that participated in two focus group discussions were analysed through thematic and discourse analyses. Biko's Black consciousness approach and reviewed literature were utilised in the analysis of data which informed the findings. The conclusion is made that social work practice and education has changed in form but not in substance. Narratives from participants indicate that social work education still reflects it racist ideological grounding with white supremacy and whiteness as the norm in the production of social work knowledge, teaching and practise settings. In response to the Department of Social Development's call that social workers should work to engage in the root causes of social problems and uprooting dysfunctional and out-dated paradigms, recommendations around the inclusion of anti-racist strategies for social work practice, policy and education are made.

Keywords:

Transformation, racism, anti- racism, racial micro aggressions, black consciousness, post modernism, black perspectives