

PAMELA PAUL

What Is Happening at the Columbia School of Social Work?

Dec. 7, 2023



By Pamela Paul
Opinion Columnist

Sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter Get expert analysis of the news and a guide to the big ideas shaping the world every weekday morning. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

During orientation at the Columbia School of Social Work at Columbia University, the country's oldest graduate program for aspiring social workers, students are given a glossary with "100+ common terms you may see or hear used in class, during discussions and at your field placements."

Among the A's: "agent and target of oppression" ("members of the dominant social groups privileged by birth or acquisition, who consciously or unconsciously abuse power against the members or targets of oppressed groups") and "Ashkenormativity" ("a system of oppression that favors white Jewish folx, based on the assumption that all Jewish folx are Ashkenazi, or from Western Europe").

The C's define "capitalism" as "a system of economic oppression based on class, private property, competition and individual profit. See also: carceral system, class, inequality, racism." "Colonization" is "a system of oppression based on invasion and control that results in institutionalized inequality between the colonizer and the colonized. See also: Eurocentric, genocide, Indigeneity, oppression."

These aren't the definitions you'd find in Webster's dictionary, and until recently they would not have been much help in getting a master's in social work at an Ivy League university. They reflect a shift not just at Columbia but in the field of social work, in which the social justice framework that has pervaded much of academia has affected the approach of top schools and the practice of social work itself.

Will radicalized social workers be providing service not just based on the needs of their clients but also to advance their political beliefs and assess clients based on their race or ethnicity?

When a student group, Columbia Social Workers 4 Palestine, announced a teach-in about "the significance of the Palestinian counteroffensive on Oct. 7 and the centrality of revolutionary violence to anti-imperialism," Mijal Bitton, a Jewish spiritual leader, asked on X, "Imagine receiving services from a Columbia-educated social worker who believes burning families, killing babies, and gang-raping women is a 'counteroffensive' and 'revolutionary violence [central] to anti-imperialism.'" Administrators barred the event from the school, but organizers held it in the lobby on Wednesday. Ariana Pinsker-Lehrer, a first-year student, set the protesters straight. "You're studying to be social workers," she told the group, "do better."

Since the time of the pioneering activist and reformer Jane Addams, social work has been guided by a sense of mission. Social workers, who are the most common providers of mental health care, as well as the people who carry out social service programs, help the country's neediest people. Whether social workers are caseworkers in government agencies or — as is the case with most Columbia graduates, I was told — therapists or counselors in private practice, their clients are often the elderly, the poor, veterans, homeless people, people with substance abuse issues and domestic violence survivors.

According to the National Association of Social Workers, “The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet basic and complex needs of all people, with a particular focus on those who are vulnerable, oppressed and living in poverty.”

Other leading schools, like the Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy and Practice at the University of Chicago and the School of Social Work at the University of Michigan, have embraced social justice goals but without as sharp an ideological expression as Columbia.

The Columbia School of Social Work updated its mission statement in 2022 to say that its purpose is “to interrogate racism and other systems of oppression standing in the way of social equity and justice and to foster social work education, practice and research that strengthen and expand the opportunities, resources and capabilities of all persons to achieve their full potential and well-being.” What was once its central mission — to enhance the world of social work — now follows an emphatic political statement.

Melissa Begg, the dean of the Columbia School of Social Work, said that while the school’s mission has always been about social justice and “equitable access,” its mission has evolved because “racism is part of the country.” The school, she explained, is trying to build an awareness of and give students the tools they need to address a diverse range of needs. As she put it, “If you think of slavery as the original sin of the United States, it makes sense to center that reality as part of the school’s mission.”

In 2017 the Columbia social work school introduced a framework around power, race, oppression and privilege, which the school called PROP. This began as a formal course for all first-year students to create what Begg referred to as “self-awareness.” In subsequent years, the PROP framework was applied to the entire curriculum of the school, and the PROP class became a required course called Foundations of Social Work Practice: Decolonizing Social Work.

According to the course’s current syllabus, work “will be centered on an anti-Black racism framework” and “will also involve examinations of the intersectionality of issues concerning L.B.G.T.Q.I.A.+ rights, Indigenous people/First Nations people and land rights, Latinx representation, xenophobia, Islamophobia, undocumented immigrants, Japanese internment camps, indigent white communities (Appalachia) and antisemitism with particular attention given to the influence of anti-Black racism on all previously mentioned systems.”

As part of their coursework, students are required to give a presentation in which they share part of their “personal process of understanding anti-Black racism, intersectionality and uprooting systems of oppression.” They are asked to explain their presentation “as it relates to decolonizing social work, healing, critical self-awareness and self-reflection.” Teachings include “The Enduring, Invisible and Ubiquitous Centrality of Whiteness,” “Why People of Color Need Spaces Without White People” and “What It Means to Be a Revolutionary,” a 1972 speech by Angela Davis.

This decolonization framework, in which people are either oppressor or oppressed, often viewed through the prism of American ideas around race, is by no means exclusive to the Columbia School of Social Work. But its application in the program illustrates the effects of the current radicalism on campus and the ways in which those ideals can shift an entire field of practice.

Addressing race should be an important part of a social worker’s education, as it is in many social sciences. The history and practice of psychotherapy, related to social work, was long infected with insidious and harmful ideas around race, which were often tightly bound to the eugenics movement and characterized African Americans and other minorities as mentally deficient and childlike; current practitioners are by no means immune to racism themselves.

Caregivers need to be sensitive to the effects of racism and other biases on their clients’ health and well-being. But professional organizations have become much more dogmatic about those concerns in ways that endanger the effectiveness of social work.

The National Association of Social Workers now stipulates that “antiracism and other facets of diversity, equity and inclusion must be a focal point for everyone within social work.” In October, Thema S. Bryant, the 2023 president of the American Psychological Association, published a column titled “Psychologists Must Embrace Decolonial Psychology.” In it she wrote, “Decolonial psychology asks us to consider not just the life history of the individual we are working with but also the history of the various collective groups they are a part of, whether that is their nationality, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion or disability.” The profession, she explained, needed to include a range of goals, from appreciating “Indigenous science” to shaping “systems and institutions” in addition to individuals and families.

Psychotherapy already carries a certain amount of political or ideological bias. A number of recent surveys have shown that mental health practitioners, including social workers, tend to be overwhelmingly liberal, progressive or socialist, according to a new book, “Ideological and Political Bias in Psychology,” edited by Craig L. Frisby, Richard E. Redding, William T. O’Donohue and Scott O. Lilienfeld.

“Until roughly five years ago, people seeking mental health care could expect their therapists to keep politics out of the office,” Sally Satel, a practicing psychotherapist and the author of “PC, M.D.: How Political Correctness Is Corrupting Medicine,” wrote in 2021. “Mental health professionals — mainly counselors and therapists — are increasingly replacing evidence-driven therapeutics with ideologically motivated practice and activism.”

“White patients, for instance, are told that their distress stems from their subjugation of others,” Satel wrote, “while Black and minority patients are told that their problems stem from being oppressed.”

Take counseling, which is similar to social work in its focus on mental health but ostensibly focuses more on individual therapy and less on navigating support systems, for example, obtaining assistance from public agencies. The code of ethics adopted by the American Counseling Association in 2014 states that “counselors are aware of — and avoid imposing — their own values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors. Counselors respect the diversity of clients, trainees and research participants and seek training in areas in which they are at risk of imposing their values onto clients, especially when the counselor’s values are inconsistent with the client’s goals or are discriminatory in nature.” But the next year, the association’s governing council endorsed guidelines on “multicultural and social justice counseling” that stipulate “social justice advocacy” and divide clients and providers into “privileged” and “marginalized” categories meant to guide professional engagement.

Therapists are supposed to be able to listen and not be judgmental about feelings and ideas that are taboo, Andrew Hartz, a New York-based psychologist, told me. It’s not helpful for patients to feel judged by their practitioner: “Even if the goal is to make the patient less racist, it’s not effective.”

This past summer, Hartz founded the Open Therapy Institute to provide training without ideology so neither clients nor therapists would feel judged for their beliefs. “I was trained in the city and in city hospitals, so I saw mostly nonwhite patients,” he said. If he had used the current decolonization framework or categorized his patients by ethnicity and race, he explained, it would have distracted him from being an effective resource. “I’m trying to think about ‘What are they feeling and how can I help them?’ Not ‘I’m an oppressor, and they’re a victim,’ and so I’m walking on eggshells. That’s not going to be good therapy.”

Social workers help a broad range of populations, one in which race and systems of oppression often play less of a central role than individual counseling and support in navigating complicated social service systems — Syrian refugees in need of resettlement and Appalachian residents navigating health care insurance, foster children, survivors of domestic violence, teenagers grappling with substance abuse and poverty. They work with military veterans, victims of natural disasters, police officers suffering from workplace stress and the elderly. The job requires long hours dealing with populations that others have largely written off — the homeless, the formerly incarcerated, the infirm.

Like many helping professions — nursing, elder care, teaching — social work is not only one of the noblest vocations; it’s also one of the least remunerative. While the two-year residential program at the Columbia School of Social Work costs an estimated total of \$91,748 a year with room and board, the median annual salary for its 2021 graduates, per a 2022 survey, was \$62,000. (The school does not provide full information on how many students receive financial aid.)

Many students go to social work school because it's often a less expensive route to becoming a psychotherapist in private practice, which many do as a licensed clinical social worker. It's less expensive and faster than getting a doctorate in psychology or psychiatry. It's also hard to pay off those student loans working in a governmental agency. More students are entering private practice, Begg acknowledged, as did everyone else associated with the school; several characterized it as an overwhelming majority.

The intention of the current curriculum at the Columbia School of Social Work, Begg emphasized to me, is to prepare social workers for hard work, not to shut out prospective students with any kind of ideological litmus test. The glossary of terms handed out at orientation, she said, was created by students for students and was not a "public-facing document." She wanted to "make a clear bright line between our curriculum and our glossary."

It's supposed to be used "internally by our community within the context of a conversation" and as a "jumping-off point for conversation" for students to "expand their horizons."

That noble intention may not be matched in practice.

Social work education has always been tied to social justice, said Amy Werman, who graduated from the Columbia School of Social Work in 1982 and has been teaching clinical and research courses there since 2009, full time since 2015.

But in the past few years, she said, the student body has become more radical. "Many students see themselves as social justice warriors, and protesting is the litmus test of being a real social worker," she told me. She said she couldn't remember a single protest at the school when she was a student. "Now," she said, "I feel it's a rite of passage."

On Nov. 8, about a month after Hamas slaughtered about 1,200 people in Israel, dozens of students occupied the school's lobby, banging on drums and yelling "Intifada! Intifada!" from 10:30 a.m. until early evening. Several Jewish students told Werman they didn't feel safe. Students I spoke with said they thought that the blatantly political slant of the PROP curriculum encouraged the radical tenor of recent student activism.

"I lead with my Jewish identity and my identity as a woman, my subjugated identities," said Werman, who discusses in orientation and in class her experience in Israel providing social services to Bedouins, Israeli Arabs and Israeli Jews, even after students have complained about her discussion of Israel in their evaluations of her.

"When Jews speak up in our school," she said, "they are met with, 'You have white privilege, so shut up. You are a colonizer. You are an oppressor. You are responsible for the deaths of innocent Palestinians.'"

When Asaf Eyal, a 2017 graduate of the school and now the director of a major New York City human services organization, arrived on campus, he said, he was bombarded immediately with messages from both the curriculum and from fellow students about his privilege as a white colonizer.

During the school's required class in power, race, oppression and privilege (an earlier rendition of the course on decolonizing social work), Eyal, a former combat soldier from Israel, was shown videos of Israeli soldiers in which they were labeled the oppressor. In classroom lessons, the oppressed, he said, were always Black people. "Do you know there are Black Israelis, Black Jews?" Eyal, who had worked with Ethiopian Jews, asked his classmates.

"The school is infected with a political agenda that should not be in place, especially on Day 1," Eyal told me.

Now, he said, he questions the education he got there. "I don't come into my shelter every day and think about who is the oppressed," he told me. "I think about helping people." In October, after four years volunteering on behalf of the school, Eyal resigned from his role overseeing fieldwork assignments.

"Is this a school of social work or an indoctrination agency for extreme ideology?" Eyal said. "We're missing the purpose. It's not our purpose."

Source images by 5second and Image Source/Getty Images

The Times is committed to publishing a diversity of letters to the editor. We'd like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some tips. And here's our email: letters@nytimes.com.

Follow the New York Times Opinion section on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, X and Threads.

Pamela Paul is an Opinion columnist at The Times, writing about culture, politics, ideas and the way we live now.