

Addressing Racial Discrimination in the 1930s: Using a Historical Case Study to Inform Contemporary Social Justice Efforts

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Abstract In this historical case study, we use the realism–idealism framework to analyze how three National Conference of Social Work (NCSW) leaders differed in their social justice advocacy to address racial segregation during the 1930s. We argue that advocacy should welcome approaches along the realism–idealism spectrum. Navigating internal difference and diverse viewpoints enables organizations to be more effective in their social justice advocacy. Managing internal disagreement enables organizations to be more effective externally. Allowing space for negotiation and voices of dissent is necessary to effectively address persistent, contemporary social justice issues like racial discrimination and exclusion.

Keywords Social justice · Racial segregation · Historical case study · Realism–idealism framework · Social justice advocacy

Introduction

In the 1930s, the leading U.S. national social work professional organization confronted racial segregation. The very profession was relatively new, but racial and gender inclusion was a tenant of the National Conference of Social Work (NCSW), both in the work they did for individuals and in their membership. This historical case study describes how NCSW leadership, despite the different

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approaches to social justice, worked successfully to address an issue which plagued the U.S. for subsequent decades.

We examine the activities of three prominent social work leaders—Eugene Kinckle Jones, NCSW Executive Board member and President of the National Urban League (NUL); Jacob Fisher, leader of the Rank and File Movement; and Edith Abbott, President of the NCSW—to describe their differing approaches to social justice advocacy. Each shared a basic belief that racial discrimination was wrong; however, they disagreed on their approaches as to how to address it. Fisher advocated against racial discrimination across *all* social structures; Abbott bounded her advocacy based on social mores of the day; and Jones advocated for integration *within* the profession. By examining the planning of the 1937 NCSW, this study offers insights into how they negotiated their differences. Specifically, we investigate: How did these three leaders approach social justice advocacy? How did their approaches differ? We conclude by considering contemporary implications in professional organizations' efforts to address discrimination of marginalized groups.

Background—NCSW and Racial Integration

During the early twentieth century, the National Conference of Social Work (NCSW), the leading professional organization for social workers across the U.S. and Canada, was racially integrated in both its membership and officers (Armfield 1998). This was unusual, as few other national professional organizations were racially integrated, and these organizations rarely resisted discriminatory practices which segregated African American citizens. During the 1920s, organizers of the NCSW annual conferences negotiated “non-discrimination” agreements with host hotels and other facilities housing conference events. Progressive for its time, these negotiated agreements led conference planners into direct confrontation with the racial discriminatory practices and policies that routinely existed across the U.S. and Canada.

In spite of hotels having signed non-discrimination agreements for NCSW attendees, explicit incidents of racial discrimination occurred at the 1935 Conference in Montreal and the 1936 Conference in Atlantic City. In 1935, two African American NCSW attendees were not allowed to check into the conference hotel (National Coordinating Committee 1937a). In 1936, two incidents of racial discrimination tainted proceedings (National Coordinating Committee 1937a). In one incident, a racially mixed group of six NCSW delegates, which included three African Americans, was denied bar service at one of the conference hotels, breaching the non-discrimination agreement negotiated by conference organizers. After the six delegates waited over an hour while others were seated, a hotel representative told the group, “Colored are not served here” (Armfield 1998). Despite these incidents, racial integration occurred without incident at the 1937 NCSW in Indianapolis.

This examination of the social justice advocacy efforts for racial inclusion is informative in understanding the social work profession's own struggle with approaches to address racial discrimination. The historical case study is illustrative of the value of a variety of advocacy strategies that continue to bound social justice reform in contemporary battles against discrimination directed at various marginalized populations.

Literature Review

Social workers have long attempted to solve social justice problems through advocacy and activism. Social justice has been defined in many ways, including interpretations that emphasize eliminating privilege and oppression, advancing human rights, giving voice to those who have been silenced, and equalizing economic opportunity (Cooke et al. 2016, p. 108; Jaeger et al. 2016, p. 3). Other definitions, aligned with Rawls's theory of justice, focus on the way systems and institutions grant rights and distribute resources (Jaeger et al. 2016, p. 3; Buschman and Warner 2016, p. 18; Wenar 2017). Despite various definitions, fairness and equality are underlying themes.

Activism can be defined by the activities it encompasses. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines advocacy broadly as the "combination of individual and social actions designed to gain political commitment, policy support, social acceptance and systems support for a particular health goal or program" (Nutbeam 1998). In the early twentieth century, social workers in the U.S. engaged in social justice activism as the social work profession struggled to confront racial discrimination (Axinn and Stern 2005).

Realism–Idealism Framework

We selected the realism and idealism framework to analyze how NCSW leaders differed in their approaches social justice advocacy. Just as there are many ways to define social justice, there are also various means to pursue it. In particular, some approach justice from a realistic perspective, while others approach it from an idealistic perspective. The realism and idealism framework has been applied to justice investigations since the very origin of political philosophy. Schmidt (2016) writes that "political theorists have had a common purpose: to reflect on the merits of realism and idealism when theorizing about the human condition and the nature of justice" (p. 1). Examining the merits of these two types of "political thinking," which seem "to recur again and again throughout history" (Herz as cited by Booth 2008, p. 511) enables us to see how each is valuable in pursuing social justice. Schmidt (2016) helpfully distinguishes between the two paradigms, stating that "realism studies the human condition as it is, while idealism studies the human condition as it could be... Simplifying considerably, a utopian asks what is possible; a realist asks what is predictable" (p. 1–2).

Realism

Realism deals with the world as it is, operating in "the realm of what is politically possible" (Schmidt 2016, p. 2). Its value lies in its authentic assessment of human fallibility, scarce resources, and imperfect conditions. This approach confronts social injustice by purposely accepting trade-offs and compromise to help secure progress and minimize risk (Koopman 2016, p. 35). Simply put, realism takes feasibility into account (Koopman 2016, p. 28; Schmidt 2016, p. 4; Ralston 2010, p. 71).

The danger of pursuing social justice from a realist approach, however, is that practicality may give way to mere complacency or capitulation. When considering

Estlund's (2008) concerns regarding realism, Ralston (2010) warns that individuals might set their sights and standards too low and "too easily concede that an ideal is purely aspirational when the struggle to achieve it is just difficult, not impossible" (p. 74). Taken to its extreme, a "complacent realism" would not require people or institutions to change at all, as staying the same would be the most realistic and feasible course of (in)action (Estlund 2008, p. 263).

Idealism

Conversely, approaching social justice from an idealistic point of view urges us to imagine our best selves and to envision society as it *ought* to be, as the most fair and equitable version possible. Ideal theory "helps us to see our principles and problems more clearly, it ensures that even when we are not motivated to do what can be required of us we are not thereby let off the hook... [it] uncovers, clarifies, and safeguards our normative commitments" (Stemplowska 2008, p. 339). The bar is purposively set high. As Estlund (2016) declares, "whatever social justice requires, it is quite idealistic - a high evaluative standard" (p. 293). When faced with injustice, idealism obliges us to boldly challenge the status quo, aspiring to a future free of discrimination, division, and marginalization.

However, rigid adherence to an idealistic approach to social justice runs the risk of irrelevance due to impracticality, or to the paralysis of perfection. In fact, Estlund (2008) coins the term "*moral utopianism*" (p. 263) to describe an extreme version of idealism that posits unrealistic standards that people or institutions cannot possibly meet. Another common criticism of idealism theories is that "much of what they say offers no immediate or workable solutions to any of the problems our societies face" (Stemplowska 2008, p. 319). Furthermore, a purist ideal stance does not allow room for compromise so there is a real risk of making no progress at all.

The Realism-Idealism Spectrum

Social justice approaches tend to fall within these extremes. Though Koopman (2016) refers to the "agon between idealism and realism" as "the very stuff of the history of modern philosophy" (p. 28), not all theorists see the two paradigms as strict dichotomies. Rather, Ralston (2010) indicates, "the relationship between the two theories resembles a continuum" (p. 70). Stemplowska (2008) further asserts that "complex normative theories, such as Rawls's theory of justice, are likely to contain within themselves both ideal and nonideal theory" (p. 339), arguing that the paradigms often operate simultaneously (p. 319). Stemplowska (2008) encourages us to avoid treating the theories as "rival approaches to political theory" (p. 319), suggesting "there is no real conflict" between them (p. 339).

Similarly, "Herz believed that there was a realistic and potentially productive political landscape" within the spectrum (Booth 2008, p. 511). Furthering this analogy, Booth (2008) encourages us to emphasize the "rich pickings available on the frontiers between the two sets of ideas rather than... [buttress]... paradigmatic purity" (p. 520). Doing so, according to Booth (2008), is instructive because it focuses on categorizing ideas, rather than labeling people, who "invariably reveal examples of both sets of ideas" (p. 520).

Indeed, if realism and idealism are on opposite sides of a rich spectrum, rather than mutually exclusive dichotomies, it becomes clear that individuals will approach social justice work from various points along the spectrum. It is unnecessary to identify the precise placement of any one approach on the spectrum, as they are not fixed to begin with. Accordingly, by examining the correspondence between Fisher, Abbott, and other NCSW organizers, we identify these leaders' varying approaches to advocacy along a continuum of realist and idealist thought, without assigning them absolute positions along the spectrum.

Realism and Idealism Applied to Racial Justice

The realism-idealism framework has rarely been applied to investigations of racial discrimination or racial justice simply because racial social justice is lacking in political philosophy literature. In fact, Rawls's ideal theory—the “dominant discourse on justice in political philosophy” (Mills 2014, p. 27)—has been criticized for “its insensitivity to the justice concerns of marginalized groups” (Kang 2016, p. 32). According to Mills (2014), “Rawls and the vast secondary literature on Rawls does marginalize issues of race and racial justice,” giving race less attention than gender, despite racial injustice being “arguably the most salient of all American injustices” (p. 35). Mills (2014) states that the secondary literature published in the decade preceding 2014 had “either no discussions at all of race, racism, and affirmative action, or at best a sentence or a paragraph or two” (p. 35). Mills asserts that political philosophy has been overrepresented by “Whites,” resulting in racial justice being sidelined as an issue of importance (p. 32).

Since 2014, the framework has been applied to select investigations of racial social justice. Hertzberg (2014) argues that non-ideal and ideal theorizing are closely related and advocates that non-ideal theory should be informed by ideal theory. Kang (2016) similarly describes how non-ideal theory can be consistent with the spirit of ideal theory in recognizing affirmative action as a remedy to “socially and historically situated racial injustices” (p. 50).

Methods

We used a variety of primary sources to inform this case study. They include direct correspondence between Abbott, Fisher, and other NCSW organizers, from the University of Minnesota Libraries Social Welfare History Archives.¹ Additionally, we utilized Jones' extensive writings on racial integration in the social work profession. Primary data were analyzed consistent with case study and historical methods (Williams 2011; Yin 2003). After orienting ourselves on the particulars of Conference

¹ Fisher's voice is most dominant in this case study based upon available content. Some of Fisher's writing contains second-hand information, such as his documentation of what NCSW leaders *told him* about their meetings and decisions. Though we do hear from Abbott directly, her response is in the context of her conversations with Fisher. Jones' voice is missing from Fisher's correspondence concerning NCSW conference planning. However, it is reasonable to assume that Jones was well aware of Fisher's advocacy, since Jones' protégé, Arnold Hill, the NCSW 2nd Vice-President and executive of NUL, was listed on Fisher's letters among the attendees at the NCSW planning meetings.

planning, including the key individuals involved in it, we formed the initial theory that these three individuals all approached activism differently. We applied the paradigms of realism and idealism as a framework for analyzing these differing approaches. Our analysis included examining and categorizing data from our various sources to determine how each of the three individuals approached activism to address racial discrimination. This analysis was critical to understanding the actions that comprised the activism activities. This analysis was important in two specific areas: (1) to detail the NCSW discussions on racial discrimination and how they evolved in subsequent years leading up to Indianapolis and (2) to investigate individual backgrounds, positions, and actions taken with an understanding of the context of the Progressive Era. This was particularly salient given that Jones, Fisher, and Abbott came from diverse backgrounds across gender, race, religion, academic training, professional roles, and institutional affiliations. The application of the realism and idealism framework enabled a robust understanding of the discussions and activities to address racial discrimination, both at NCSW events and broadly in the social work profession.

Historical Background

African Americans and the Social Work Profession

William Still's (1821–1902) pioneering work on the Underground Railroad helped shape modern social work (Still 1872/2005); it included individual casework, group work, fundraising, and community organizing (Johnson 1994). African American social workers of the Progressive Era (1890s–1920s) utilized approaches established by Still, which included three specific principles: (1) self-help and mutual aid, (2) race consciousness, and (3) an obligation to serve (Carlton-LaNey 1999; Gary and Gary 1994).

Self-help was a key tenet of social services work for two reasons: African Americans generally were excluded from participating in the emerging U.S. social service system, and White social workers did not meaningfully participate in addressing the unique social issues faced by African Americans. For example, White settlement houses were racially segregated, suggested as the biggest factor that contributed to their ultimate demise (Carlton-LaNey 1994):

Not only did the settlements' failure to welcome Black neighbors universally into their programs contribute to their long-term decline, but their restrictionism left the great promise of the movement unfulfilled (p. 8). (Lasch-Quinn 1993)

By the beginning of the twentieth century, African American social worker pioneers like Lawrence Oxley posited that the principle of mutuality was essential to address the daunting social challenges resulting from racial discrimination (Burwell 1994). African American social workers played a key role in developing racial pride through the mentoring, teaching, and support they provided in their delivery of social services. Their holistic approach included the entire person *and* their environment, particularly important in efforts to consider class and educational differences between the providers of services and the direct beneficiaries of them, a consideration still relevant in contemporary social service activities.

The long-standing African tradition that economic or educational success is accompanied by an obligation to “give back” was an important component ingrained in the approach. Prominent African American social workers were instrumental in establishing educational opportunities for African Americans, and Eugene Kinckle Jones was the most notable among them.

Eugene Kinckle Jones

As head of the National Urban League (NUL) from 1911 through 1941, Jones believed firmly in racial integration, giving it high priority right along with his social policy and fund raising activities. Jones (1885–1954) was raised in Richmond, Virginia, by educated parents. His father taught theology at Virginia Union College and his mother taught music at Hartshorn Memorial College, a segregated school for African American women. Growing up, Jones observed his parents interact as equals with White intellectuals and professionals; racial integration would be a common theme in his life’s work. Jones received a Master’s degree in economics and social service from Cornell. While at Cornell, Jones became one of the seven founders of Alpha Phi Alpha, Inc., the nation’s first African American fraternity (Wesley 1981). By that time, racial consciousness was firmly established in his work; his Master’s thesis was titled *Progress of the Negro Americans since their Emancipation* (Cornell University 1909, p. 598).

In 1925, Jones became the first African American elected to the NCSW Executive Board, serving in that role until 1933. Although Jones’ reputation had grown internationally by the end of the 1920s—he was an American delegate at the International Conference of Social Work in Paris in 1928 and attended the International Conference on Human Relations in Industry in Cambridge, England—he faced significant fund raising challenges in leading the NUL. Also, he continued the established tradition of creating educational opportunities for African American social workers, shaping the plan of study for the social work profession (Carlton-LaNey 2001).

As the leader of the NUL, his agenda included advancing the social work profession by integrating White and African American social workers. In 1921 Jones clearly articulated his mission as a social worker, *where possible, white organizations should be induced to include Negroes in their programs and to employ colored workers to handle their cause* (Armfield 1998). Jones’ personal writings reflected a core principle of racially integrated social work:

I have always cultivated the friendship of Negro and white persons in key positions wherever it was my good fortune to meet them... and social workers have aided the cause I have espoused (Armfield 1998).

Uniting the races in social service work was a key theme of his life’s work. Social justice was fundamental, and Jones’ writings and professional responsibilities reflect a realistic approach to social justice advocacy. He led racially integrated organizations focused on broad social justice issues rooted in racial inclusion (i.e. NCSW), while also leading organizations focused on particular issues facing racial minorities (i.e., NUL, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.).

Jacob Fisher

Jacob Fisher was a key leader of the Rank and File Movement that began in New York in 1932 (Jenson 2004). A Polish immigrant aligned with Jewish causes, Fisher was sensitive to oppression of all people. He worked as a social worker and held several key leadership positions in the Rank and File Movement throughout the 1930s. In 1935, he was elected chairman at the inaugural National Convention of Rank and File Groups in Social Work, which changed its name to the National Coordinating Committee (NCC) of the Social Service Employee Group in 1936. Fisher served as editor of the NCC's journal *Social Work Today* from its founding in 1934 through October 1937. Through the journal, the NCC advocated against federal cuts in relief spending and forcefully advocated for integration and racial equality in the social work profession.

Fisher was born in Poland in 1905 and emigrated to the U.S. with his family shortly after (Fisher 1979). He graduated from the Washington Square College of New York University in 1926 and received his Master's degree from the Graduate School of Jewish Social Work in 1928 (Fisher 1980). Among his various professional roles, he was a caseworker for the New York Jewish Social Services Association.

In 1940, he became an employee of the federal government; he joined the research and analysis staff of the Social Security Board. Fisher's prior advocacy history at the onset of the McCarthy Era led to a decline in influence and leadership in the Rank and File Movement. In 1947 he was alleged to be disloyal under Executive Order 9835, a Truman administration program designed to identify and remove suspected Communists from the federal government. The "Loyalty Order" subjected the accused, who could be any federal employee or applicant, to loyalty boards that conducted "loyalty screenings." Fisher was among the 3 million government employees who were investigated; 300 of them were dismissed because they were determined to be security risks (Storrs 2013). Fisher was not fired, but he was suspended, then forced to resign in April 1954. His professional social service work was essentially over; he operated a nursery for the rest of his a professional career. In the 1970s, Fisher discovered through the Freedom of Information Act that the FBI had amassed an extensive file that included information on his professional activities, personal correspondence, political affiliations, and social networks (Reisch and Andrews 2001).

Edith Abbott

Edith Abbott (1876–1957) served as president-elect of the 1936 NCSW (Costin 2003). She made significant contributions to the social work profession, from education to public support programs. By 1936, Abbott was firmly established as a leader in social work education and in service delivery; her leadership role in the NCSW was just one of her many pioneering positions (National Association of Social Workers 2013).

Abbott's lifelong commitment to social service is well documented. She received a Ph.D. in economics from the University of Chicago in 1905 and played a key role in defining social work education (Costin 2003). In 1924, she served as the first female dean of the first university-based school of social work, the University of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration (Domhoff and Webber 2011). She cofounded the University of Chicago Journal *Social Service Review* in 1927 (National Association of Social Workers 2013). The journal was the product of one of her many

collaborations with her longtime colleague and former teacher Sophonisba Breckenridge (Fitzpatrick 1994; Muncy 1990). Abbott also helped establish the Cook County (Illinois) Bureau of Public Welfare in 1926 and supported the development of the Social Security Act in 1935.

The National Urban League (NUL)

The NUL was cofounded in 1910 by Dr. George Edmund Haynes (1880–1960) and Ruth Standish Brown (Nixon and Horsch 2013). The NUL was, perhaps, the single most influential national organization supporting the development of social work education for African Americans. Although African Americans were admitted to schools of social work in limited numbers, institutional racial segregation at the turn of the twentieth century presented significant barriers to training. Subsequently, in 1911, Haynes developed the first social work course of study for African Americans at Fisk University, a historically black university in Nashville, Tennessee (Carlton-LaNey 1999). Under Haynes' leadership, the NUL focused on developing training opportunities for African Americans, which included funding support.

The Rank and File Movement

The Rank and File Movement was concerned with worker and minority rights. The Movement emerged from the Social Workers Discussion Club (Jenson 2004), which began in New York in the Spring of 1931 (Hunter 1999). The Club was organized by young social workers dissatisfied with the profession's focus on professional standards and membership requirements, instead of the challenges faced by its members. Fisher (1980), the leader of the New York Club, explained the rationale for its formation:

Social workers in the early years of the Depression who felt dissatisfied with the thinking of the social work establishment, unhappy about the political and economic order, and anxious to do something about these two evils, found that a natural first step was a meeting to talk things over. You talked things over to find out how many felt the way you did. When you had a like-minded nucleus, you held a meeting to influence other social workers. In time a following was established (p. 94).

The New York Social Worker Club served as a model for clubs in other cities. Over the next 4 years, discussion clubs began in Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, Baltimore, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Seattle, Los Angeles, and San Francisco (Hunter 1999).

The Rank and File Movement addressed racial discrimination both in the provisioning of social services and among the ranks of social work professionals. Its fundamental purpose was to eliminate the economic and political repression of all workers. What distinguished the Rank and File Movement from most other social work groups, and virtually all other organizations whose membership was mostly White, was its inclusion of the African American experience in the context of general class struggles (Spano 1982). Mainstream social work tended to separate the social worker from the oppressed group; the social worker *acted on behalf* of the oppressed group, not *with* them (Wagner 1989).

Many members of the Rank and File Movement were recently unemployed Jewish professionals who assembled through trade unions or college organizations. Their experiences as an oppressed American group forged natural connections to the plight of African Americans (Abramovitz 1998; Wagner 1989).

The National Conference of Social Work (NCSW)

The NCSW, through its annual conferences, brought together various individuals and associations to define professional standards of social work and elevate the evolving profession. They aspired for social work, as a profession, to be distinguished side by side with medicine and law. However, the NCSW included African Americans among its delegates and officers. In 1925, Jones was the first African American elected to its 15 member Executive Board, serving as its Treasurer. Jones served on the Executive Board through 1933 and was elected Vice President. Various social work groups and associations attended the annual NCSW national conferences. The NCSW was the parent organization of the American Association of Social Workers (AASW), established in 1921. From its inception, the AASW welcomed African American membership, which rendered obsolete the African American-focused Social Work Club, which had been founded in 1915.

The NCSW's mere existence as a fully integrated professional organization was exceptional in the early 1920s, a clear indicator of the racial progressiveness of the profession. Most other established professional organizations practiced racial and gender segregation during this time. Many African American professional organizations which persisted for decades—the National Medical Association founded in 1895, the National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses founded in 1908, and the National Bar Association founded in 1925—were created in response to the racial exclusionary practices of the medical and legal professions. As Jones wrote in 1928, *there is probably no profession in which Negro members are on as cordial relationships with white members as is that of the social worker* (Armfield 1998). However, the policy of racial inclusion, remarkable for the time, did not insulate the NCSW from racial discrimination, internally nor externally.

The NCSW and Racial Segregation

Efforts to address racial discrimination at NCSW annual conferences date back to the 1920 NCSW held in New Orleans. At that Conference, NCSW President Owen Lovejoy determined that meeting halls would be used *only if they did not discriminate* against African Americans (Spano 1982). During the 1927 NCSW, participants explicitly discussed arrangements for the following year to ensure that meeting facilities did not discriminate against African American members and delegates. Lunch and dinner meetings were planned for locations, like church basements, to ensure that African Americans could attend and participate as equals (Spano 1982).

Conference discussions about racial injustice were not limited to concerns about members, but also extended to the unique issues facing African American clients seeking social services. Such conversations began at the 1923 NCSW in Washington D.C. Case work was evolving. It had been viewed as the collection of activities done *to or for* the individual; the concept of *working with* was emerging and gaining attention, as it focused

on the unique needs of African Americans (National Conference of Social Work 1923). NCSW participants openly discussed White social workers' nominal understanding and lack of appreciation for the plight of African Americans (Fogel 1957).

By 1928, the NCSW conferences discussions turned a critical eye to how social workers conducted their work in two specific areas (Fogel 1957). First, White caseworkers lacked requisite understanding of the conditions facing African Americans which caused them to seek services, and this limited the caseworker's ability to address institutional or structural problems. Second, discussions focused on the established discriminatory practices of agencies and caseworkers, specifically those in the South, where racial discrimination in the budgeting and provisioning of social services was widely tolerated and even endorsed. For instance, the common practice of diverting resources from African American to White clients was discussed at annual conferences over the next several years. At the 1933 NCSW, discussions were openly critical of these racial discriminatory practices (Hubert 1933):

Instead of facing the question courageously, some welfare agencies are either dodging it entirely or exploiting the Negro for furtherance of other projects. There have been instances where the Negro district with its high death-rate and its slum area was played up as the sore spot - used as a sob story to secure funds only to be forgotten when those funds were administered (p. 423).

Social workers in attendance at the 1934 NCSW conference were challenged for not considering the unique environmental, political, and social factors that *created the need* to support African Americans. Some were reluctant to acknowledge these important mediating factors (Fogel 1957); however, simply having these overt discussions, in a professional organization that included African American members as equals, is an indicator of the progressive nature of the profession. The profession was confronting its own inconsistencies, yet factions within social work were interested in swifter progress.

As the NCSW wrestled with racial issues, the mobility of the annual conference required that NCSW leaders actively and planfully take a stand on racial segregation. They did this by negotiating non-discrimination agreements with hotels and restaurants in host cities.

Events Leading up to Indianapolis (1937) — Montreal (1935) and Atlantic City (1936)

At the 1935 NCSW in Montreal, the non-discrimination agreement negotiated with the Montreal Committee on Arrangements stipulated that racial discrimination would not be tolerated. This agreement was brazenly violated when two African American conference attendees were denied hotel rooms because of their race (Spano 1982). The incident was brought to the attention of all NCSW attendees at the close of the Conference by the Fisher-led NCC, which set the stage for more aggressive negotiation and enforcement of the non-discrimination agreements.

Fisher issued a letter to all social workers, not just members of the Rank and File Movement, emphasizing the rich history of the social work profession in working to address a vast array of social concerns. He was consistently on the idealism side of the realism–idealism spectrum, as he argued the boundaries of activism for the social worker were virtually limitless, insisting that social workers be *outposts in defense of*

human liberties against the forces of reaction (van Kleeck as cited by National Coordinating Committee 1935). He challenged social workers by appealing to their professional integrity in pursuit of improving the welfare of *all* people (National Coordinating Committee 1935):

There are tasks which you cannot shirk, tasks for all social workers inside and outside the Rank and File Movement who cannot accept program of reduction in the standard of living of the people of Canada and America; who stand fast against attacks on civil liberties; against racial discrimination; against all vices leading to fascism in America, whether open or disguised.

The following year's Conference in Atlantic City was beset by incidents of blatant racial discrimination in violation of negotiated non-discrimination agreements. Two incidents bracketed the 1936 NCSW held from May 25th to 28th. These violations were particularly remarkable since originally the 1936 NCSW was to be held in Washington D.C.; however, the NCSW Executive Committee moved it to Atlantic City—absorbing some financial cost—because Washington D.C. facilities *could not guarantee that racial discrimination would not occur* (National Coordinating Committee 1937a). As in Montreal, the NCSW planners negotiated and secured signed non-discrimination agreements with facilities hosting NCSW events. Among the signers was the Seaside Hotel where both of the incidents occurred. On the opening day of the Conference, two African American NCSW attendees were denied service in the Seaside Hotel's bar and lounge. On the closing day of the conference, a racially mixed group of six NCSW delegates that included three African Americans was denied service. After waiting over an hour while others were served, a hotel representative informed them that since African Americans were part of their group, the entire group would not be served.

Approaches to Confront Discrimination at the NCSW

Just after the 1936 Conference concluded, on May 30th Fisher issued a statement describing the events and documenting a meeting he had with Howard Knight, the NCSW General Secretary. In the letter, Fisher stated that both he and Knight agreed that notices should be sent to all Conference facilities in Atlantic City calling attention to these incidents. They also agreed that the NCSW should create *more detailed non-discrimination agreements*. This initiative would start with the hotels and restaurants associated with the 1937 NCSW in Indianapolis. Finally, Fisher used this platform for tying these actions back to core principles of the profession (National Coordinating Committee 1936a):

The National Coordinating Committee re-affirms its belief that no principles for which social work stand can remain inviolate or secure so long as we permit any infringement of the inalienable right of all our colleagues to equal consideration and respect regardless of race, color, or creed. In a period of growing reaction, we feel that vigilance in this direction must be strengthened. The National Coordinating Committee stands uncompromisingly for the equal rights for the Negro people.

In preparation for Indianapolis, Conference planners met on October 15, 1936, to discuss the “Negro Issue.” Fisher and Knight attended along with two other NCSW officers, Mr. Gaulden, from the NCSW Executive Board, and Harold P. Levy, the NCSW Vice-Chair and Director of Publicity. Abbott was not in attendance. This group highlighted four specific approaches to address persistent racial discrimination. First, they reaffirmed that the NCSW non-discrimination agreements stipulated that services at specific hotels and restaurants would be available to all NCSW delegates in Indianapolis. However, the NCSW would not be responsible for incidents of racial discrimination that occurred at hotels or facilities not affiliated with the NCSW. Second, although food service was specified in the agreement, bar service was not mentioned. Fisher, Gaulden, and Levy believed that bar access should also be addressed, given the incidents in Atlantic City. Knight disagreed, arguing that the agreement was just for “essential” NCSW activities which, in his view, did not include bar service. Knight agreed to bring this particular issue to the NCSW Executive Committee for further discussion. Third, if any facility violated the non-discrimination agreement, Knight would bring details of the incident to the NCSW Executive Committee. Last, Knight believed the NCC should not publicize any incidents of racial discrimination at facilities that were not part of the agreement (National Coordinating Committee 1936b). In summary Knight’s approach, representing the NCSW, was to limit the scope of services covered, the methods of handling violations, and the breadth of publicity in the aftermath should a racial discrimination incident occur.

On October 26th, Knight briefed Fisher on the Executive Committee position about bar service. The Executive Committee unanimously agreed that it would not be responsible for discriminatory practices involving bar service. Knight suggested that if Fisher wanted to pursue the matter further he could contact Abbott in her role as NCSW president. On November 6th, Fisher replied to Knight, without mentioning the bar issue, and sent a copy of Knight’s October 26th letter to Gaulden, who agreed that bar access should be included in any non-discrimination agreement.

Fisher—Idealism

On November 20th, Fisher sent a letter to Abbott entitled the “Negro issue at Indianapolis.” Their correspondence was cordial, respectful, and cooperative. Fisher copied the letter to Gaulden and Thomas Arnold Hill, the NCSW 2nd Vice-President and executive of the NUL. Hill, an African American, worked closely with Jones. Hill joined the NUL in 1914, opened the Chicago branch in 1917, and served as the first Executive Secretary (Hurst 2011). In the letter, Fisher pressed Abbott and the NCSW *to do more* to ensure equal treatment for all Conference participants, including access to bar service. He framed his arguments according to unequal treatment and discrimination, while steering away from the moral framings prevalent during prohibition (Fisher 1936):

We do not in any way wish to deprecate the efforts of the Conference to obtain equal of treatment for its Negro and white members. We feel that the move from Washington to Atlantic City last year and the agreement with the Indianapolis hotel men guaranteeing no discrimination in the matter of housing and restaurant service are distinct gains.... we believe the Conference should not rest on its record, but should carry the principle of equal treatment a step further. At Atlantic

City the only two incidents which marred an otherwise satisfactory handling of the problem arose out of the failure of one of the hotels in the agreement to serve Negroes at the bar. We should not like to see a repetition of such occurrences in Indianapolis. The principle at issue is not prohibition or temperance, but equal treatment. Mr. Knight in our discussion feared the development of ugly situations of Negroes and whites drinking together. But the present arrangement does not prohibit Negroes from requesting bar service. Many Negroes undoubtedly will next May. Some bars will give service, others may not. We should like to see the Conference admit the existence of the issue, ask the hotel men that Negroes get service at bars, and list in the Conference Bulletin the names of those hotels whose bars will not discriminate against Negroes.

Fisher also made a recommendation for future conferences—Seattle had been selected for the 1938 NCSW—considering the breach of agreements in the past (Fisher 1936):

Seattle's record on the Negro problem is relatively good ... we ought to begin thinking now of the kind of request the Conference can reasonably make of that city's hotel people...

He concluded on a conciliatory note, expressing his support for the NCSW and his desire to continue building relationships despite previous tensions (Fisher 1936):

I am under the impression, may I say in closing, that there are members of the Executive Committee who misunderstand our motives in raising this issue, and who believe that our sole purpose is to embarrass the Conference. May I therefore assure you of our wholehearted desire to work sincerely and constructively with the Conference. Better relationships we feel will grow out of continued contacts.

Fisher's approach was consistent with idealism. He advocated forcefully for adherence to non-discrimination across all venues, including bar service. Since he was unsatisfied with the response, he brought this issue directly to Abbott, the leader of the NCSW.

Abbott–Realism

On December 11th, Abbott responded to Fisher. She informed Fisher that the NCSW would not pursue the question of access to hotel bars for African Americans, indicating that the issue had been discussed among the Executive Committee. She noted that while some members were concerned about interracial drinking, this was not her concern. Abbott *was persuaded* by the argument that bar service was not part of Conference business and attempts to demand racial equality in areas beyond Conference business were simply inappropriate (Abbott 1936):

I am not at all afraid of 'any specially difficult developments because of the two races drinking together.' I feel sure that there were others present at the Executive Committee who shared my opinion about this. My reason for thinking that we

should take no action is that I believe that the business of the Conference is to make it possible for all of our membership to have an opportunity to attend all of our meetings and our official social gatherings.

Interestingly, Abbott cited the example of membership at golf clubs that barred members based on gender, suggesting that this too would be *out of scope* for the NCSW (Abbott1936):

I do not think that it is the business of the Conference to assure any kind of recreational facilities to all of its members. If a golf club gives privileges to men and not to women, this seems to me a matter about which the Conference is not concerned. If a bar admits men and excludes women, this seems to me again a matter about which we have no concern. This applies also to the matter of any racial lines that may be drawn in these fields.

Abbott's response is illustrative of her consideration of the social mores of the day and hence, consistent with realism. Specifically, Abbott remained within the bounds of what she perceived to be "politically possible," to borrow the phrase from Schmitz (2016, p. 2).

Critique of ideal theory includes considerations that not everyone will comply with the ideal, that the ideal is insensitive to conditions on the ground, and that it does not take feasibility into consideration (Ralston 2010 p. 71). The sociopolitical environment of the time may have led Abbott to believe that 'conditions on the ground'—or the racial and gendered granting of privilege—could not feasibly be changed. Abbott supported inclusion based on race and gender, but she believed that it was not the business of the NCSW, nor the social work profession in general, to eliminate discrimination *wherever it may occur*. Abbott's advocacy was limited by realism, rooted in considerations of "real-world conditions," (Ralston 2010, p. 71). She differed with the idealists; she differed with Fisher. But as an idealist, Fisher persisted.

Fisher's Response—Idealism

Fisher appealed to all social workers writ large. In January 1937, Fisher issued a bulletin from the NCC entitled "Statement On The Negro Issue At The National Conference of Social Work." It detailed the distinct positions of the NCC and the Executive Committee of the NCSW on the issue of racial discrimination. He began the four-page manifesto outlining the differences, and then, documented his correspondence and meetings with NCSW leadership over the previous months. His intent was to spur a discussion among social workers; *we feel the issues at stake have become sufficiently crystallized to warrant discussion and the expression of opinion by the general body of social workers* (National Coordinating Committee 1937a).

Fisher reiterated NCC's *idealist* position on racial discrimination; it should not be tolerated, regardless of external sociopolitical circumstances. Furthermore, failing to publicize violations of the non-discrimination agreements flew in the face of the idealist nature of NCC's position on discriminatory treatment and its advocacy efforts to challenge it. Fisher confronted realism by noting his opposition to Abbott's view that bar service was outside the scope of "official" Conference business (National Coordinating Committee 1937a):

In reviewing Miss Abbott's letter the National Coordinating Committee has come to the conclusion that the issue at stake is one of civil liberties and not the provision of recreational facilities which have no relation to the Conference. A logical application of Miss Abbott's view would exclude Conference action on equality of treatment in Conference hotel dining rooms when breakfast, luncheon or dinner meetings are not involved.

Fisher acknowledged that the financial power of the NCSW was leveraged to demand equality for Conference participants and asserted that this influence should be fully applied in pursuit of the ideal (National Coordinating Committee 1937a):

The Conference has progressed to the point of insisting upon no discrimination in housing and restaurant service. It has been able to win these concessions because of its size and the amount of purchasing power it represents. It should take the next step and extend this principle to the other services offered by hotels coming into the agreement.

He concluded the letter by requesting support from social workers and attempted to garner support for the ideal, to the point of soliciting support to *resist* any attempts to schedule the 1939 Conference in the South (National Coordinating Committee 1937a):

We have pressed this matter as far as we can with the Executive Committee of the Conference. We now appeal to the membership of the Conference and to social workers in general to add their voice to ours. We do so because we believe that this is a matter of general concern to the membership of the Conference as a whole and to social work as a profession. The issue furthermore is particularly timely this year; when choice of a city for the 1939 Conference will be made and all indications point to serious consideration being given the Deep South.

Equality in Indianapolis

The 1937 NCSW in Indianapolis began on Sunday May 23rd and concluded Thursday, May 27th. There was no mention of incidents of racial discrimination in the NCSW Daily Bulletins nor in correspondence that followed the Conference. Nevertheless, the issue was still a considerable part of the Conference discussions. The NCSW *Trade Union Notes* from the opening of the conference on May 23rd included a page one article, "Social Effects of Racial Discrimination Warrant Attention," about how racial discrimination at the Conference should be a concern for *all social workers present* (National Coordinating Committee 1937b).

Social Effects of Racial Discrimination Warrant Attention

With official Conference hotels having agreed to provide rooms and dining accommodations without discriminating against Negroes, it is hoped that there will be no instances of racial discrimination at the Indianapolis meetings of the National Conference of Social Work and related bodies.

The National Conference, it is hoped, will also give greater time and attention to the social effects of discrimination against Negroes throughout the country. Millions of Negroes in the South and in urban centers of the East and Middle West are segregated, restricted in their possibilities of earning a living, and limited in opportunities to secure education, medical care, and other necessities of modern life.

The struggle for equal rights and opportunities for Negroes, for an anti-lynching law, and other such legislation requires the active support of all progressive social workers.

Subsequent Conferences were held without racial incident; the 1938 NCSW was held in Seattle and in 1939 in Buffalo. Over the next several decades, racial segregation and discrimination persisted across the U.S.; however, leaders in the social work profession continued to work together to resolve advocacy differences to successfully resist the flagrant discriminatory practices which had plagued previous NCSW national conferences and which continued to plague large swaths of the U.S.

Discussion

Each of these three social work leaders was concerned about racial discrimination, both within the social work profession and in broader society. Their personal identity, background, leadership style, and roles as leaders of their respective organizations contributed to their differing approaches on the realism–idealism spectrum.

Jones' main responsibility was leading the NUL and fund raising was a significant challenge during the Great Depression. Jones was not mentioned specifically in Fisher's letters detailing the correspondences in advance of the 1937 NCSW, which included listings of meeting attendees. However, he must have at minimum been informed of the discussions given his prominence and involvement in the NCSW. In addition, Hill, his colleague and NUL officer was copied on Fisher's correspondence. Jones had left the Executive Committee in 1933, but remained deeply involved in various issues associated with the social work profession. As an African American who exerted considerable influence at a time when few others could, Jones' realism approach to activism from within organizations and power structures enabled him to gain membership in the Roosevelt Administration. From 1933 to 1936, he was the director of the Commerce Department division for the study of Negro issues (Armfield 1998). This case occurred during a period when Jones' fundraising work was perhaps most challenging, which may further explain his realism approach. His activities included persuading educational institutions to provide funding support for African American social work students, which included the New York School of Social Work and the University of Chicago (Armfield 1998). He may have deferred to Abbott on the racial discrimination issue due to her position in the NCSW, and her role as dean at the University of Chicago. Jones' was instrumental in creating opportunities to educate male and female African

American social workers—particularly those from lower socioeconomic status. These opportunities were partially dependent on his ability to secure financial support in the wake of the Great Depression and on coalition building with educators to ensure that African American students would be able to attend social work education programs. A more idealist approach, such as that taken by Fisher, would likely threaten this potential.

Like Jones, Abbott was involved in a broad array of advocacy associated with the profession, from policy to education reform. Negotiating non-discrimination agreements for racial integration at NCSW conferences involved many businesses in the U.S. and Canada. Her realism approach is important to consider in her opposition to Fisher's stance that bar services should be included in the non-discrimination agreement. In addition, a racially mixed group of women and men drinking together would not have been tolerated in some areas; negotiating agreements that included this could prove risky, and to the realist, it simply was not feasible. Last, although Abbott was well established, women's right to vote had only occurred 16 years prior. Meaningful progress on women's rights was still relatively new, likely a consideration for a prominent female head of a professional organization.

Fisher's idealism focus was relatively narrow across his numerous roles; he exclusively concentrated on worker's rights and civil rights. This common thread enabled him to focus on this one issue. Among the three leaders, his idealism manifested in advocating most forcefully and consistently for racial integration in the NCSW and the profession in general. Unlike Jones and Abbott, he led groups that were comparatively narrow in scope. Therefore, he could focus on civil liberties. Comparatively less is known about his activities after this case in part because of the decline of the Rank and File Movement, due to their idealist anti-war position and alignment to communism. The accusation of associations with communists was a common tactic used against various social reformers of the time, but Fisher particularly fell victim at what should have been the prime of his professional career. Taking a government position in 1940 made him vulnerable to McCarthyism, likely contributing to the rapid decline of the considerable influence he had during the 1930s.

Contemporary Social Justice Implications

The range of perspectives on the realism–idealism spectrum reflects a diversity of approaches to activism among the leadership responsible for NCSW planning. We assert that their success was, in part, due to this diversity concerning this consequential and vexing societal issue. Fisher the idealist influenced Abbot the realist, and their success was predicated on their ability to persist effectively despite their differences.

While contemporary conference planners may not need to be concerned specifically with *racial* discrimination, professional organizations continue to face social justice issues concerning discrimination and equitable access to conference venues.

For example, the Society for Social Work Researchers (SSWR) Board deliberated over whether to move or cancel their 2014 conference in San Antonio, Texas, because Hyatt Hotels hosted conference events. Hyatt was being boycotted around the world due to “worker's rights violations and labor disputes” and accusations of poor treatment of lower paid hotel staff (Hooper 2013). The SSWR was under considerable public pressure from the labor union, Unite Here, to move the conference events from Hyatt

facilities. Additionally, social work professor Dr. Shane Brady created a [Change.org](#) petition to urge the SSWR to cancel its 2014 conference, change venues, or “push the leadership of Hyatt Hotels in San Antonio harder to do the right thing by workers” (Hooper 2013). While sympathetic to workers’ rights, the SSWR decided to maintain their contractual agreement, signed in 2009, to hold conference events at Hyatt facilities. According to Dr. Jeanne C. Marsh, SSWR President at the time, “The SSWR Board voted not to terminate the contract with the Grand Hyatt San Antonio based on the appraisal that financial penalties of \$491,088 that would put SSWR out of existence” (Hooper 2013). This decision suggests that SSWR leadership ultimately fell on the realism side of the realism–idealism spectrum, while SSWR members, such as Dr. Brady and others who signed the petition, fell on the idealism side.

Perhaps the most valuable lesson from the NCSW case study is how to deal with tensions inherent in differing approaches to social justice from either end of the realism–idealism spectrum. Significantly, while Fisher and Abbott publicly disagreed, they were respectful and tolerant. They remained open to debate rather than shutting one another down. They were able to move forward, without causing divisive rifts within the NCSW. Though Fisher made his objections known, he continued to remain involved and supportive of NCSW’s overall work. Furthermore, Fisher not only corresponded with Abbott, but encouraged dialog between leaders from the NCSW and the Rank and File Movement, along with all members of the profession.

Conclusion

This historical case study offers insight to how leaders of professional organizations handled fundamental differences in approaches of how to address racial discrimination, which was quite pervasive at the time. These differences can still be observed in contemporary social justice advocacy efforts against discrimination of marginalized populations across many professions. Members and leaders of professional organizations may disagree on how to approach efforts to address discrimination of marginalized groups. In addition to issues that directly affect gender and racial minority groups, these contemporary issues can include policies that discriminate against members of LGBTQ groups, immigrants, and religious groups.

Contemporary organizations should be tolerant of approaches from either side of the realism–idealism spectrum. If we ascribe to Herz’s claim that there is a productive landscape *between* the two ends of the spectrum, rather than emphasize a divisive “paradigmatic purity” (Booth 2008, p. 520), then we will be in a better position to work together in the pursuit of social justice. Working within this space enables opportunities for growth as individuals consider the merits of others’ viewpoints.

However, while finding common ground is desirable, the goal of tolerance is not to arrive at the same conclusions or to eradicate disagreement. Rather, as we observe from Fisher and Abbott’s example, tolerance and inclusion enable us to remain in relationship with those who approach social justice advocacy from varying points on the realism–idealism spectrum, even—and especially—when we do not agree.

We contend that tolerating differences and finding common ground through dialog are perhaps just as important as the solutions at which we arrive. Therefore, organizations can effectively contend with internal disagreements on how to approach advocacy

by encouraging discourse on divisive issues. This case describes the approaches taken during a bygone era concerning an issue that has been the subject of considerable activism; however, the value of diversity of approaches from within professional organizations has relevancy today. Disagreement concerning approaches within organizations undergird activism activities associated with lingering racial discrimination, and other contemporary issues such as LGBTQ discrimination and rights, and U.S. immigration policy and enforcement. Professional associations must invite their members to debate and deliberate when negotiating the best course of action. Similarly, leadership should allow room for disagreement and for voices of dissent. After all, these participatory processes of collaboration and discussion across the realism–idealism spectrum embody the very essence of social justice.

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