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Using the concept of epistemic injustice and cultural humility for understanding why and how social work curricular might be decolonized

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ABSTRACT

The notion of decolonizing the curriculum is currently gaining momentum in Higher Education Institutions (HEI) across the world and in the United Kingdom (UK). Fuelled by the movements #RhodesMustFall, 'Why is my curriculum White?', and critical incidents such as the killing of George Floyd and the #BlackLivesMatter protests, campaigners for decolonizing the curriculum have all questioned the omission of other perspectives from dominant Eurocentric White curricula at universities around the world, including social work education. This paper reports the findings of a qualitative study that involved 20 in-depth interviews with social work academics, social work students and practice educators (field instructors) in an English HEI social work department about their perspective on decolonizing the curriculum in social work education. The concepts of epistemic injustice and cultural humility were used to examine the data. Findings suggest that social work education is not immune to the centering of a Eurocentric curriculum and White middle-class values and needs to change to embrace other epistemology. The paper concludes by arguing that the concepts of epistemic injustices and cultural humility are especially relevant for understanding why and how social work curricula might be decolonized.

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Introduction

The literature suggests historical legacies of colonialism, 'Othering', the marginalization of minoritised epistemology and racially driven human rights violations are some of the key drivers of decolonization (Le Grange, 2016; Lerner, 2021; Townsend & McMahon, 2021). Rooted in the argument that Higher Education Institutions' (HEI) curricula, which shape and define ways of knowing, being and doing, center on Eurocentrism, White privilege and power, decolonization scholars, activists and students have argued that the curriculum needs to change to embrace other ways of knowing, being and doing that reflect diverse communities. This paper reports on a qualitative research study undertaken in an English HEI social work department with social work academics ($n = 5$), practice educators (field instructors) ($n = 5$), undergraduate social work students

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($n = 5$) and postgraduate Masters social work students ($n = 5$) on what decolonizing the social work education curriculum meant to them and what social work education could do to decolonize. The research question was framed as: '*What does decolonising the curriculum mean to those studying and teaching social work?*'

Literature review

Clarifying terms

Curriculum is broadly defined as a syllabus, the body of knowledge that is taught, as a product, process and praxis (Hicks, 2018). It includes the process of teaching and learning, students' engagement with the process, how students come to know, as well as reflection and evaluation of these (Annala et al., 2016). Curriculum plays a central role in facilitating the link between theory and practice. It provides the means through which theories and practice are integrated by allowing students to put what is taught at university into practice (Social Work England [SWE], 2021).

What is decolonising the curriculum?

There is no single agreed-upon definition of what decolonizing the curriculum is. A starting point to unpack what is meant by 'decolonising the curriculum' is to explain what is meant by colonization, as one informs the other. Colonization refers to the process and practice of forcibly taking over another country and asserting power and control over it (Bhatti-Sinclair, 2022). The process of colonization involved systemic dehumanization of the colonized people's knowledge, philosophies, religion, social and cultural practices developed over centuries (Ashcroft et al., 2000), as well as the imposition of the colonizer's language, religion and culture on the colonized. Mathebane and Sekudu (2018) note that the prime aim of decolonization is to deconstruct and challenge the legacies of colonization that still perpetuate the systems and structures that frame contemporary ways of knowing, being and doing, particularly the centering of Eurocentrism on social work programmes and practice. Mbembe (2016) goes further, suggesting that decolonization includes reviewing and reversing the structural bureaucratic mechanisms that sustain HEI systems. These views suggest that decolonizing the curriculum includes the content as well as the structures and systems that frame ways of knowing.

What shapes social work curricula?

In England what social work students come to know and are expected to demonstrate as graduates is set by regulatory and professional bodies. Social Work England (2021) approves and validates social work courses against its education and training standards, including the professional standards. The Quality Assurance Agency for UK Higher Education (QAA, 2019) Subject Benchmark Statements set out the academic standards of what is expected of graduate social work education. Similar systems exist in the other three nations of the UK (i.e. The Northern Ireland Social Care Council; Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales and the Scottish Social Services Council).

In common with the UK, to give some examples at international level, in the North American context the Canadian Council of Social Work and United States Council on Social Work Education provide regulations and guidance on what graduate social workers should know. Similar systems exist in Australia and Eastern Asia, where the Australian Association of Social Workers and Hong Kong Social Workers Registration Board provide guidance on what social work students should know. Regulatory bodies of social work can also deregister courses and dictate the curriculum. Proponents of decolonization argue that although what is taught on social work programmes across the UK and globally are influenced by contextual national policies, law, political, socio-economic and geographical factors, what is generally taught is steeped in White history, Eurocentrism, White hegemony and White privilege. They therefore call on social work educators to decolonize the curriculum (Bhatti-Sinclair, 2022; Chilvers, 2022; Clarke, 2022; Clarke & Yellow Bird, 2021; Lerner, 2021; Tamburro, 2013).

Why the call to decolonise?

Scholars of decolonization in social work education draw attention to the multi-generational impact of colonialism, noting that it has sustained Western hegemonic power and created difficulties for minoritised students and communities (Chilvers, 2022; Choate, 2019; Tamburro, 2013). Advocates of decolonization argue that neo-liberal capitalist policies in HEIs, characterized by individualism, managerialism, marketization, internationalism and top-down audit surveillance culture (where excellence is measured by standardized performance outputs and outcomes), have exacerbated unequal power relations and existing racial inequalities where minoritised groups are required to compete within historical colonial systems that continue to structure HEIs (Moss et al., 2022; Rai & Campion, 2022). In the UK, the University Partnerships Programme (UPP) Foundation and Higher Education Policy Institute (2021) study found that 45% of the general public believe that universities are elitist, and the Office for Students (2020) has highlighted a number of concerns about the lack of Black and minority representation at universities, including a degree attainment gap between Black and White students. A report by Skills for Care (2022) suggests 5,710 students enrolled onto social work programmes in England in 2020–21. Of these, 65% were White and 35% were from Black, Asian and Minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds: 20% were Black, 7% Asian, and 6% identified as other. The Higher Education Staff Statistics 2021–22 (HESA, 2023) show, in general, there are 21,760 professors with known ethnicity in UK HEIs; 2,625 or 12% are from ethnic minority backgrounds and of the 2,625, 1,705 are Asian. Of the 22,855 professors in the UK, data suggests 89% are White, 28% are women, 7% are Asian and only 1% are Black. Just 41 out of 160 professors are Black women (HESA, 2023). Rana et al. (2022) suggest the underrepresentation of BAME academics in senior-level positions, if left unchanged, would inevitably affect the implementation of policies aimed at decolonizing the systems and structures that frame HEI practice. Research suggests that the disparities impact minoritised students' sense of belonging and wellbeing (Canea & Tedam, 2022; Office for Students, 2020). It is worth noting that although decolonization work involves individuals from different cultural and racial backgrounds, Akhtar

(2022) points out that most decolonization work falls on minoritised academic and student activists. Findings from the literature identify challenges in decolonization work and these include the emotional labor of such work on those leading decolonization, including pedagogical complexities (Akhtar, 2022).

Fairtlough et al. (2014) identified that the academic learning environment, including teaching and assessment, and the policies and structures of institutional practices, affected minoritised students' experiences and progression in England. Consistent with Fairtlough et al.'s (2014) findings, an earlier study by Thomas et al. (2011) argued for a more inclusive space of learning and educational experience, which fosters a sense of belonging for minoritised students. These findings were echoed more recently in Sangha's (2022) study, which concluded by calling for a more inclusive educational experience for minoritised students on social work programmes.

At international level, Chilvers' (2022) qualitative research, consisting of individual interviews ($n = 20$) and five groups ($n = 19$) of field educators (practice educators) in New Zealand, draws attention to the limited use of Indigenous pedagogical approaches due to constraints of time, lack of management support, marginalization and isolation. At practice level, Choate (2019) reports on three amalgamated research projects undertaken in Canada with students and faculty members, and consultation with Blackfoot Elders, legal, social work and First Nation experts involved with child protection systems. Findings from the projects suggest that although Indigenous people do not identify with the Eurocentric methods and approaches that define social work practice, they nonetheless find themselves assessed and case managed by them (Choate, 2019). It is within these contexts that decolonization scholar activists have called for the decentering of Eurocentric epistemology, both in the academy and in practice. Tamburro (2013) proposed using post-colonial theory in teaching to foreground current issues caused by colonialism as a counter narrative to Western Eurocentric perspectives on culture and history. This concurs with Choate's (2019) consultation with Blackfoot Elders ($n = 6$) on family, childcare and child rearing practices within Indigenous communities. Choate's (2019) findings encourage social work educators to deconstruct and decenter the theories used to assess childcare and child rearing practices with Indigenous people. A scoping review undertaken by Fernando and Bennett (2019) in Australia identified a number of approaches that could be used to foster a culturally safe space when teaching Aboriginal content in social work. The approaches include collaborative partnerships; relationship building; critical reflection; developing cultural courage; yarning and storytelling. Gatwiri and Ife (2021), also writing from Australia, invite social work educators to use the notion of vulnerability and love to inform teaching, as well as to question assessment methods that promote and benefit White privilege. Warria (2022) advocates for the inclusion of the perspectives of survivors in the intersectional analysis of people-trafficking discourse. Other decolonizing scholar activists have used digital storytelling of Indigenous knowledge to decenter Eurocentric epistemology in teaching (Bissell & Korteweg, 2016; Loewen & Suhonen, 2018; Nakata et al., 2014). Clarke (2022) encourages participation in dialogue about the histories that have shaped contemporary social work professional identities, as well as using podcasts to collect, analyze and disseminate local knowledge about ancestors to counter the top-down approach of expert-driven knowledge. Social work educators involved in decolonization activities could draw from any of the above to

address unequal power structures in educational settings or as a measure to center other ways of knowing, being and doing.

Methodology and ethics

The study draws from constructivist, interpretivist and insider-practitioner researcher paradigms and was informed by qualitative research ontology and epistemology. Qualitative methodology holds that reality is socially constructed and interpretive; that we come to know through our encounters with others, events and processes, that reality is lived and shaped through these encounters and the meaning we attach to them (Esterberg, 2002). As such, purposive sampling was used to allow recruitment of those with lived experiences of social work education curricula who could provide in-depth information on what decolonizing the curriculum in social work education meant to them (Campbell et al., 2022). The research participants were recruited from one HEI provider of the social work degree programme in England. The study site is predominately White. The sample group consists of social work academics ($n = 5$), practice educators ($n = 5$), undergraduate social work students ($n = 5$) and postgraduate Masters social work students ($n = 5$). Participants were aged 20–58 and included 15 females and five males. The gender and age composition of the sample reflects sector trends in social work across England, where the proportion of females (82.6%) is higher than males (17.3%) and the average age is 45 (Social Work England, 2022). The racial and cultural demographic make-up of the sample also reflects the composition of the general population data in the county where this study took place. According to 2021 census data, 95% of the population are White, with non-White accounting for 5% (ONS, 2022). In this study sample, the composition of ethnic origin included those identifying as White, Black and Ethnic dual heritage. The proportion of those identifying as White was higher than those from Black or identifying from Ethnic dual heritage backgrounds. A situated ethics decision was made to provide minimal details about the breakdown of participants' racial and cultural backgrounds to respect confidentiality and provide anonymity, as to do so would unmask the identities of those who took part in the study (Corplea & Linabaryb, 2020). Literature in social work supports situated ethic decisions. For example, in her analysis of social work as ethics work Banks (2016, p. 36) notes that situated ethics '*places dilemmas and decisions in a broader social, political and cultural context and sees responsibility in a wider, more relational sense, beyond the isolated individual decision-maker.*'

Ethical approval for the study was obtained through the Departmental Ethics Committee at the University (Ethics Application ID: ETH2122–1439). Ethical issues were considered from a practitioner-researcher position as an 'insider' (Fleming, 2018; Mercer, 2007; Taylor, 2011) and from the four binding ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice (Boulton, 2009). Drawing from Mercer (2007), the different power positions held as an insider researcher, and their likely impact on the relationship with the participants, was shared with would-be participants at the recruitment stage. It was felt that the different power relations may have compromised decisions to participate in the study. However, this was not the case, as those approached were able to give a firm answer about their willingness to either participate or not. In line with the four binding ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice,

an information sheet detailing the purpose of the study, method of data collection, likely risks and benefits, and information about participants' rights to withdraw from the study were provided to would-be participants to enable those interested in the study to make informed decisions about participation. Would-be participants were informed that participation was voluntary. Written and verbal consents were obtained from all those who took part in the study. It is worth pointing out that different ethical principles exist. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine these. For further reading on other ethical principles please see Banks (2016).

Method of data collection

Individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 20 people who consented to participate in the study. Interviews were conducted and transcribed via MS Teams and each interview lasted for up to an hour. The semi-structured approach offered some degree of standardization (Robson & McCartan, 2015). Participants were asked to comment on the following questions:

RQ1: What does decolonizing the curriculum in social work education, including practice learning (field education), mean to them?

RQ2: What could social work education do to promote decolonizing the curriculum, including practice learning (field education)?

RQ3: Any recommendations about teaching and learning resources that social work educators could use to promote decolonising social work education at the academy and in practice learning (field education)?

A conversational interview style was used to allow for in-depth discussions and flexibility on participants' perspectives, as well as allowing the opportunity to '*follow topical trajectories as the conversation unfolded*' (Magaldi & Berler, 2020, p. 4825).

Data analysis

The interview data was analyzed focusing on identification of salient repeated themes relating to the research question and issues similar to those located in the literature review, drawing from the interfacing strengths of yarning, an Indigenous research method approach (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010), and the practical iterative framework developed by Srivastava and Hopwood (2018). Walker et al. (2014, p. 1217) describe yarning as '*a conversational process that involves the telling and sharing of stories and information*'. Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010) delineate four modes of yarning: social yarning, research topic yarning, therapeutic yarning and collaborative yarning. Each yarning stage has its own rules and protocols. Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010) note that social yarning occurs between the researcher and participants before the research process. It is at this stage that information about the research, including social information, is shared between the researcher and

participants to enable relationship and trust to be built. The second stage of yarning identified by Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010) is research topic yarn, which is described as yarning with a purpose (conversation) to gather information about the research topic. The third stage of yarning identified by Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010) consists of therapeutic yarn and involves participants sharing personal emotional stories, where the researcher can step in to provide appropriate emotional support. The final stage consists of collaborative yarning. This is used by the researcher and participants to explore and examine concepts and meaning in order to work together to identify and develop new understanding about the research topic (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010). It was through these lenses that the interview data was analyzed.

It is important to explain my positionality as the researcher, my relations to others, to land, knowledge of systems, storylines and accountability in line with the ethos underpinning social yarning (Kennedy et al., 2022). I am the sole researcher on this project. I am female, employed as a social work academic. I teach as well as hold different leadership positions on the social work programme where this study took place. This positionality meant that the participants were known to me. These experiences shaped the personal, professional and wider contextual factors, including the methodological approach which shaped the desire to work collaboratively with colleagues and students to explore and understand why and how social work curricula might be decolonized. A reflexive position was taken to question my own position: the personal, professional, and inter-relations with the research participants, land, knowledge systems, including my assumptions, and what I brought to the study. Berger (2013, p. 220) points out that *'reflexivity is commonly viewed as the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of the researcher's positionality as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome'*. In the study, adopting a reflexive position allowed the sharing of personal and professional information about myself with the participants, as well as ensuring that the participants' experiences, relationship with others, land, knowledge systems and stories were central to the study.

The transcript data of each interview was read several times to gain an overview of participants' perspectives on what decolonizing the curriculum meant to them and what social work education could do to decolonize the curriculum. Srivastava and Hopwood's (2018, p. 2) practical iterative framework was also applied to interpret the data with the following questions in mind:

(1) What is the data telling me?
(2) What is it I want to know?
(3) What is the dialectical relationship between what the data are telling me and what I want to know?

Preliminary themes and subthemes were identified and color-coded in relation to the research question (research topic yarn). A second reading of the interview data was undertaken to identify salient themes, patterns and meaning. This also involved identification of shared perspectives, comparing within and across the different subgroups. A third reading was undertaken to identify issues similar to those identified from the

literature review. A cutting and sorting technique was then used to organize and compile the themes. Analysis of the findings draws from the theories of epistemic injustice and cultural humility. These were used for understanding the study findings.

Theoretical influences: the concept of epistemic injustice and culture humility

Fricker's (2007) concept of epistemic injustice and the theory of cultural humility (Foronda, 2020; Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998) provided a useful framework for understanding why and how social work curricula might be decolonized. Epistemic injustice is concerned with the silencing of a person's knowledge, their capacity to speak as a knower and the psychological harm caused by the silencing. Fricker (2007) identifies two forms of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice occurs when a knower's capacity to speak is silenced or not acknowledged, or not given credibility or respect by the hearer due to prejudice. Hermeneutic injustice occurs *'when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences'* (Fricker, 2007, p. 1). Isham et al. (2020) note that hermeneutic injustice occurs when both the listener and speaker have insufficient epistemic resources to communicate and understand one another. This can occur at either the structural or institutional level. Fricker (2007) argues that we wrong the speaker *'in their capacity as a knower'* (p. 1) when they are silenced.

Equally important is the concept of cultural humility. Established in medicine, nursing and education, cultural humility involves a lifelong process of self-reflection about how one comes to know and an openness to learn. Self-reflexivity, humility and an acknowledgment that we don't know it all, an appreciation of other people and communities' knowledge, flexible thinking, a desire to learn and to address power imbalance and privilege are considered important attributes of cultural humility, as is being respectful of other cultures (Foronda, 2020; Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998). Tervalon and Murray-Garcia (1998, p. 117) point out that *'cultural humility incorporates a lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and self-critique, to redressing the power imbalances'*. In what follows, the syntheses of thematic analysis of the findings are presented, drawing on the concepts of epistemic injustice and cultural humility.

Findings

Analysis of the interviews revealed three themes. The findings are reported under these themes. Quotes are used to illustrate what participants said. The quotes are drawn from all the participating cohorts. Minimal details are provided about individual participants' characteristics for confidentiality and anonymity, due to the small size of the groups. The quotes are therefore attributed to the participants' roles, rather than to individuals.

What currently shapes social work curricula, including practice learning (field education)?

No differences were found among the different groups under this theme. The use of Fricker's (2007) concept of epistemic injustice revealed the absence of other ways of

knowing, as well as the silencing of other voices and perspectives from the curriculum. The findings suggest agreement that the social work curriculum, including practice learning (field education), is underpinned by Western, Eurocentric, White history, White privilege and White male middle-class values. Although none of the participants offered a definition on what is meant by White male middle-class values, their narratives provide some insights about their perceptions of what this meant. All indicated that the literature (teaching and learning materials) is written mainly for a White audience:

> The academic discourse we have on the curriculum tends to be very Westernised and Eurocentric. (Academic)

> In social work, we're just looking at things from a White, you know, really a White viewpoint and even more kind of marginal, we're looking at it from pretty much a middle-class White male viewpoint on the whole. (MA student)

There was an acknowledgment that the silencing of other ways of knowing, being and doing was also perpetuated in practice learning (field education) settings. Participants described observations from practice learning (field education) settings, which highlight both testimonial and hermeneutic injustice. One participant described an assessment of a young 19-year-old service user (an asylum seeker) whose parenting style came under scrutiny, and who underwent a social work assessment without understanding the process:

> She sort of found herself in the assessment process, but without really being properly assessed. And she obviously struggled to communicate because she was still learning English . . . You know, her culture and where she comes from and what parenting looks like, you know, in her culture it is slightly different. (BA Student)

The above resonates with Choate and Lindstrom (2018) and Lindstrom and Choate's (2016) research, undertaken in Canada, where the authors found that assessment literature and practice in social work are not framed with Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing. Moss et al. (2022) cites similar findings in Moss (2012) Australian study, where the authors highlighted inherent disconnections between Western theories and practice. Moss and colleagues point out that although social work embeds anti-racist theories, this has not addressed the top-down expert approach in practice, where social work is done to people from non-White ethnic backgrounds. The authors urge social work to address the imbalanced top-down power structures embedded in the theories used, to seek to understand the needs of Indigenous people and to consider what could make them feel empowered to enable healing (Moss et al., 2022).

Another student placed in a predominately White low socio-economic area commented that some of the approaches used in practice inhibit other ways of knowing, being and doing and thus draw attention to the importance of critical thinking and intersectional considerations.

> What the forms, questions on the forms were looking for, focused on middle-class solutions and you know service users will come back and say well, I don't have access to that; I can't afford that. (MA Student)

Rawles (2023) highlights the importance of critical thinking and reflective practice by noting that social work is not just about doing but thinking, which makes doing meaningful. Effective decolonization of practice includes questioning the taken-for-granted assumptions about the practice tools and approaches used, leading one to explore other ways in which our engagement with others may be meaningful to them.

Perspectives about decolonising the curriculum

Participants conceptualized decolonizing social work education, including practice learning (field education), in different ways. There were no particular differences among the groups. Perspectives included supporting students to be more curious, ensuring that theories taught on social work programmes are more inclusive and respectful of other ways of knowing, and promoting the participation of marginalized groups in decision making. Creating spaces for other voices to be heard was a common theme, found in all the participants' interviews:

> It's changing the way that learning materials are focused on kind of White British families, White British views. (BA student)

> It is about creating spaces within what's being offered already and allowing for other voices to enter into that discourse . . . it means that you include other scholars and other ideologies from, you know from Africa and Asia. You know, other cultures too have significant contributions to make in our field. (Academic)

Most of the participants related decolonizing the curriculum to anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice. Others commented that they were unsure of where decolonization begins and ends or separates from anti-oppressive practice, and particularly anti-racist practice within that umbrella. In this extract, one practice educator participant clarified the difference between the terms:

> I think the difference for me is decolonisation has something in it about history. Understandings, values, perceptions through history that particularly as a White person, I may or may not even recognise.

Some of the participants commented that the killing of George Floyd and the #BlackLivesMatter protest movement was pivotal in raising awareness of historical racial injustice and the drive to bring about change:

> I have to get my head around that, but I suppose it's for me, you know, I sort of connect it with the #BlackLivesMatter . . . I suppose decolonisation in a way for me, has in the last couple of years made me think about my White privilege. (Practice Educator)

Approaches to decolonising the curriculum

All the participants maintained that decolonization holds social work educators, including regulatory bodies, accountable in meeting social work's social justice obligations to ensure the knowledge and values of all communities are respected. Participants offered different perspectives on how to decolonize social work education, and this included using different teaching materials, case studies and scenarios that respect as well as

acknowledge the intersectional factors of individuals and the wider community. Participants recommended reviews and an update of textbooks and reading materials that promote positive aspects of diversity to be undertaken. In addition, participants recommended using digital technology, such as short videos and discussion forums, to promote decolonization. This was a common theme in all the participants' interviews, as evidenced in this extract:

> What would be very meaningful to articulate the message would be using a social media platform you know, so many young people use social media and if you just have like 3-minute kind of video that will appeal to people because it's a quick watch, memorable. Another good one could be a kind of Forum. Short, short, very short videos. (Academic)

This supports Moss et al. (2022) work, where the authors report using digital platforms such as H5Ps with embedded quizzes and videos, Padlets, discussion boards, VoiceThreads and yarning circles via Zoom to aid student interactions and experiential learning.

One of the participants highlighted some of the challenges of using digital technology and reported on some work undertaken to address this:

> 'So we've done quite a bit of work on getting some structural change around how names appear on Teams. Now if you have a name that's really unusual for English-speaking people, how that can make you feel?' Let's decolonise! the name is in the wrong order for people who have difficulties to pronounce names, it's a nightmare, it's just structurally oppressive. (Practice Educator)

The above comment highlights the challenges of decolonization work in relation to content (what is taught) as well as structure (the systems that supports and promotes decolonization), as one informs the other.

As well as using digital technology as a pedagogical tool, participants recommended inclusion of other cultures and religions in the curriculum. These were common themes in all the participants' interviews and resonates with Furness and Gilligan (2014) and Pentaris (2020) research:

> Teaching different cultures or different religions and different ways of living could be focused on a little bit more to help us understand that our way of living isn't the only way of living. (BA student)

Furness and Gilligan's (2014) study with students ($n = 57$) about the extent to which issues of religion and belief had been discussed in their practice learning (field education) settings over a 12-month period found that although students acknowledged the importance of taking service users' religion into account, they did not know how to do so. Similarly, Pentaris (2020) qualitative research with qualified social workers ($n = 34$) in England found that practitioners employed either avoidant or utilitarian approaches in their assessments of service users' religion. In the following extracts, two practice educators described how religion and other cultures could be incorporated into teaching:

> I go to church, I'm a Christian, I decided to visit a mosque to listen into a sermon. I was looking at faith and the impact of spirituality and faith on a person's life through that particular sermon.

> In Nigeria when you pass a certain age, we don't call people by their first name. If you see a 65-year-old woman and you call her by name, she might be offended and might not engage if she hasn't lived here [UK] for a while and understands the system. You know, ask how would you like to be addressed? . . .Some may even have a pet name, or you call them Auntie. You can't teach every single sphere of life of a community but at least to have some basic understanding.

Integral to the theory of cultural humility is self-reflexivity, self-critique, humility and willingness to learn (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998). There was agreement among the different groups that decolonization is needed. Participants talked about where decolonization should start, and the actions needed to effect change:

> I don't know whether you've read or heard about hidden narratives of social workers of colour, the article says intelligence and what is considered intelligent in universities does not look like Black or other ethnic minorities. So I think decolonisation will have to start first of all, from academia, doing the work themselves before they try to teach it. (MA student)

> We can reflect as we encourage our students to, as we're asked to do in social work because it impacts our decision making. A starting point will be, I've got these influences, these values. Where did that come from? . . . it's about reflexivity with people which I then have to step back and think right, OK how do I then unlearn and repair. (Practice Educator)

Discussion

The findings revealed epistemic awareness among the research participants about the unfair disadvantage experienced by those who are silenced in the way that social work education and practice are structured. The study supports the findings of others who have examined decolonizing the curriculum in social work education (Akhtar, 2022; Chilvers, 2022; Choate, 2019; Clarke, 2022; Dempsey, 2022; Rasool & Harms-Smith, 2021; Tamburro, 2013). In common with other studies, participants reported that the social work curriculum is underpinned by Eurocentric, White privilege and White power and thus drawing attention to the epistemic injustice, the silencing of other ways of knowing, being and doing (Choate, 2019; Dempsey, 2022; Rasool & Harms-Smith, 2021; Tamburro, 2013). Findings drawn from participants' observations from practice learning (field education) settings revealed occurrences of hermeneutic injustice where both the listener (social work practitioners in carrying out social work assessments) and the speaker (service users) have insufficient epistemic resources to communicate and understand each another. The findings suggest taking a cultural humility stance presents an opportunity for social work educators and students to engage in self-reflection, and for openness about the values and beliefs that have shaped how social work has come to know and do, and to unlearn and repair. Foronda (2020, p. 8) points out that where cultural humility exists, there is '*mutual empowerment, partnerships, respect, optimal care, and lifelong learning*'. Like other studies, participants talked about a willingness to change (Chilvers, 2022; Choate, 2019), the need for unlearning, re-learning, engagement in self-reflection and reflexivity with others on what has shaped our thinking and learning and taking steps back to repair (Choate, 2019; Dempsey, 2022; Rasool & Harms-Smith, 2021). All the participants agreed that there is a need to change, to embrace other ways of knowing, being and doing that reflect diverse communities (Chilvers, 2022;

Choate, 2019; Dempsey, 2022). Consistent with other studies, participants recommended the inclusion of other cultures and religion in the curricula (Choate, 2019; Furness & Gilligan, 2014; Pentaris, 2020).

In common with the literature some of the participants, mostly practice educators, linked decolonization to anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice theories (Bhatti-Sinclair, 2022; Dempsey, 2022). Participants noted that the killing of George Floyd and the #BlackLiveMatters protests were pivotal in the call to decolonize. The findings also support others who have used or considered using digital technology as a pedagogical tool to decolonize social work (Bissell & Korteweg, 2016; Clarke, 2022; Loewen & Suhonen, 2018; Nakata et al., 2014; Neden, 2021). As well as using digital technology as a pedagogical tool, participants from this study included the need to decolonize the structural systems embedded in digital usage that perpetuates Whiteness and White privileges. This includes, for example, the order in which names appear on some of the current digital platforms (second and first name). Further, in common with previous studies, participants mentioned the need to create space for other voices to be heard (Fairtlough et al., 2014; Thomas et al., 2011) and this included adding how life is experienced through other cultures and religions (Pentaris, 2020; Tamburro, 2013).

Limitations

There are clear limitations to the study, firstly due to the sample size. A second limitation stems from the fact that the data comes from one HEI provider of social work. In line with the qualitative research tradition, although statistical generalization cannot be made, it is possible to make theoretical generalization (Yin, 2009). A third possible limitation relates to the researcher positionality as an insider and its likely influence on the research processes, including the study findings. As mentioned, I had what Mercer (2007, p. 4) described as an 'intimate' insider-practitioner researcher relationship with the research participants. Although this came with the advantage of having trusting and meaningful conversations with those who took part in the study, it nonetheless had an impact on the findings. This is linked to a fourth possible limitation, relating to the situated ethics decision taken to provide minimal details about participants' racial and cultural backgrounds. This limits analysis on whether participants' racial and cultural backgrounds influenced their perspectives on decolonizing social work education. Future studies could further explore racial and cultural background differences in perceptions on decolonizing social work education with a larger sample size, at different institutions offering social work education.

Conclusion

The findings from the study suggest that the social work curriculum is shaped and framed by Eurocentrism and White male middle-class values, drawing attention to epistemic injustice and the silencing of other epistemologies in social work education. All the participants agreed that decolonization of social work curricula is needed and all conceptualized decolonizing social work curricula as decentering Eurocentric White middle-class values in social work education and practice, albeit in their different ways. Recommendations on decolonization include advancing diverse ways of knowledge,

engagement in critical reflection, creating spaces for other voices and views to be heard, including other cultures and religions in the curriculum, interrogating the systems and structures embedded in the use of digital platforms that perpetuate White privilege, and engagement in self-reflection.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Ann Anka is an Associate Professor in Social Work at the University of East Anglia. Her publications include articles on service user and carer involvement in social work education. She has co-authored research papers on using professional curiosity in safeguarding adults and partnership, self-neglect; safeguarding adults, COVID-19 and virtual assessment. Her research draws on qualitative research methods, lived experiences and participatory methods.

Ethic approval

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