

Perspective

## Preventing White supremacy: an applied conceptualization for the helping professions

Loran Grishow-Schade<sup>1</sup> 

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### Abstract

This perspective paper synthesizes insights from social work research, Critical Race Theory (CRT), and Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) to develop a strategy for preventing White supremacy and promoting racial justice. It examines the intricate feelings of White guilt and shame, advocating for introspection, comprehension, and active engagement by White individuals toward systemic reform. The paper underscores CRT principles like Interest Convergence and Critique of Liberalism to examine concepts such as Moral Injury, Perpetration-Induced Traumatic Stress, and White Shame Culture. Three main obstacles to racial justice are identified: perceptions of power, funding dynamics, and attitudes toward White identity. The paper argues that racial healing should not be solely the responsibility of people of color, emphasizing the crucial role of White people in anti-racism work within supportive settings that foster growth rather than stress and humiliation. Focusing on prevention, the paper argues for social work practices that eliminate conditions obstructing optimal social functioning while challenging oppressive systems. This includes implementing trauma-informed approaches and fostering group work centered on empathy, relationship-building, and reflection. Advocating a strategy that champions our collective liberation, it suggests social work praxis as central to applying interpersonal and group solutions to systemic racism. The paper stresses the need for preventative funding in social services—highlighting tangible action steps and reforming funding strategies to support long-term engagement and address root causes of marginalization and oppression. This integral strategy calls for a collective push toward an equitable society, significantly enriching the discourse on CRT and CWS within social work.

The foundations of Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS), an interdisciplinary field—were laid in the previous century through the works of eminent thinkers such as W.E.B. Du Bois [1], James Baldwin [2], Zora Neal Hurston [3], Gloria Anzaldúa [4], and Vine Deloria Jr. [5] among others. These authors challenged 'Whiteness' as an unseen status quo, emphasizing its recognition to dismantle racialized oppression. CWS, a product of Critical Race Theory (CRT), builds on the work of these influential thinkers and scrutinizes White culture and its role in perpetuating systems of White supremacy, emphasizing the need to explore the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of White people [6].

Recent scholars have applied CWS principles specifically to social work. Scholars such as Nylund [7], Jeyasingham [8], and Hafen [9] have shown how entrenched White perspectives in social work hinder social justice. Their work advocates for deeper analysis of Whiteness and Whitenormativity, formal anti-racism education, and encourages White social workers to confront White supremacy culture. These studies highlight the importance of incorporating CWS into social work to combat systemic racism.

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✉ Loran Grishow-Schade, [loran@penncaireylaw.upenn.edu](mailto:loran@penncaireylaw.upenn.edu) | <sup>1</sup>School of Social Policy and Practice, The University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA.



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As social work strives to stay relevant and adaptive, by integrating CWS into our knowledge, skills, and abilities, as our sibling fields of psychology [10] and education [11] began more explicitly over a decade ago, we can advance our understanding of how to prevent White supremacy. This paper explores key barriers—how we think about power, funding, and attitudes toward race and racism among White practitioners—that hinder the adoption of CWS in North American social work.

The predominantly White (68.8%) and politically liberal (55%) social work field in the US presents a unique backdrop for exploring its racist history and White supremacy [12–15]. This demographic implies a majority of White liberals, grouped under the term “liberal” for this paper.

Social work has a long-standing history of racism, acknowledged and apologized for by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) in a 2021 press release [16]. CRT shows racism is entrenched in societal structures and daily interactions, often unnoticed by those with privilege [17]. CRT redefines racism as systemic inequities, not just isolated acts of discrimination. CRT and the Racial Contract expose the historical roots of racism within societal norms, perpetuating systemic inequities [18]. CRT calls for deconstructing racial categories and confronting systemic injustices for significant change. Social work’s connection to White supremacy has been examined through CRT [19–21]. However, the reluctant adoption of CWS in social work raises questions, given the critical role of race and racism in the US. This situation suggests a deeper issue.

## 1 Positionality

In social work research, acknowledging our ‘positionality’—our unique perspective shaped by personal experiences—is crucial [22]. This self-awareness helps us manage biases and understand how our backgrounds influence our research. Holding a license in social work and being a White, non-binary, queer, neurodivergent, HIV-positive millennial renting in a mid-Atlantic city while juggling three jobs and a marketplace insurance plan distinctly influences my approach to social work. As a White social worker, I use “we,” “us,” and “our” pronouns when discussing White social workers to avoid any real or perceived allusions to expertise, elitism, or an us-versus-them mentality.

## 2 Language

In this paper, “Whiteness” is shorthand for White Culture. In the tradition of queer and feminist theories, which critiques the normalization of heterosexuality and cisgender identities through the study of heteronormativity and cisnormativity, I find “Whitenormativity” to be more precise, parallel, and streamlined to other social movements pointed toward our collective liberation from systems of oppression.

This paper speaks specifically to White practitioners, acknowledging our shared experience. In the context of the social construction of Whiteness, I find myself having this conversation with a diverse spectrum of people who have internalized this experience. This includes those who are biologically White and those who are culturally White—people who are often mis/read as biologically White. We are all part of this conversation, seeking healing and understanding. “White people” refers to individuals who are biologically or culturally White.

Lastly, I employ the term “collective liberation” instead of “anti-racism” as our end goal because it highlights that everyone’s freedom is interconnected. “Collective liberation” addresses not just racism, but also other forms of oppression like sexism and classism. This term helps readers understand that dismantling White supremacy benefits the entire community, emphasizing solidarity and the well-being of all.

## 3 The (myth of a) White monolith

CWS critiques and examines the dynamics of race, Whiteness, and Whitenormativity [23]. These concepts can be large and opaque, so let us start by remembering that race and Whiteness do not exist in a social vacuum. Our relationships with gender, class, ability, sexuality, religion, immigration status, and age impact our relationship to race. As Lorde said, “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives” [24].

Generalizations about White people fail to honor the diverse White experience. We must consider the spectrum of identities that exist simultaneously to being raced: we are gendered, aged, classed, sexed, abled, and our ethnicities

determined. Our social positioning may simultaneously grant us social privileges and disadvantages. A single father on welfare in Elko, Nevada, who is White, has a different—better and worse—social experience than a mother with an au pair in Baldwin Hills, California, who is Black. Socially, we have a range of experiences within races. Being White is no different.

For example, within the White community, there is significant diversity in terms of ethnicity and experiences. Recognizing this diversity is crucial for a nuanced discussion on race and Whiteness. Nearly two-thirds of Romani Americans report feeling discriminated against due to their heritage, with close to 80% agreeing that Americans treat Roma people differently from other minority groups [25]. Similarly, Jewish people face ongoing challenges, particularly due to the current conflict in Palestine, impacting perceptions and experiences of discrimination globally [26]. These examples underscore the importance of recognizing the diverse and intersectional experiences within the White community, emphasizing the need for a nuanced discussion on race and Whiteness in social work.

Now we have a shared language and context; let's dive in.

## 4 Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) emerged from students of color at Ivy League institutions in the 1970s and '80s [27]. It aimed to challenge entrenched White supremacist narratives in academia and the legal field. Delgado and Stefancic identified its core principles: Interest Convergence, Revisionist History, Critiquing Liberalism, and Structural Determinism [28].

### 4.1 Core principles of CRT

- *Interest Convergence*: Civil rights gains for communities of color often align with White self-interest. This challenges the idea that progress is purely driven by altruism.
- *Revisionist History*: CRT reexamines America's history, challenging majoritarian views and presenting marginalized perspectives.
- *Critique of Liberalism*: Critical race theorists argue that liberal concepts like color blindness and neutral constitutional principles fail to address systemic racial issues.
- *Structural Determinism*: The idea that the societal structure and its inherent vocabulary are fundamentally ill-equipped to redress certain systemic wrongs.

This paper will focus on the principles of Interest Convergence and Critique of Liberalism. Future research should explore White social workers' relationship with Revisionist History and Structural Determinism.

### 4.2 Focus on interest convergence

Introduced by Derrick Bell in 1980, Interest Convergence examines power dynamics and the limitations of zero-sum thinking in racial equity and justice [29]. There are many examples, and history is more complex than a summary can capture:

- During the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which freed enslaved people in the Confederacy. This act was not only driven by moral considerations but also by the Union's strategic interests in undermining the Confederate war effort and bolstering its own military forces [29].
- The US Civil Rights Act of 1964 was influenced by the emotional impact of President Kennedy's assassination, generating sympathy among White Americans and a shared interest in honoring his legacy by ending discrimination [30].
- In Canada, establishing the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) following the Oka Crisis in 1990 demonstrates Interest Convergence [31]. The federal government's interests in political stability and maintaining its international human rights image aligned with and benefited from Indigenous demands for recognition and justice.

Understanding how White interests intersect with those of minoritized racial groups is key to advancing collective liberation. This shared liberation comes from meeting the interests of White people with Indigenous, Black, Latin@, and Asian populations. We must do both; we cannot do either/or. We must not de-center but co-center. This argument relies on resolving contradictions like de-centering White people in CRT and how our approaches can create reinforce White supremacy [32]. This leads us to examine the ideologies guiding our understanding of racial dynamics and their impact on professional practices.

### 4.3 Zero-Sum ideologies and its implications

In understanding equality and justice, we encounter the zero-sum paradigm of social progress. In economic or game theory, a zero-sum scenario is where one participant's gain or loss is balanced by the other's. Both groups cannot win. Both participants cannot lose: a competition. In discussions on racism and equality, a zero-sum viewpoint implies that advancements for marginalized groups result in losses for the dominant group. For example, opportunities for people of color through affirmative action or fair hiring practices are seen as reducing opportunities for White individuals. With limited resources or one job posting, there can be only one "winner," making everyone else a "loser."

### 4.4 Power

In social work, zero-sum thinking is often applied to power. Abrams defines power as the ability to acquire what one needs and persuade others to help; essentially, it revolves around winning [33]. Discussions on power frequently suggest that it must be "taken" [34] or taken "away from" [35] dominant populations (re: White, straight, able, men)—and redistributed [36]—implying that non-dominant populations (re: people of color, queer, disabled, women and gender nonconforming, nonbinary, and trans people) cannot persuade others to assist them in securing what they need. This binary model fosters a harmful either/or mindset: one either has power or does not.

Seeing power as socially constructed allows us to view it as expandable and shareable. Community organizing and coalition-building can create new, collaborative forms of power, promoting social justice for all. Interest Convergence shows that aligning the interests of dominant and marginalized groups can expand and equitably distribute power. This framework challenges zero-sum thinking by showing that progress for marginalized groups does not come at the expense of dominant groups.

Because of the perils of the illusory truth effect—where we begin to believe false information is correct merely because it is repeated—we can start to construct a reality of power that portrays social justice as a competition. This method maintains social inequity by competing for power, bypassing the need for collaboration or communal power [33, 37]. We neglect the tools and trainings—power mapping, community organizing, strategic alliances and partnerships, social media campaigns, narrative and framing techniques, crowdfunding and resource mobilization, volunteer networks, digital advocacy, grassroots lobbying, and coalition building—that instruct us on how to achieve this, which demonstrate the evidence and legacy of how to build power out of nothing [38–40]. We forfeit power by adopting a scarcity mindset, overlooking our social work education.

### 4.5 Zero-sum implications

For example, many White liberal social workers adhere to biological essentialism, which asserts that racial identities dictate behaviors and capabilities [41]. This philosophy suggests White individuals are inherently racist and are therefore intrinsically incapable of addressing race and racism. This makes change or justice seem unattainable [42–44]. White people will always win: zero-sum. Such a stance not only simplifies complex racial dynamics but also ignores the diversity within White communities. Casting racial dynamics as a rigid power battle, where White people monopolize authority, cultivates zero-sum ideologies. This view ignores Interest Convergence and sees power as a limited resource to be reallocated, rather than a socially constructed concept that can be expanded and equitably distributed.

### 4.6 Misconceptions

Table 1 catalogs how zero-sum thinking and distorted views of power have created a wide array of biases, assumptions, and misconceptions within anti-racism work. It shows us how far we have strayed from recognizing the power of Interest Convergence to creating social change.

The Table begins with the prevalent assumption (#1) that all White individuals are inherently racist or uniformly benefit from racial privilege. This view ignores individual complexities like socioeconomic status, education, and personal values. Additionally, it challenges the way of thinking (#2) that White people cannot comprehend or tackle racism by ourselves, highlighting the significance of both individual efforts and collective action in addressing racism. The table also draws attention to the diversity within White communities, revealing a wide spectrum of (#4) awareness and engagement with racial issues. It demonstrates that White individuals can make significant

**Table 1** Deconstructing racial misconceptions: an examination of assumptions, biases, and misconceptions by and about white individuals and our role in racism

Misconception	Description
#1 Inherent Racism and Uniform Privilege	The belief that all White individuals are inherently racist or benefit equally from systems of racial privilege overly simplifies the complexity of individual experiences. It overlooks significant factors such as socioeconomic status, education, and personal beliefs. Isenberg [45], in her book 'White Trash', highlights the often-ignored complexities of class identity, challenging the notion that all White individuals benefit equally from systems of racial privilege.
#2 Lack of Independent Understanding	A common misconception is that White individuals cannot understand or combat racism on our own. This view underestimates individuals' abilities to learn, empathize, and take action against injustice. However, being able to understand racism independently does not diminish the collective responsibility to address it, as discussed by Haga [46] and Todd Jealous & Haskell [47].
#3 Exclusion from Responsibility	Societal progress necessitates everyone's participation and commitment, regardless of their race, challenging the idea that White people are not affected by or do not have a stake in preventing systems of racial oppression [46–48].
#4 Homogeneity in Awareness	The notion that each White person possess the same level of awareness or engagement with racial issues disregards the diversity of perspectives, experiences, and knowledge within any racial group [49]. This homogenization can undervalue the significant contributions that White individuals can and have made to collective liberation efforts [50].
#5 Limited Contribution to Anti-Racism Efforts	The idea that White individuals cannot make significant contributions to anti-racist efforts undervalues the role that allies can play in challenging systemic racism and promoting equity [50, 51]. While some may underestimate White individuals' contributions, others fail to recognize that race impacts everyone.
#6 Lack of Racial Experience	Contrary to popular belief, every individual, including those who identify as White, experiences the effects of race in unique ways. The term 'racial experience' refers to how one's racial identity shapes their experiences [17]. This is true for White people, too, not just people of color.
#7 Unidirectional Impact of Racism	Though people of color bear the brunt of racism, it is a misconception to assume they are the only ones negatively impacted. Racism also indirectly harms White individuals by perpetuating harmful stereotypes and social divisions [47, 51, 52]. This is further explored in Perpetration-Induced Traumatic Stress, moral injury, and White Shame Culture.
#8 Universality of Untrustworthiness	The stereotype that all White individuals are untrustworthy overlooks individual differences and actions [53]. This broad generalization can foster the misguided belief that rectifying racial issues is solely the responsibility of people of color.
#9 Exclusive Responsibility of People of Color	Believing it is solely the responsibility of people of color to rectify and lead racial issues is erroneous. Combatting systemic racism requires efforts from all racial and ethnic groups [46]. This mistaken belief often leads to another misconception—the oversimplification of desires and solutions within communities of color.
#10 Homogeneity in Desires and Solutions	Assuming all people of color, or all Black people, all Latin@ people, all Native people, all Asian people, all Southeast Asian people, all Middle Eastern/North African people, or all White people desire the same outcomes oversimplifies the diverse experiences and aspirations within these populations. This belief treats people of all races as distinct monoliths with identical thoughts, feelings, or behaviors, ignoring the shared societal responsibility in addressing racial disparities and injustices [54, 55].

contributions to collective liberation efforts (#5), countering the myth of our ineffectiveness or non-involvement. By questioning the assumption that White people are excluded from responsibility (#3) and the one-directional impact of racism (#7), Table 1 advocates for the possibility of change and fluid power dynamics inherent in CRT's social construction thesis [27].

Table 1 examines misconceptions about White individuals and clarifies how these perceptions impact social workers' actions and inactions. By adhering to the flawed zero-sum paradigm, we overly focus on interventions, often neglecting a holistic approach to prevent White supremacy.

## 4.7 Reverse racism

For many White people, zero-sum thinking aligns with ‘reverse racism’—power being taken from and redistributed from White people [42, 43, 56, 57]. Many scholars in the helping professions maintain that reverse racism does not—and cannot—exist. This stance is supported by key arguments: (1) reverse racism misunderstands discrimination and racism, (2) ignores historical context and power dynamics, (3) misinterprets discrimination dynamics, (4) denies racial privileges, (5) misunderstands affirmative action, and (6) neglects evidence of White advantages. [58, 59].

However, a 2017 report revealed that 55% of White respondents believed that racism against White people exists [60]. In 2020, data from FiveThirtyEight showed that 73% of Republicans, 38% of independents, and 22% of Democrats shared this belief [61]. Public figures like Elon Musk and Scott Adams have propagated these narratives, indicating growing acceptance of reverse racism among White individuals [62]. This data shows an interest by White people to acknowledge racism against White people in contemporary American culture despite the key arguments that maintain it cannot exist.

While some White people fear that systemic racism against White people is emerging as we become a racial minority, it is important to focus on creating equitable systems that prevent any form of systemic oppression. This demographic shift is part of the natural progression of society in the US and is projected to occur within the next two decades. However, this change will not happen suddenly; we are already in the transitional phase. White nationalist groups have weaponized this notion and propagated The Great Replacement Theory, suggesting that White individuals in the US are experiencing systematic displacement and eradication [63]. This conspiracy has been cited in the manifestos of mass shootings at the Christchurch Mosque in New Zealand and Walmart in El Paso, Texas, in 2019; the Squirrel Hill synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 2018; and the Tops Supermarket shooting in Buffalo, New York, in 2022 [64].

Even if textbook definitions do not support the existence of reverse racism, many White people believe it exists. Ignoring this belief can have deadly consequences, as evidenced by these violent acts. We must also recognize our unintentional role in fostering dangerous narratives due to a disconnect between our theory and practice concerning White people. For instance, children born between 2008 and 2016, who grew up during Barack Obama’s presidency, will experience Donald Trump as their first president who is White. This shift in experience underscores the evolving nature of our language, demographics, societal experiences, and the importance of updating our social definitions accordingly. As social workers, it is imperative that our practices reflect these changes to effectively serve our communities.

## 4.8 The intervention vs. prevention binary

A second oversight in social work’s fight against White supremacy is the false dichotomy between intervention and prevention. Effectively addressing systemic racism in social work requires a nuanced understanding of intervention and prevention strategies. Balancing intervention—challenging oppressive systems [65, 66]—with prevention—eliminating conditions that obstruct optimal social functioning [67–69]—is essential. CRT’s principle of Interest Convergence can guide this balance by identifying common interests supporting immediate interventions and long-term preventive measures. We must see these approaches as complementary, with a focus on preventive measures. Like addressing a flood, we need to aid survivors *and* construct a dam to stop future occurrences.

However, efforts to shift social work culture toward prevention often go unheeded [70]. If we understand White supremacy as a problem White people have created, then preventing White supremacy means working with White people. As reported by Guidestar, the database of registered nonprofits in the US, the majority of organizations working within community and economic development, education, human rights, and human services are explicitly working with Black (29%), Latin@ (20.6%), Native (16.1%), Multi-Racial (15.4%), and Asian (11.2%) populations [71]. While these organizations play a crucial role in supporting marginalized communities, the limited focus of nonprofits working explicitly with White people—only 3.7%—highlights a significant gap. Without addressing the population that perpetuates White supremacy, it can feel unpreventable, leading to misconceptions about its inevitability.

Effectively combating White supremacy in social work requires a balanced approach that integrates both intervention and prevention strategies. Viewing these methods as complementary enables us to address immediate harms while eliminating the conditions that allow systemic racism to persist. While prioritizing preventive measures is essential, we must also recognize the necessity of immediate interventions to challenge oppressive systems and support those affected. Currently, many efforts overlook the principle of Interest Convergence, focusing more on harm reduction than on reducing harm itself. By aligning our strategies, we can more properly attune our praxis.

## 4.9 Example: “de-centering Whiteness”

The phrase and practice of “de-centering Whiteness” has become common in the US [32, 72–75]. De-centering is generally known as the process of moving away from treating White cultural norms, values, and perspectives as the default or standard in our literature, classrooms, and staff meetings throughout the helping professions. However, based on the misconceptions we hold around race and racism (see Table 1) White people might feel hesitant to engage in spaces focused on decentering Whiteness due to fears of being labeled or judged, self-doubt about our understanding of racism, and feelings of exclusion from responsibility. Additionally, we may perceive that our contributions are undervalued or that their unique perspectives and experiences are not considered relevant. “De-centering” then becomes internalized as code for shutting down or tuning out White people. People of color are centered; White people are de-centered: zero-sum. There is no talk of co-centering. Often, it’s these spaces that profess to support CRT who are suddenly fumbling one of its core principles (re: Interest Convergence). Ironically, by getting White people to stop talking about Whiteness the interests of Republicans and conservative movements to stifle race-related conversations are inadvertently supported in liberal spaces [76–78].

Centering leadership from marginalized groups while holding White individuals accountable for most of the work can be seen as an attempt to manufacture Interest Convergence. This well-intentioned strategy risks reducing White individuals’ agency to mere compliance rather than active participation, leading to superficial engagement that lacks genuine understanding and long-term commitment to racial justice. Moreover, this approach can inadvertently reinforce zero-sum thinking by implying that the empowerment of people of color necessitates the disempowerment of White individuals. Instead, a more effective strategy would involve co-creating spaces where White people and people of color can lead and collaborate, recognizing the unique contributions and responsibilities of each group. This balanced approach aligns with the principles of Interest Convergence by ensuring that the interests of all parties are considered and integrated into the collective effort to dismantle systemic racism.

Over the past decade, many North American classrooms, conferences, and social service providers have shifted toward ‘De-Centering Whiteness.’ While the goal is to de-center Whitenormativity, current literature suggests removing White people from these conversations [32]. Literature shows that when White people enter race and racism conversations, we often feel poorly informed, miseducated, or uneasy. Our involvement decreases, and we anticipate that Indigenous, Latin@, Black, and Asian people will fill the silence, teach, and lead [48, 72, 74]. This often places an undue burden on people of color to lead and educate. This dynamic creates an escape for White people from engaging meaningfully in intergroup dialogues [75].

In social work, misinterpreting ‘de-centering’ Whiteness fosters a belief in zero-sum equity—that making space for marginalized groups means taking space from White individuals [56]. A recent journal example illustrates this by advocating for inclusivity while suggesting the education system ‘de-emphasize’ Whiteness, reflecting a counterproductive shift toward zero-sum thinking. What is more: White people do not have to internally stop ourselves from showing up, because other well-intentioned White people are already telling us to sit down and not speak.

The flawed approach that elevating marginalized voices requires silencing White voices reinforces the erroneous belief that White perspectives on racism are fixed, ignoring the fluid nature of racial interactions. This, coupled with increasing societal segregation, raises vital questions about our collective liberation and the importance of mutual accountability among all racial demographics [79, 80].

Interest Convergence suggests that efforts to prevent White supremacist structures—like de-centering Whiteness or avoiding race discussions—hinder collective progress. Instead of removing White voices from the conversation, Interest Convergence advocates for a balanced approach where the interests of both White individuals and marginalized groups are aligned. Involving White people in race-based initiatives can bridge understanding and foster collective action toward systemic change. Overlooking the role of White individuals in addressing systemic racism by failing to acknowledge the impact of race only serves to preserve the structures we are seeking to change.

This oversight underscores the need for careful integration of CWS and CRT within social work.

Implementing Interest Convergence in social work invites us to *collaboratively* confront and address systemic racism. This collaboration is central to both CRT and effective social work practice, challenging us to move beyond binary perspectives of intervention and prevention toward true inclusivity and accountability.

## 5 Critical Whiteness Studies

Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) explores Whiteness as a social construct and its implications across cultural, historical, and institutional contexts [6, 81]. Scholars from various disciplines contribute to CWS by examining the origins, manifestations, and privileges of White people. It is crucial to examine Whiteness itself, rather than taking it for granted. This involves questioning how Whiteness is constructed, maintained, and contested, and understanding its role in systemic racism. CWS's mission is evident in its engagement with CRT, aiming to prevent oppressive systems and encourage ethical practices that address race and power complexities. By understanding how Whiteness operates within social work and other fields, we can identify and address the unique stresses, such as Perpetration-Induced Traumatic Stress (PITS) and moral injury, thereby facilitating more authentic engagement for our collective liberation.

### 5.1 Liberalism and CWS

Since 68.8% of social workers in the US are White and operate within Western Liberalism's political and moral framework, this paper uses Critical Race Theory's Critique of Liberalism along with CWS [28]. The Critique of Liberalism argues that the ideas of individualism, equality, and freedom in classical liberalism can hide systemic racial injustices [82]. For decades, the anti-racism movement has relied on the narrative that education is the answer to injustice: if we know better, we do better. However, recent data shows that support for Black Lives Matter has declined, and many believe race relations have not improved [83]. Addressing these issues through CWS is essential for social work. It underscores the need for something deeper with concrete actions to prevent systemic injustices, moving beyond mere education and awareness.

### 5.2 Mental health needs of White liberals

When White people realize that our beliefs in liberalism clash with systemic racial injustices, we have a spectrum of emotional responses, including cognitive dissonance, guilt, shame, emotional exhaustion, and identity crises. In 2020, at the height of the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and systemic racism, only 11.2% of White people received counseling or therapy at least once from a mental health professional [84]. This suggests that seeking mental health support was not a widespread response—or financially viable—among White people, even amidst a global health crisis and civil unrest. Stigmas around mental health are still quite high [85], which may contribute to this low percentage. Therefore, when White people do seek mental health support, it is crucial to use skilled interventions to address these emotional responses and prevent these responses from reinforcing White supremacy.

This paper advocates addressing the mental health needs of White liberals as a strategy to prevent the perpetuation of White supremacy. This argument is supported by the works of Baldwin [2], Morrison [86], and Menakem [87], who highlight racism as a manifestation of White people's troubled relationship with mental health. Central to this discussion is exploring guilt and shame among White social work students, a common thread in recent studies [88–90]. By addressing these mental health challenges, we can better equip White people to engage in collective liberation work without being hindered by emotional barriers, ultimately contributing to the prevention of systemic racism.

### 5.3 Guilt and shame

Guilt and shame, while related, influence self-concept and self-esteem differently. Guilt is transient, triggered by wrongdoing (re: 'I did something bad'), offering a pathway to rectification [91, 92]. Shame, however, is more enduring, entailing a deeper internalization of fault (re: 'I am bad'), which can significantly hinder personal and professional growth. As White people become more aware of racial privilege and systemic racism, we often experience these emotions. Understanding these emotions through lived experiences is essential for navigating discussions on race and racism. However, color-blind and post-racial approaches can exacerbate or dismiss these feelings, denying the need for systemic reform. Therefore, developing a positive White racial identity requires acknowledging the emotional landscape of being White [93–96], particularly in the dynamics between guilt and shame.



## 5.4 White guilt

White guilt, emerging from the 1960s liberation movements, has evolved, resulting in diverse viewpoints on preventing racism today [50, 97]. White guilt is the remorse some White people feel when we recognize racial injustices and how our race protects us from these injustices. Research around trust and self-worth offers valuable insight into White guilt. While cultivating a robust moral compass is beneficial [98, 99]—particularly for middle-class White people—feelings of White guilt can hinder our ability to trust ourselves and have positive self-worth. This highlights the importance of addressing White guilt for societal progress and individual well-being [100, 101].

Moreover, this overwhelming sense of guilt can lead White individuals to believe that we are incapable of leading or co-leading anti-racism work. Current social justice narratives suggest that White individuals cannot prevent White supremacy without the leadership of people of color [102–104]. This perspective emphasizes the importance of centering the experiences and leadership of people of color in anti-racism initiatives. However, it is sometimes misinterpreted as suggesting that only people of color should lead these efforts [49, 105] (See Table 1, misconceptions 8 through 10). Such misinterpretations can lead to the simplistic belief that White people are always guilty of wanting to maintain White supremacy, which makes it hard to believe we can fight against it effectively.

High-profile incidents like the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Breonna Taylor have ignited a racial awakening among many White people, with the Black Lives Matter movement keeping this dialogue at the forefront [106–108]. The enduring presence of the Black Lives Matter movement, highlighting police brutality, has made it difficult for many White people to ignore these issues. From 2016 to 2019, the Pew Research Center observed a 50% increase in White people recognizing racial discrimination [109]. By the decade's end, a majority of White Americans (55%) acknowledged that racial discrimination was occurring in the US. The escalation of conversations surrounding race, racism, Whitenormativity, and White supremacy across various platforms, including the Super Bowl Halftime Show [110], housekeeping magazines aimed at suburban mothers [111], and children's networks like Nickelodeon, which aired an eight-minute and forty-six-second tribute to George Floyd [112], has brought racism, from interpersonal to systemic, into the limelight of national discourse.

This widespread exposure to discussions of racism has influenced White American culture and profoundly affected our collective consciousness. Against this backdrop, White Americans' understanding of our role in a racially structured society has begun to unravel. This confrontation with explicit racism and the realization of complicity in systemic injustice has led to what some describe as "moral injury" among White liberals, affecting deeply held moral values and beliefs.

## 5.5 Moral injury and perpetration-induced traumatic stress

Moral injury, initially associated with traumatic experiences like warfare, has found increasing relevance in racial discourse [48, 113, 114]. It arises when individuals experience, witness, or fail to prevent actions that contradict their moral beliefs and expectations. This contradiction leads to profound psychological distress, characterized by guilt, shame, disgust, anger, struggles with self-forgiveness, and changes in behavior, relationships, and spirituality. It may also include feelings of betrayal by leaders or peers [115, 116]. This construct can emerge as White people confront our involvement in a racist system, particularly when viewed through the Critique of Liberalism [42, 45, 49]. Depending on the perceived severity of the racist act, moral injury often manifests as feelings associated with White guilt [113, 114]. Prolonged engagement with guilt-like thoughts can exacerbate stress, potentially leading to a state of emotional paralysis; being stuck.

Research on perpetration-induced traumatic stress (PITS), initially applied to combat veterans and executioners [117, 118], now extends to White populations grappling with this emotional paralysis or "stuckness" [48, 113]. At the heart of PITS is the struggle to transcend the discomfort of moral injury, marked by continuous distressing memories and psychological distress [119]. This traumatic stress is characterized by persistent avoidance of trauma-associated stimuli and negative changes in cognition and mood. PITS takes the concept of moral injury one step further by internalizing the conflict—transitioning from "I have done something bad" to "I *am* bad," which reflects the shift from guilt to shame.

Given the recent emergence of PITS, moral injury, White shame, and White guilt in both academic and public discourse [48, 90, 120], it is important to clarify that these terms are often used interchangeably. However, moral injury is more closely related to White guilt, while PITS is more aligned with White shame. Each term represents a deeper psychological impact, compounding the initial trauma with self-condemnation.

## 5.6 Emotional impact of White shame and guilt on anti-racist efforts

Two recent studies have examined the issue of White shame's impact on our collective liberation from White supremacy, yielding insightful findings. The first study, conducted in 2019 by Grzanka, Frantell, and Fassinger [120], explore the relationship between emotions and attitudes toward racism among White people. It found that White shame was weakly and negatively correlated with racist attitudes, suggesting that higher levels of such shame do not inherently lead to reduced racist views. In contrast, White guilt was strongly associated with rejecting racist attitudes, indicating that guilt might be a more effective motivator for White individuals to adopt anti-racist perspectives. The study suggests that emotional responses to racism, particularly guilt, can be leveraged in educational and social initiatives to encourage deeper anti-racist commitments. This insight suggests focusing on guilt rather than inducing shame to interrupt and interrogate racist attitudes within White communities.

The second study by Brock-Petrosius, Garcia-Perez, Gross, and Abrams found that shame was significantly linked with fewer anti-racist behaviors than colorblind attitudes [90]. This finding suggests that White shame acts as a considerable obstacle to engaging in anti-racist actions. Although the research team did not identify a significant relationship between guilt and anti-racist behaviors, they acknowledged the existence of a positive relationship. This underlines the need for interventions to help White MSW students manage feelings of shame or guilt from reduced colorblind attitudes and highlights the importance of reducing White shame and promoting anti-racist actions. Shame can inhibit anti-racist activities despite a deeper understanding of racism and a solid intent to engage in anti-racist actions. Interestingly, more respondents said they felt higher levels of shame compared to empathy or guilt, even though the average score for shame was similar to that of guilt. The self-perception of shame among respondents is notably higher than that of empathy or guilt. This discrepancy highlights the personal impact and potentially more profound experience of shame, suggesting it may significantly influence behaviors or attitudes.

These studies suggest that while White guilt *might* motivate anti-racist perspectives, without careful management, White guilt could potentially lead to White shame, which does not inherently reduce racist views [90, 120]. These findings highlight the need for interventions to guide White individuals through guilt-related experiences and away from the paralyzing effects of shame, enabling meaningful actions towards our collective liberation.

## 5.7 White Shame Culture

White Shame Culture, a feature of contemporary White liberalism, arises from the acknowledgment of racial privilege and the perpetuation of White supremacy. It is characterized by pervasive feelings of shame related to racial identity, fueled by social justice discourses that often frame racial equity as a zero-sum competition. This culture is marked by a lack of positive White racial identity formation and resistance to transformative practices aimed at achieving collective liberation. White Shame Culture is rampant with untreated moral injury and Perpetration-Induced Traumatic Stress (PITS), often disguised as the "Good White Person" complex [44], where individuals strive to be seen as morally superior without addressing underlying issues. Understanding White Shame Culture involves examining its systemic manifestations, which extend beyond individual anxieties to influence group norms, values, and traditions. Addressing this culture requires proactive racial justice measures and educational initiatives that transform shame into constructive action, fostering a positive and equitable racial identity.

For example, the term "Karen" exemplifies societal entitlements and racial insensitivity [121], causing anxiety among White women about public shaming and social ostracization [122–124]. While some women do exhibit 'Karen' behaviors (re: entitled, often territorial policing, racially insensitive), the misappropriation of the term outside of these behaviors helps to perpetuate White Shame Culture, making it difficult for White women to build a positive identity around their Whiteness. CRT and CWS stress introspection and fostering positive White identities as key steps toward equity [27, 81, 87].

Furthermore, social justice literature advises White individuals to brace for potential isolation from other White people and possible rejection from communities of color, contributing to heightened internalized guilt among White liberals [42, 125–127]. Public shaming and social ostracization, intertwined with the fear of isolation, underscore pervasive anxiety among White individuals as we confront our racial identities, transforming personal guilt into communal and internal shame.

To mitigate this shame, some White individuals downplay or conceal our racial identity, adopt cultural markers of other groups, sidestep discussions on White-specific topics, or use pseudonyms and avatars online [128, 129]. This effect, distinct from cultural appropriation, often results in White individuals tokenizing academics and artists of color, frequently out of context, as a performative act of anti-racism [130]. This can also look like White people having a pronounced lack of patience and empathy for other White people or claiming expertise on the experiences of people of color. These behaviors, a form of credentialing to be received as a “Good White Person” [131], mirror the chameleon effect, critiqued by CRT and CWS as performative, indicating a need for authentic engagement with racial matters beyond superficial actions.

Paradoxically, these external stressors, expectations of rejection, internalized stigma, and identity concealment align with Minority Stress Theory (MST), initially designed to understand stressors faced by marginalized groups [132]. Increasingly prevalent among White liberals, these characteristics underscore the emergence of MST-like experiences, signaling a need for understanding and supportive mental-health measures for White people struggling with PITS.

Exploring these emotional dynamics and behavioral patterns through CRT and CWS unveils the intricate web of White guilt and shame and emphasizes moving beyond performative gestures toward our collective liberation. This deep-seated anxiety, shared across the political spectrum, highlights the reach of White supremacy and shame—and the need to transform the norms, values, and traditions that maintain it within liberal settings. Addressing the psychological impact of these dynamics is paramount in preventing White supremacy and fostering environments conducive to introspection and meaningful action.

While anti-racism work has traditionally focused on the implications of White supremacy for populations of color [133–135], it is equally critical to address the escalating racialized anxiety within White populations. As Charles notes, “White America could not perpetrate five hundred years of dehumanizing injustice without traumatizing itself” [113]. By integrating insights from the Critique of Liberalism, CWS, moral injury, and PITS, we achieve a nuanced understanding of White Shame Culture and its ramifications, advocating for informed dialogues and collective efforts toward racial equity and the work necessary to prevent White supremacy at individual and systemic levels.

## 6 Applications for social work

The application of CWS and CRT in social work is crucial to effectively address systemic racism. Group work is a pivotal strategy in this endeavor [136], highlighting the importance of interpersonal relationships and individual commitments in shaping and transforming the systems and institutions we navigate. Reflective and transformative approaches, which involve continuous self-assessment and adaptation in practice, are essential in social work education and practice. These approaches enable the identification and correction of ingrained prejudices, fostering genuine understanding and collective liberation.

White social work practitioners face unique challenges, including negative emotions and mistrust towards our coworkers, which can hinder collaborative efforts. Addressing anti-White bias, alongside other forms of bias, and promoting empathy are vital steps in cultivating an inclusive environment where all individuals can contribute meaningfully to the fight against White supremacy. By integrating these insights and acknowledging the diverse perspectives within the field, social workers can play an instrumental role in leading our collective liberation.

### 6.1 Group work

A significant tool to prevent White supremacy lies in our ability to work with groups. Intergroup dialogue, as outlined by Bohm [137], is an exceptionally well-crafted tool to meet this moment. Bohm explains that dialogue involves participants openly sharing their thoughts and experiences, which helps everyone gain a clearer understanding and work together more effectively. Dialogue is not merely a conversation where we wait for our turn to speak; it requires us to actively listen and truly understand the other person’s perspective before considering how our own views align or differ. In a dialogue, there is no attempt to win. The zero-sum mindset is avoided. Instead, everybody wins if anybody wins. This collective spirit is vital for genuine collaboration and preventing systemic issues like White supremacy.

Combating White supremacy relies on group work that improves interpersonal relationships and acknowledges individual contributions. As Toseland and Rivas find [136], group work nurtures the socio-emotional needs of individuals and the group. Since group work is mandated by the Council on Social Work Education [138], we must hold ourselves accountable for not fully utilizing this powerful tool effectively in the fight against White supremacy. By critically examining and

reflecting on our group work practices, we can identify and correct ingrained prejudices, fostering genuine understanding and actions toward our collective liberation.

While some perspectives in social work focus on racism as a macro-level problem inherent in systemic and institutional discrimination, it is crucial to consider the influence of individual and collective values and morals in shaping these systems and institutions. We must stop thinking of systems and institutions as amorphous, wandering behemoths. Policies and laws are simply the morals and values of a group of people.

Interpersonal relationships and individual commitments are crucial for group work in preventing White supremacy. However, some White social work practitioners may harbor negative emotions toward our White counterparts, including frustration and mistrust, as observed in certain contexts. These feelings are often borne out in classrooms [139], professional forums [140], and social media comment sections of many social work organizations. Many social workers recognize that historical contributions by White individuals have played a significant role in shaping contemporary societal issues. Contributions to oppressive ideologies in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries can still shape contemporary dynamics, fueling mistrust toward White colleagues, especially White, straight, cisgender men [121, 141, 142].

## 6.2 Addressing anti-White bias

Despite social work's efforts to address racism and White supremacy over the past fifty years [143–145], some White people feel devalued and discriminated against in social work curricula [88, 146]. As of 2017, White students are now underrepresented in higher education, with significant decreases in Ivy League schools, the University of California system, and a 31.49% decrease of enrollment at major institutions since 1980 [147]. Within classrooms, many White students argue that coursework overlooks anti-White bias and induces guilt or discomfort about our racial identity [88]. Cases like the Ontario school principal who took his own life after being accused of White supremacist behavior during a training session—led by a social worker—for public educators highlight the emotional toll such discussions can take, notably when adequate support is lacking [148, 149]. These practices highlight how disconnected social work has become from our best practices for social change and adherence to the NASW Code of Ethics in our anti-racism work [150].

Many articles, publications, and media on White supremacy for White audiences emphasize White privilege. While this is an important aspect, it creates a single-story narrative of Whiteness. Very little is said about the ways White people are negatively impacted—directly and indirectly—by White supremacy. However, the work of scholars like Todd Jealous and Haskell [47], Brock-Petroshius [90], Grzanka [120], Lensmire [52], Spanierman [151], Burnett [50], Charles [113], and Grishow-Schade [114], and the insights from the Spillway [48], highlight the importance of our collective role in understanding this issue. These authors reveal the paradox of being White in contemporary U.S. culture, where we are both perpetrators and victims of White supremacy. This perspective calls for active involvement, stressing the need to complicate the narrative that White people only have positive and privileged racialized experiences.

Even though research shows the inefficacy of inducing guilt, shame, and discomfort about racial identity [90, 120], social workers have continued to use these approaches. However, in a profession built on values of service, social justice, dignity, and integrity [143], we must question whether these methods truly benefit White racial identity development and strengthen the relationships needed for group work. Sustainable growth is challenging amidst emotional dysregulation [152], as it can hinder our ability to adhere to our Code of Ethics. Therefore, fostering emotional attunement and empathy is essential for constructive dialogue and ethical practice. Change needs empathy.

Feelings of hostility or mistrust toward White people from various racialized communities can be understood from a psychological, emotional, and somatic perspective [153, 154]. These communities have borne the brunt of racism, impacting their relationship to White culture and White people. However, similar emotional responses among White social workers toward other White people need a different analytical lens. By adopting the CWS framework, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding the presumption of guilt among White social workers by White social workers. It also provides tools to navigate and mitigate these feelings, enhancing the effectiveness of social work across diverse racial and ethnic contexts and preventing White supremacy. This dynamic of White people harboring negative feelings toward other White people can also be seen as profitable within the context of the Nonprofit Industrial Complex (NPIC), which underscores the financial motivations behind these emotional responses.

## 6.3 The Nonprofit Industrial Complex

Financial sustainability in social service nonprofits often depends on external funding rather than clients paying for services. The NPIC highlights the dynamics among nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and private funders,

showing how reliance on external funding can divert social movements from their core objectives and create caution in confronting harmful practices by funders due to fear of losing financial support [155].

The NPIC tends to fund intervention services over preventative measures, showing a bias for immediate solutions over addressing root causes. This bias is evident in child welfare, where only 11 percent of funds are directed toward preventative efforts, underscoring the constraints of the current funding landscape [156].

Smith critiques the 501(c)(3) model [157], which many social justice organizations adopt to secure tax-deductible donations and foundation grants. This model can co-opt movements, forcing them to conform to the priorities of funders rather than their communities. The NPIC promotes a social movement culture that is non-collaborative, narrowly focused, and competitive—re: zero-sum, Liberalism—often stifling genuine activism and innovation.

The NPIC's competitive nature forces groups to vie for limited resources, often promoting their work at the expense of broader coalition-building. This competition can dilute the focus on systemic change and maintain the status quo. This liberal approach often prioritizes incremental change and personal achievements rather than addressing systemic inequalities through group efforts. By focusing on individual success, the NPIC undermines the power of collective action and solidarity, which are essential for achieving true social justice. Foundations, while providing temporary relief, can mask underlying issues like White supremacy, as they often prefer funding projects that do not challenge systemic inequalities.

Spade advocates for a paradigm shift in the NPIC toward prevention-focused strategies that address the root causes of marginalization and oppression [158]. Drawing inspiration from public health successes like anti-smoking campaigns, Spade emphasizes that balancing immediate interventions with long-term preventative measures is crucial. Combining insights from INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence—who wrote the seminal guide to the NPIC [155]—with Spade there exists a profound transformation required in funding strategies centered on racial equity. This reform aims to support individual and group efforts necessary for systemic change, ensuring a fairer distribution of financial resources and promoting sustainable change [155, 156, 159].

Recent research from the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity reveals that nonprofits received \$4.47 billion in race-related funding in 2020 alone [160]. Further analysis shows that foundations, funds, and trusts provided \$111.58 billion for race-focused initiatives in education, health, human rights, and social rights from 2003 to 2021. Of this, only 0.49% (\$557 million) was allocated for initiatives serving "people of European descent." Through the lens of CRT and CWS, this is less than half a cent of every dollar spent on race-related funding for preventative actions.

Thus, how we think about our work—considering power dynamics, Liberalism, zero-sum thinking, and the balance between prevention and intervention—greatly influences our funding strategies. To address these challenges, it is crucial to explore alternative resources and strategies that prioritize prevention over short-term interventions. Informed by CRT and CWS praxis, this shift toward preventative paradigms is vital for our funding streams. By focusing on preventive measures, we can better address the root causes of social issues, ensuring our efforts lead to sustainable change. This strategy aligns with our mission to promote social justice, challenges the systemic constraints of the NPIC, and advocates for a more equitable distribution of financial resources, ultimately reimagining how social work can meet the needs of all communities.

## 7 Preventing systemic racism

Integrating CWS and CRT within social work is fundamental to effectively addressing systemic racism. Group work is a pivotal strategy, emphasizing the importance of interpersonal relationships and individual commitments in transforming our systems and institutions. Reflective and transformative approaches enable the identification and correction of ingrained prejudices, fostering genuine understanding and collective liberation. Intergroup dialogue and critical examination of group work practices can enhance collaboration and mitigate systemic issues like White supremacy.

Secondly, White social work practitioners face unique challenges, including anti-White bias, negative emotions, and White Shame Culture that can hinder collaboration. Addressing these biases and promoting empathy, an essential quality in our work, are vital for creating an inclusive environment.

Lastly, the Nonprofit Industrial Complex (NPIC) presents additional challenges, often prioritizing intervention over prevention. However, a shift towards prevention-focused strategies that address root causes, informed by CRT and CWS, is beneficial and urgent for sustainable change and social justice.

Maintaining momentum in these efforts can be challenging. As Mondros and Wilson observed [161], participation often declines after initial enthusiasm peaks. To counter this, it is crucial to focus on factors that encourage long-term

engagement, such as emphasizing the group's impact, building a supportive community, maintaining a strong interest in tasks, and recognizing every member's contribution.

By focusing on these aspects, especially within the context of White social workers, we enhance individual accountability and strengthen interpersonal relationships. This approach fosters a resilient and committed community ready to tackle and prevent systemic racism through evidence-based practices in group work, aiming to root out deep-seated prejudices that fuel racial inequities.

Ultimately, embracing reflective, group-based efforts and shifting towards collective, community-focused liberation will pave the way for a social justice environment where ideals are actively pursued and realized. Social workers must adopt these principles to foster a more equitable and just profession, ensuring that our efforts lead to meaningful and sustainable change.

## 7.1 How we start

The transformation toward preventative work in social services requires social workers across nonprofit organizations, academic institutions, and funding bodies to address pivotal areas. This task necessitates a profound understanding of the intersection of racism and mental health, specifically among White individuals.

1. First and foremost, it is essential to recognize the diversity within White populations. Being White does not equate to uniform experiences or perspectives. Social workers must comprehend the unique racial experiences and perceptions of White individuals, debunking common misconceptions about homogeneity within this group. By acknowledging this diversity, we can tailor our approaches to be more effective and sensitive to individual experiences.
2. Facilitating intergroup dialogue is another critical aspect. Dialogues about systemic racism often stir feelings of guilt and shame. Social workers can provide spaces for constructive intergroup dialogue, mitigating feelings of isolation and potential radicalization. These dialogues can help bridge gaps in understanding and foster a sense of community and shared responsibility in addressing racism.
3. Implementing trauma-informed approaches is integral to promoting understanding and preventing racism. Social workers need to acknowledge the unique stresses that White individuals might experience like PITS, moral injury, and MST. Trauma-informed approaches can support these individuals in their journey toward healing, helping us understand and combat the roots of racism within ourselves and our communities.
4. Debunking misconceptions about race, racism, and White supremacy is a critical role for social workers (See Table 1). Challenging harmful stereotypes and assumptions fosters a nuanced understanding of these complex issues. By promoting accurate and comprehensive views of these topics, we can dismantle the biases that perpetuate systemic racism.
5. Promoting and building leadership among White individuals in collective liberation work shifts the responsibility of preventing White supremacy away from marginalized populations who are most impacted by it. Encouraging White people to take initiative allows for respect for each group's unique healing and restoration paths from a place of lived experience. This shift is essential for fostering a collective commitment to social justice.
6. Advocating for transparency through open and honest discussions about racialized harm and trauma is necessary for healing. Social workers should offer resources to help White individuals understand our role in systemic racism and White Shame Culture. These discussions can pave the way for greater awareness and responsibility in addressing racial harm.
7. Practicing empathy is crucial in these efforts. Understanding that everyone is at different stages in comprehending race and racism can facilitate more productive interventions. Some White individuals are firmly rooted in White Shame Culture, some traverse between Shame and Supremacy Cultures depending on their context, and others actively seek a return to explicit forms of White supremacy. By meeting individuals where they are, social workers can guide ourselves and other White people more effectively toward greater awareness and action.
8. Group work plays a significant role in addressing contemporary systemic and institutional racism. Often, the failure to tackle the policies, practices, and values of groups and organizations perpetuates these issues. The key to systems change is merely group work. Even the largest companies in the world do not have more than 12 people on their board of directors. Collaborative efforts are essential for driving significant change.
9. Lastly, reforming funding strategies to prioritize preventive measures over short-term interventions is critical. By addressing the root causes of societal issues and promoting sustainable, equitable social change within the NPIC

framework, we can create long-lasting impacts. Investing in prevention work is essential for fostering a more just and equitable society.

## 7.2 Action steps

1. *Provide immediate resources and build emotional resilience:* offer accessible resources that support immediate needs, such as crisis hotlines, counseling services, and support groups. Build emotional resilience by creating spaces for emotional expression and open discussions without fear of judgment, such as community workshops and peer support circles.
2. *Promote anti-racist actions:* engage in meaningful conversations about race and racism, especially with those who may not share your views. If everyone in the room has the same definition of justice, it's not a diverse space [162]. Approach these conversations with compassion, patience, empathy, and understanding. For example, organize intergroup dialogues that foster new relationships.
3. *Create healing affinity spaces:* develop and maintain healing spaces that allow for personal growth and deeper understanding within affinity groups. Examples include dedicated rooms in community centers for reflective practices, online support groups, and retreats focused on racial healing and identity exploration.
4. *Encourage reflective practices:* promote introspective activities such as reflective journaling, meditation, or self-assessment exercises. These practices help individuals organize and deeply understand our thoughts and experiences, fostering personal growth. Provide resources like guided journals, online meditation sessions, and self-assessment tools while being mindful to reflect on more than only our privileges.
5. *Leverage technology for engagement:* utilize online platforms and social media to facilitate the exploration of racial identity and intergroup dynamics. Choose the medium that best supports individual learning and engagement styles. Examples include virtual discussion groups, webinars, and interactive educational platforms.
6. *Shift accountability to include all parties:* ensure accountability mechanisms consider the needs of those harmed, those who caused harm, and their communities. Accountability should validate humanity while enabling behavior correction. Implement restorative justice practices that involve all parties in the accountability process.
7. *Build community support:* foster community building through local meetups, online forums, or social media groups. These communities offer support and foster meaningful relationships grounded in compassion and empathy. Examples include organizing neighborhood potlucks, creating online discussion groups, and hosting community-building events. Consider a support group for people in White Shame Culture.
8. *Understand the difference between shame and guilt:* educate individuals on the difference between shame ("I am bad") and guilt ("I did something bad"). Effective accountability should avoid reinforcing White Shame Culture. Provide educational workshops and resources that focus on understanding and applying this distinction.
9. *Proactive and reactive approaches:* implement both proactive and reactive strategies to heal and prevent harm. This dual approach is essential for sustainable personal and societal change. Examples include preemptive educational campaigns and responsive support services for those affected by racial harm.

## 8 Conclusion

To address systemic racism and White supremacy, integrating Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) into social work is essential. By examining principles like Interest Convergence and Critique of Liberalism, we can better understand power dynamics and move beyond zero-sum thinking in our approach to racial equity. This paper highlights the importance of supporting White individuals in understanding race by addressing Perpetration-Induced Traumatic Stress (PITS), moral injury, and White Shame Culture.

Self-reflection is crucial for White people in addressing racism. Morrison [86] and Baldwin [2] argue against the idea that people of color should be solely responsible for correcting or leading efforts to undo racial injustices. Menakem, a social worker, extends this argument by insisting that White people must reclaim and redefine Whiteness to embody responsibility and care [87]. He suggests building communities and supporting White leaders in anti-racism work rather than relying on Black individuals. Fred Jealous further extends this argument, challenging White people embedded in White Shame Culture with a poignant question: "Can you access the truth of your preciousness? And that's the starting place for the discussion. Can you access that? And if you can access that, can you stay there? Use it as a starting place from which to connect to all of life and from which to take a look at where you put your attention with other humans" [163].

White individuals must take a lead in preventing White supremacy. As demonstrated, these arguments are supported by the concept of Interest Convergence [29, 164]. Various racial groups have developed strategies over centuries that meet the emotional, mental, and physical needs of White people, advocating for spaces where White individuals can heal independently—and communally—without interference [87, 165]. This paper calls for White individuals to actively engage in collective liberation efforts, emphasizing the importance of internal community engagement before extending these efforts to broader societal interactions.

Integrating CWS offers a novel, preventative strategy to address modern White supremacy. It aims to explore the motivations behind White supremacy without justifications, tone policing, or diminishing the impact on colleagues of color. The ethos of this paper come from Audre Lorde's insight that new tools—compassion, patience, and respect—are essential in dismantling the house of White supremacy [166].

Social workers play a crucial role in applying an interpersonal approach to systemic racism. Understanding that systems and institutions are groups of individuals, this paper highlights the role of social workers in reflective practice, advocacy for systemic change, and fostering trauma-informed intergroup dialogues. Through these methods, social workers can make significant strides in preventing systemic racism.

This paper envisions a future where social work actively leads efforts toward an equitable and inclusive society. This vision is based on collective efforts, grounded in compassion, understanding, and a commitment to justice. Recognizing that liberation from oppressive systems is best achieved through collaborative efforts, social work must move beyond merely confronting White supremacy. Let's prevent it.

## 8.1 Concluding positionality

A key challenge is motivating White social workers to address our racialized mental health needs. Over the years, I have focused on understanding White individuals through a trauma-informed lens. The most formidable challenge has been inspiring White social workers to consistently acknowledge and address our mental health needs related to race. I have experienced firsthand the reluctance of White colleagues—from standing faculty in schools of social work to direct service providers—to confront their racialized fears and insecurities, reflecting the pervasiveness of White Shame Culture in the helping professions. This culture leaves a significant imprint on contemporary social work practice. Confronting and addressing White Shame Culture is crucial for advancing social work toward its true potential. I acknowledge the emotional impact this discussion may have had on you, dear reader. I see you, precious friend. Me, too.

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## Declarations

**Competing interests** The authors declare no competing interests.

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