

# Increasing Awareness of White Privilege Among Social Work Students

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## Introduction

The verdict exonerating George Zimmerman for the shooting of Trayvon Martin in July 2013 revealed the depth of racial animus that still exists in the United States. According to a *Washington Post/ABC* poll conducted within hours of the verdict, 86% of Blacks, but only 31% of Whites, disapproved of the verdict (Cohen & Balz, 2013). In a comparable poll reversing the racial identification of victim and alleged perpetrator (O. J. Simpson's trial), 88% of Blacks believed that the jury made the right decision, in comparison to only 41% of White respondents (CNN–*Time Magazine*, 1995).

Disparities in racial perspectives persist despite postmodern conclusions that race is socially constructed, not biologically determined (Gilroy, 1998). St. Louis (2002) asserted, "It is clear therefore at least for much of the academy, that the inviolable sanctity of race is under fire, it is under erasure" (p. 653). The use of the term *postracial* has exploded, growing by more than 164 times from 1968 to 2008 according to Google's book *Ngram Viewer*. Claims that America's racially discriminatory past is on the wane (e.g., Rich, 2013), although not without detractors, have fostered a climate in which affirmative action policies are eroding.

For example, in striking down Section 4

of the *Voting Rights Act* (1965), the U.S. Supreme Court concluded that "racial disparity in those numbers [voter registration and turnout] was [in 1965] compelling evidence justifying the preclearance remedy and the coverage formula. There is no longer such a disparity" (*Shelby County v. Holder*, 2013). No less an authority than the first African American president has written,

Rightly or wrongly, White guilt has largely exhausted itself in America; even the most fair-minded of Whites, those who would genuinely like to see racial inequality ended and poverty relieved, tend to push back against . . . race specific claims based on the history of race discrimination in this county. (Obama, 2006, p. 247)

As social work educators who acknowledge some degree of improvement in race relations over the last 50 years, we reject the proposition that America is entering a postracial ideal because of the racial disproportionalities so carefully documented by Michelle Alexander in her book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. Unfortunately, this conviction is not always shared by our students, a problem noted regularly in multicultural education classes (Delano-Oriaran & Parks, 2015; Hossain, 2015).

As Funge, Meyer-Adams, Flaherty, Ely, and Baer (2011) noted, social justice pedagogy can generate cognitive dissonance and accusations of political bias from students. Confrontational pedagogy focusing on changing student perceptions has been criticized as ineffectively leading to resistance (Sullivan & Johns, 2002), and Adams, Edkins, Lacka, Pickett, and Cheryan (2008) found that the standard pedagogical approach addressing racism as individual prejudice was wholly inept at changing student's consciousness of systemic racism or in improving student support for antiracist policies.

We concluded that a less confrontational and personal pedagogical approach may provide students the opportunity to change perspectives, as suggested by Heinze (2008). This study explores the use of Alexander's (2012) racial caste system as the means of presenting racism as a systemic phenomenon (Adams et al., 2008) in the first undergraduate ( $n = 134$ ) and first foundation year graduate social welfare policy courses ( $n = 36$ ) as a framework for achieving changes in student perceptions during a single semester.

Specifically, we hope to show that an understanding of systemic racism increases student awareness of White privilege, which is considered an essential prerequisite for culturally competent future practice (Marsiglia & Kulis, 2015).

## Assessment of Competencies

We teach social welfare policy to social work students on both the undergraduate and graduate levels and assume responsibility for improving students' multicultural education with a focus on the embrace of diversity and promotion of human rights, economic justice, and social justice. Competency-based higher education places a premium on measuring student behavioral outcomes; however, the measurement of student outcomes in social work is in its infancy (Burgess & Carpenter, 2010; Carpenter, 2011). Relatively little research has focused on the potential for change in social work student perceptions or behaviors by completing a course in social welfare policy.

Direct assessment of competencies requires assessment of practice behaviors; accordingly, assessing changes in student perceptions is an indirect measure of competencies. Instead of analyzing and formulating policies in written assignments and mimicking collegial collaboration through

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group projects (as suggested by Heinze, 2008) as proxies for practice behaviors, approaches with merit that are quite limited as predictors of future practice behaviors because the classroom context differs markedly from the practice context, we have chosen to assess changes in student perceptions as a preparatory step toward behavioral change in a manner consistent with the transtheoretical model of stages of change that theorizes that behavioral change follows a cognitive process that leads to readiness for change (DeClemente, 1993; van Wormer, 2007).

Accordingly, changes in student perceptions may be a more important pedagogical target than behavioral change for influencing future practice behaviors that may require a subjectively significant adjustment in attitude (Kraus, 1995). Going one step beyond Heinze and DeCandia (2011), we measured the degree of change in student perceptions using three validated and standardized instruments that evaluated student perceptions of the American criminal justice system and cross-race racial attitudes. The primary educational intervention was the adoption of the second edition (2012) of Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* as a textbook and class discussions of that material.

Alexander is a civil rights attorney, former director for the ACLU's Racial Justice Project in northern California, and an associate professor of law at Ohio State University. Her book is an exposé of the American criminal justice system, documenting the changes that have occurred in law enforcement, court procedures, and law that have converted a system of justice into one of the primary structural mechanisms for racial oppression.

Alexander has argued that the American criminal justice system has become a new racial caste system that constricts access to full civil liberties to racial minorities. After exposure to Alexander's arguments and evidence, changes in student perceptions toward the American criminal legal system will be an indirect measure of student awareness of White privilege imbedded in cultural structures and mechanisms of oppression that exist in contemporary America.

### Alexander's Racial Caste System

The publication of Alexander's book, a *New York Times* best seller, and the author's widespread publicity tour presenting her perspective on contemporary race relations in the United States, served

as the background against which this research project was developed. In short, Alexander denounced the 35-year trend of mass incarceration as a new form of an old American social disease—the maintenance of a racial caste system to sustain White privilege and marginalize Blacks.

As social work educators and social welfare policy instructors, we believed Alexander's insight into contemporary American society to be a seismic shift in social consciousness because the structural oppression associated with mass incarceration has legal justification. Teaching toward student competency in diversity and social justice required, in our view, inclusion of Alexander's new perspective. We modified the content in our courses to engage more directly with the changing world in American race relations as presented by Alexander.

To Alexander a racial caste is "a stigmatized racial group locked into an inferior position by law and custom" (p. 12). Alexander contended that Black Americans have been subjected to an inferior position in America through three distinct time periods with specific racial caste systems: slavery (1770–1863), Jim Crow (1877–1954), and mass incarceration (1980 to the present day). Although each succeeding system for enforcing a racial hierarchy is less capable of all-encompassing control, racial caste systems produce common effects, "legalized discrimination and permanent social exclusion" (p. 13).

Note that a racial caste system is not defined by the intent of those holding power but by the adverse consequences affecting the racial under caste. Accordingly, racial animus is not required (but may exist) to create or sustain a racial caste system. Simple indifference to disparate racial outcomes suffices, suggesting the importance of increasing student awareness of the racially disproportionate influences associated with mass incarceration.

The contemporary racial caste system that subordinates Black Americans through mass incarceration includes not only the criminal justice system but also "the larger web of laws, rules, policies, and customs that control those labeled criminals both in and out of prison" (Alexander, 2012, p. 13). The invisible punishment and collateral consequences of a felony conviction are extreme (Mauer & Chesney-Lind, 2002), with more than 38,000 local, state, and federal legal sanctions for the 19.8 million American adults with a felony conviction and the 65 million with a criminal record (Legislative Update, 2012). Access

to employment, housing, education, and safety net benefits is significantly impaired for each of these individuals long after completion of their incarceration, probation, or parole sentences.

Blacks are disproportionately involved with every aspect of the American criminal justice system. Ample evidence supports the conclusion that Blacks are more likely to be arrested, prosecuted, sentenced to longer terms, and incarcerated at higher rates than other racial and ethnic groups (Mauer, 2011).

Pettit (2012) concluded that the social exclusion of Black Americans continues to result in racial disparities in educational attainment, employment, and earnings due to this disproportionate involvement in the legal system and the omission of the incarcerated population in most household-based surveys used to produce nationwide data sets. The contemporary racial caste system, therefore, is invisible to most people while devastating to Black individuals, households, and neighborhoods. Alexander concluded,

What is missed in the rare public debates today about the plight of African Americans is that a huge percentage of them are not free to move up at all. It is not just that they lack opportunity, attend poor schools, or are plagued by poverty. They are barred by law from doing so. (p. 13)

### Alexander's Evidence

The racial caste system described by Alexander is primarily the product of the War on Drugs. To provide law enforcement broad discretion in the War on Drugs, the U.S. Supreme Court has virtually created a drug exception to the Fourth Amendment's ban of unreasonable searches and seizures by approving consent searches as valid.

Accordingly, even in the absence of suspicion or the presence of a warrant, when a citizen grants consent to a police officer for a search, any evidence located in the search can be used to prosecute. Like consent searches, pretext traffic stops have the Supreme Court's blessing. The Drug Enforcement Agency has trained more than 25,000 police officers in 48 states to use pretext traffic stops, consent, and drug-sniffing dogs to bypass probable cause standards for searches.

To overcome police resistance to the War on Drugs, significant financial incentives were directed at local law enforcement through the Edward Byrne Memorial State and Local Law Enforcement Assistant Program and asset forfeiture

legislation that permits the seizure of almost any asset owned by someone merely suspected of a drug crime. No conviction is necessary. The evidence that broader discretion by law enforcement has led to racial disproportionality in jails and prisons is unassailable.

The second step toward building this racial caste system was accomplished by closing the courts to all claims by defendants of racial discrimination (see Alexander, 2012). First, prosecutors received immunity from claims of racial bias (*Armstrong v. U.S.*, 1960), then arguments for racial bias based on statistical evidence of disproportionality were barred (*McClesky v. Kemp*, 1987). *Purkett v. Elem* (1995) permitted racial bias in jury selection, *Whren v. U.S.* (1996) barred charges of racial bias based on the Fourth Amendment, and *Alexander v. Sandoval* (2001) eliminated personal accusations of racial bias under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act. Law enforcement, prosecutors, and judges cannot be held accountable for racial discrimination.

### This Study

Alexander claimed that the U.S. criminal justice system has been coopted and converted into a new form of Jim Crow in which historically underrepresented people are legally excluded from justice in the institutions that purport to guarantee justice for all citizens. While there may be other systemic forms of oppression and discrimination in America, without understanding Alexander's racial caste system, and her condemnation of the American criminal legal system, we do not believe that our students can understand the pervasive structural problems that maintain White privilege in contemporary society.

Pre- and posttest assessments of student perceptions of the criminal justice system and cross-racial attitudes were obtained to explore the degree of change, if any, that resulted from the assigned reading of Alexander and the class discussions that followed.

Although this study is exploratory, we anticipated that students would report a lower positive regard for the criminal justice system because of the injustices documented by Alexander; a lower positive regard for Whites due to an enhanced awareness of White privilege, especially as it relates to interactions with the criminal justice system; and a higher positive regard for Blacks due to an increase awareness of the legal structures enveloping Black lives.

### Method

Using a one-group pre/post longitudinal survey design, undergraduate social work students enrolled in social welfare policy classes and graduate social work students enrolled in foundation year social welfare policy classes at two different institutions ( $N = 154$ ) completed pre- and posttest questionnaires measuring student perceptions. The strength of this exploratory design is the provision of panel data to measure change over time by particular individuals (Grinnell, 2001).

### Procedures

Owing to naturally occurring distinctions in student race/ethnicity, social work policy instructors at an urban university (mixed White and Black students) and a rural university (White students only) collaborated to measure the degree of change in student perceptions. Students enrolled in an undergraduate social work policy class or a foundation year graduate social work policy class during the 2012–2013 academic year were eligible to participate.

Instructors teaching these courses agreed to assign *The New Jim Crow* as one of the textbooks in these courses and to discuss the content of this book at least once during the semester. At the discretion of each instructor, students who completed both the pre-test and post-test questionnaires received extra credit up to 5% of the course grade. An alternative extra credit opportunity was available to students who elected not to complete the questionnaire.

### Participants

After approval by the appropriate institutional review boards, student participants were recruited to complete an online questionnaire available on SurveyMonkey.com. Racial diversity was greatest at the urban institution, but consistent with the instructors' experiences, almost all students (97.4%) self-reported as either White or Black. The extent to which the results of this study may be applicable to other racial groups cannot be determined from this sample.

Instructors provided the student emails to the principal investigator who coordinated email delivery of unique links to each student during the first 2 weeks of each term (pre-test) and near the end of the term (post-test) as scheduled by the instructor. Use of unique links and personal emails permitted confirmation of completion of both pretest and posttest for each participant.

The first pages of the online questionnaire contained full informed consent information, and students demonstrated consent by completion of the questionnaire. Of the 196 students completing the courses, 154 completed both the pre-test and post-test for a response rate of 78.6%. Demographics of the respondents are reported in Table 1. Only one of the respondents reported having read *The New Jim Crow* before the classes began, but 128 respondents (83.1%) reported having read it by the time of the post-test.

### Instrumentation

The online questionnaire included the 24-item Attitudes Toward the Criminal Legal System (ATCLS) scale (Martin & Cohn, 2004), the 20-item Attitude Toward Blacks (ATB) scale, and the 20-item Attitude Toward Whites (ATW) scale (Brigham, 1993). Demographic questions included age, biological sex (male, female, intersex), race/ethnicity identification (African American, Caucasian/White, and other), degree sought, and anticipated year of graduation. With the exception of omission of the demographic questions at posttest, the pre-test and post-test questionnaires were identical.

### ATCLS

The ATCLS was developed as a global measure of attitudes toward the criminal

**Table 1**  
**Demographics of Respondents**

Variable	N	%
Age <sup>a</sup> (years)		
Under 27	91	61.1
Over 26	58	38.9
Biological sex		
Male	20	13.0
Female	134	87.0
Racial identification		
Caucasian/White	82	53.2
African American	68	44.2
Other	4	2.6
University		
Urban	107	69.5
Rural	47	30.5
Program		
BSW	114	76.0
MSW	36	24.0
Anticipated graduation		
2012	1	0.6
2013	48	31.2
2014	82	53.2
After 2014	23	15.0

Note. Variation in the number of respondents was due to missing data.

<sup>a</sup>  $M (SD) = 27.3 (8.81)$ .

legal system with 24 items inclusive of punishment, police, defense attorneys, prosecuting attorneys, judges, laws, and juries. Responses are recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), with higher scores indicating a more positive attitude toward the criminal legal system. Twelve items are reverse scored.

Five developmental studies with college, high school, and community dwelling adults established suitable reliability with Cronbach's alpha ranging from a low of .79 to a high of .85. No gender differences were noted in any of the developmental studies; however, the racial homogeneity of respondents (88.3% to 95% White) precluded determination of race/ethnicity utility. Validity was determined in comparison with four established instruments (Martin & Cohn, 2004).

The ATCLS was developed to include items that reflected perceptions on the integrity of legal authorities (e.g., *lots of police are corrupt and hypocritical*), the competence of legal authorities (e.g., *most of our laws are effective at protecting people*), and the procedural fairness associated with the criminal legal system (e.g., *most prosecuting attorneys are as fair to the victim and defendant as possible*). In all five developmental studies (Martin & Cohn, 2004), higher scores on belief in a just world scale predicted positive attitudes toward the criminal legal system as measured by the ATCLS, and this relationship is central to our interpretation of ATCLS scores.

Belief in a just world is a robust construct that has been associated with conservative political ideology (Carey & Paulhus, 2013; Parikh, Post, & Flowers, 2011), victim blaming (Hayes, Lorenz, & Bell, 2013), and retributive punishment (Carey & Paulhus, 2013). In light of the overwhelming evidence of the racial injustice sustained and perpetrated by the criminal legal system that Alexander (2012) has presented to her readers, we interpret lower scores on the ATCLS and less positive attitudes toward the criminal legal system to be supportive of human rights and social justice that focus on awareness of cultural structures and mechanisms of oppression as mentioned earlier.

#### ATB and ATW

The ATB and ATW are attitude and opinion scales designed to assess college students' perceptions toward each population group. Both scales have 20 items scored on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) with reverse coding required on 10

items on the ATB and 14 items on the ATW to avoid a response set. Both scales have demonstrated reliability with Cronbach's alpha of .75 on the ATW and .88 on the ATB (Brigham, 1993).

In both cases, higher overall scores indicate positive attitudes toward the related racial group. Convergent and content validity of these scales has been established in relationship to four existing scales (Brigham, 1993). These scales were included to measure the change, if any, in student racial perceptions as a result of exposure to Alexander's (2012) argument that the criminal legal system has devolved into an unjust system creating and sustaining a White racial hierarchy in the contemporary United States.

## Results

Despite the urban-rural and racial differences between the participating institutions, there were few differences noted between subgroups. At pretest, independent *t*-tests for biological sex, race, or degree level were not significant for positive regard for the criminal legal system. Student respondents from the rural university did report a higher positive regard for the criminal legal system at pretest than student respondents from the urban university,  $t(140) = -2.168$ ,  $p = .032$ , 95% CI [-9.07, -0.42], and MSW student respondents reported a significantly higher positive regard for Blacks at pretest than BSW student respondents,  $t(138) = -2.582$ ,  $p = .011$ , 95% CI [-15.06, -2.00]. The only racial difference at pretest was that Black respondents reported a lower positive regard for Whites than White respondents,  $t(138) = -2.401$ ,  $p = .018$ , 95% CI [-9.39, -0.91].

At post-test, subgroup difference remained uncommon. Most White respondents (70.3%) and Black respondents (51.9%) reported a common trend, a decline in positive regard for the criminal legal system, and the majority of both racial groups reported declines in positive regard for Whites (70.4% of Black respondents and 69.9% of White respondents). The rural students did not continue to report a higher regard for the criminal legal system at post-test, and the racial distinctions in positive regard for Whites was not sustained at post-test due to White respondents lowering their positive regard for their own race.

MSW student respondents continued to report higher positive regard for Blacks than BSW student respondents,  $t(141) = -2.950$ ,  $p = .004$ , 95% CI [-15.15, -2.99], and MSW

student respondents reported less positive regard toward the criminal legal system than BSW student respondents,  $t(134) = 3.190$ ,  $p = .002$ , 95% CI [2.94, 12.52], even though there was a significant change for both degree programs.

Owing to the relatively small number of graduate students in this study ( $n = 36$ ), interpretation of differences between BSW and MSW respondents should be conducted carefully; however, we noted that MSW students appeared, in general, to have a higher regard for Blacks than undergraduate students and a greater tendency to embrace Alexander's (2012) criticism of the criminal legal system.

Whether this is due to more life experience by the MSW students or a more serious commitment to their graduate studies cannot be determined from these data. The slight differences between MSW and BSW responses does not appear to warrant omission of the MSW data from further analysis.

#### Overall Scores

Internal consistency was adequate for all three scales to measure dependent variables with the Cronbach's alpha of .886 at both pre-test and post-test on ATCLS; .688 and .735 on the pre-test and post-test, respectively, on the ATW; and .869 and .854 on the pre-test and post-test, respectively, on the ATB. Overall scores on the ATCLS and ATW were distributed normally at both pre-test and post-test with modest skew ranging from -0.210 to 0.205. The overall scores on ATB were skewed to a larger extent, -1.291 at pre-test and -0.620 at post-test, but well within the acceptable range for independent and repeated measure group comparisons. Ceiling effects on the ATB were modest with the pre-test mean 1.82 and the post-test mean 1.80 standard deviations below the maximum possible score on the instrument.

Dependent *t*-tests (see Table 2) indicated a significant decline in positive attitude toward the criminal legal system (ATCLS) and a significant decline in positive attitude toward Whites (ATW) at posttest with a moderate effect size (see Table 2); however, there was no change in students' positive regard for Blacks (ATB). As would be expected, the majority of student respondents reported a decline in positive regard for the criminal legal system at post-test (61.5%) and a decline in positive regard toward Whites at post-test (69.5%). Individual respondents reported change in regard for Blacks; however, those reporting an increase in positive regard at

post-test (50.7%) were counterbalanced by those reporting a decrease in positive regard at post-test (49.3%).

The change in ATCLS, ATW, and ATB scores from pre-test to post-test were normally distributed with skews ranging from -0.195 to -0.531, and the change in ATCLS scores was directly associated with change in ATW scores,  $r = .201, p = .036$ , and indirectly associated with change in ATB scores,  $r = -.192, p = .037$ . The changes in ATW and ATB at post-test were directly associated as well,  $r = .187, p = .040$ .

Phi coefficient tests indicated that there were no significant associations between the change in ATW and ATB scores and age, biological sex (male, female), race (African American, White), school (rural, urban), or degree program (BSW, MSW). Only degree level was significant for the change in ATCLS scores,  $\phi = .710, p = .036$ , with 91.2% of MSW students reporting a decline in positive regard toward the criminal legal system.

Regression of change in scores on the ATB, ATW, and degree program (BSW = 0; MSW = 1) explained 20.8% of the variance in change on ATCLS score (see Table 3), indicating graduate school and a more positive attitude toward Blacks explained the decline in positive regard for the criminal legal system. To a smaller extent, a more positive attitude toward Whites mitigated the decline in positive regard for the criminal legal system.

**Qualitative Data Analysis**

During the post-test, students were

given the opportunity to provide spontaneous comments about the book, for example, *Do you have any comments about the book?*. Of the 154 students who participated in the post-test, 47 (31%) provided comments. The comments were analyzed utilizing a qualitative method with three steps. Comments were initially raw-coded for data directionality and categorization.

Two researchers then coded the comments separately, achieving 87% interrater reliability. Following a second round of coding and interrater discussion, researchers arrived at 100% consensus (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In terms of directionality, comments were either positive (41 comments, 87%) or negative/ambivalent (6 comments, 13%).

Further data categorization resulted in the extraction of four themes: *the book was eye-opening* (25 comments, 53%), *the book was interesting and/or enjoyable* (26 comments, 55%), *I would recommend this book to others* (8 comments, 17%), and *the book was not very good* (4 comments, 9%). Note that categories add to more than 100% because more than one code was applied to some comments. Small but interesting differences were found based on race, school (urban and rural), and the intersection of race and school, with 57% of Whites saying that the book was *eye-opening* compared to 44% of Blacks.

Over 70% of students at the rural university commented that the book was *interesting and/or enjoyable*, while 47% of students from the urban university made the same comment. Finally, 17% of

urban Whites did not think the book was very good, but only 6% of rural Whites; 6% of urban Blacks and no rural Blacks expressed that sentiment.

For some students, the book presented a point of view they had not confronted in a serious way before, as can be appreciated in the comments of rural White graduate students. One said, "It opened my eyes to a lot of things and when talking with my friends who are African American they looked at me like duh, we have always known this. I realized how different our upbringing has been." According to another,

It was a very informative book. I had no idea some of the practices going on in law enforcement and was also ignorant of laws that allow human rights to be violated. . . . For me, the book lead [sic] to a lot of self-reflection on my beliefs and ideals.

But a graduate Black student commented,

I was already aware of the concepts discussed in the book however it was very thorough and comprehensive with information for continued study.

A very small percentage of students had negative comments about the book, but these were most likely to be urban Whites. A White urban undergraduate student said,

I do agree with the fact that some of the drug laws are a bit harsh depending on the amount, however I do believe in if you break the law then you need to be punished accordingly.

In general, however, students had positive comments and found the book appropriate for policy class.

**Discussion**

This study explored the degree of change, if any, in student perceptions of race and the American criminal justice system from completing an undergraduate or foundation year graduate social welfare policy class that incorporated Alexander's understanding of the new racial caste system that has evolved as a product of mass incarceration since 1980.

As expected, the results indicate a significant decline in positive regard toward the criminal justice system as well as a significant decline in positive regard for Whites by student respondents, both demonstrating a moderate effect size. Contrary to our expectations, there was no change overall in the degree of positive regard for Blacks. Qualitative results, *prima facie*, appear to support these conclusions.

**Table 2**  
Dependent t-Test Comparisons of Pre-test and Post-test Responses for Dependent Variables

Variable	N	Mean (SD)		df	t	Sig.	S	95% CI
		Pre-test	Post-test					
ATCLS	130	71.0 (12.44)	66.2 (12.65)	129	4.486	.000	.379	[2.66, 6.86]
ATB	138	110.0 (16.45)	110.0 (16.61)	137	-.026	.979		[-2.22, 2.16]
ATW	131	97.4 (12.94)	92.2 (12.91)	130	5.924	.000	.404	[3.48, 6.97]

Note. Variation in number of respondents is due to missing data.

**Table 3**  
Predictors of Change in Positive Regard for the Criminal Legal System (ATCLS)

Variable	B	Sig.	95% CI
Constant	-0.509	0.715	[-3.264, 2.247]
Change in ATW	0.185	0.120	[-0.019, 0.418]
Change in ATB	-0.183	0.038	[-0.355, -0.010]
Degree program	-11.242	0.000	[-16.154, -6.329]
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.208		
F	9.687		

Note. N = 99.

The absence of change in positive regard for Blacks suggests that students were confronted not so much with the oppression of Black Americans by the criminal legal system as with the reality of White privilege as that privilege is institutionalized in the American criminal justice system. The authors speculate that when students were confronted with the overwhelming evidence of racial injustice in the criminal justice system, students acquired a new consciousness that led them to question the legitimacy of the existing social structures and White Americans who are advantaged by it, thereby achieving the awareness of cultural values and mechanisms of oppression called for in the practice behaviors most closely associated with this study.

The post-test declines in positive regard for the criminal legal system and Whites, accordingly, are consistent with this interpretation. Alternatively, the absence of change in positive regard for Blacks could suggest that this study had little to no effect on preexisting cross-racial biases, an interpretation that is contrary to Adams et al.'s (2008) findings that elevated awareness of systemic injustice influences subjective values.

All three dependent variables, however, were statistically and significantly related with a direct association between attitudes toward the criminal justice system and Whites. The relationship between attitudes toward Blacks and the criminal justice system was indirect. Accordingly, a decline in positive regard toward the criminal justice system was statistically associated with a decline in positive regard toward Whites and an increase in positive regard toward Blacks.

The changes in attitudes toward Whites and Blacks were not explained by respondents' age, biological sex, race, school, or degree program; however, graduate social work students ( $n = 36$ ) were significantly more likely to report a decline in positive regard for the criminal justice system. Qualitative results are not sufficient to assert that attitudinal change occurred, and they certainly cannot be tied to causality in any way.

Because of the small number of graduate student respondents, we were unable to explore statistical explanations for this finding; however, a moderate amount (20.8%) of the variance in the change in attitude toward the criminal justice system was explained by graduate enrollment and changing attitudes toward race.

Because positive attitudes toward the criminal legal system have been associated

with belief in a just world, victim blaming, and a preference for retributive punishment, as previously noted, the results appear to suggest that students acquired increased awareness of systemic injustices in the social structure they previously accepted without question, the American criminal legal system.

We interpret these findings to infer improvement in students' attitudinal preparation for future practice with an increased awareness of institutionalized cultural values, mechanisms of oppression, and the interplay between power and privilege. We interpret this attitudinal preparation as an indirect measure of improved multicultural education and preparation for future practice with racially diverse clientele.

### Limitations

Generalizability of these results may not be possible due to sampling bias associated with student recruitment; however, the sample did contain a reasonable amount of diversity and a high response rate (78.6%). One participating program was rural and one urban; self-identified racial identity was reasonably balanced between White (53.2%) and Black (44.2%) students; and biological sex is fairly representative of national norms in social work (87.0% female).

We strongly caution care in the interpretation of the difference between graduate and undergraduate students because of the small subsample of graduate students, and we note the high likelihood of social desirability bias in pretest measures of student racial perceptions.

Although confidentiality of student responses was assured, students may not have had confidence in their anonymity, which may have led to self-reports of perceptions that the students knew would be preferred by the instructors; however, we note that 38.5% and 30.5% of student respondents reported an increase in positive regard for the criminal legal system and Whites, respectively, which is counter the declining trends noted earlier.

There can be little doubt that the instructors' support for Alexander's arguments may have significantly increased the influence her work had on student perceptions.

### Future Directions for Research

This study supports the growing body of research (Burgess & Carpenter, 2010; Carpenter, 2011) related to evidence of

student competencies but needs to be augmented by representative samples confirming these results. More detailed measurement of pedagogical approaches may help clarify causal factors influencing changes in student perceptions, but we did not address pedagogy in this study.

Each instructor was free to address the content in Alexander as he or she preferred. Longitudinal studies measuring the relationship between attitudinal preparation and future practice behaviors is an important missing element in confirming the efficacy of social work education in general and for policy courses in particular; however, these results suggest that multicultural education may benefit from a less confrontational approach.

We are particularly intrigued, however, by the absence of racial distinctions in our sample's responses and what this lack of difference may mean differentially for White and Black students. Does the degree of gate-keeping in social work education prescreen and exclude student applicants based on racial attitudes? Have the intersections of political conservatism, free market ideology, White privilege, and Black American exemplars (e.g., Barack Obama, Oprah Winfrey) redefined the meaning of race in contemporary America? If so, what are the implications for multicultural education?

### Conclusion

Four different social welfare policy instructors used Alexander as a textbook, but there were no additional pedagogical interventions associated with this study. Each instructor was free to engage the content provided by Alexander in her or his own fashion. Accordingly, we conclude that the newness of this material and the massive amount of empirical evidence presented by Alexander were sufficiently persuasive to influence student attitudes in a single semester. Further adaptation of this content for multicultural education classes may be warranted.

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