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## **Social Work Allyship: Exploring White and BIPOC Perspectives at Predominately White Institutions within the Southeastern Conference**

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Social Work Allyship: Exploring White and BIPOC Perspectives at Predominately White  
Institutions within the Southeastern Conference

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Social Work

by

Aubrey Franke  
John Brown University  
Bachelor of Science in Family and Human Services, and Intercultural Studies, 2020

May 2022  
University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the experiences of allyship through the perspectives of White and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) social work students at primarily White universities within the Southeastern Conference. The study includes 10 semi-structured interviews with Bachelor and Master's level social work students. The findings from this study present necessary characteristics and qualities for effective social work allyship. Interestingly, BIPOC students emphasize the importance of informed action, while White students share relational qualities such as empathy and willingness to learn. The findings also show that some BIPOC students experience performative allyship from White social work students. BIPOC participants also experienced unbalanced labor, including speaking up for themselves and calling cohort members out on racist statements. Lastly, the study provides recommendations to advance allyship in schools of social work.

*Keywords:* allyship, performative allyship, social work, social work education

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## Chapter One: Introduction

### Context

Social work as a profession is predominately White, thus social work departments within universities are also predominately White (Jani et al., 2011). However, there has been an increase in students of color since the 1970s with integration and non-discrimination policies (Jani et al., 2011). Increased representation is important for social work departments to maintain diversity of thought, ideas, and experiences. Yet, even though representation has increased, it is important to understand Black, Indigenous, and People of Color's (BIPOC) experiences within schools of social work, specifically within predominately White institutions (PWI), which are higher education institutions with White enrollment at or above 50% (Lomotey, 2010).

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) (2017) contains values that compel social workers to be culturally competent allies to historically marginalized groups, including BIPOC populations. More specifically, these values state that social workers are to “pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people” (NASW, 2017). The phrase “with and on behalf of” places an expectation of allyship on social workers. Allyship includes using one's privilege and power to advocate alongside historically marginalized communities, which can create true and lasting change (Williams et al., 2020). Allyship also has the potential to turn into meaningful partnerships that work to empower those who feel powerless (Williams et al., 2020).

However, research also demonstrates a lack of allyship, and in some cases performative allyship, among White social workers (Davis & Fields, 2020; Spanierman & Smith, 2017). Performative allyship, which will be defined further below, is when someone with a dominant identity (i.e. White, male, cisgender) creates more harm than good when attempting to support a



disenfranchised group (Kalina, 2020). Performative allyship typically lacks action, an essential component to meaningful allyship (Brown, 2015; Brown & Ostrove, 2018; Kutlaca et al., 2020).

### **Experiences of BIPOC Students in Social Work**

As previously mentioned, social work departments on college campuses have gained BIPOC representation (Jani et al., 2011). However, this representation does not come without its struggles for these students. BIPOC students experience stress within the classroom either because they are the only student of color or they have no faculty representation (Weng & Gray, 2017). The lack of diversity within social work faculty members also impacts retention and quality of experiences (Fields, 2020). Professional support has been shown to positively impact experiences in social work departments, thus not having BIPOC representation in faculty impacts students' experiences (Fields, 2020).

### **Problem Statement**

White social work allyship is unknown at predominately White institutions within the Southeastern Conference. Additionally, the experiences of BIPOC students in relation to allyship are unknown; therefore, one cannot know if BIPOC social work students at predominately White universities experience allyship from their White counterparts. It is important to understand BIPOC experiences because historically there has been a lack of allyship from White social workers (Gaumont, 2020; Hesford, 2021). Allyship is an ethical responsibility as outlined by the NASW Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017), and recent research has highlighted the need for White allyship that is not performative (Spanierman & Smith, 2017). To continue, a lack of allyship can contribute to prejudice and continued oppressive views of BIPOC students (Broido, 2000). These findings cannot be generalized to all social workers, or White social work students within the

SEC, but it is the researcher's desire to know if the findings from this study will be consistent with previous research.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study is to gain insight into White social work allyship towards BIPOC communities at predominately White universities within the Southeastern Conference. It is the researchers' desire to understand if White social work students demonstrate allyship to BIPOC students and to explore how that allyship is received. This study will seek to understand how White social workers exhibit allyship, if BIPOC students experience allyship, and what BIPOC students believe they need from White allies. By understanding both experiences, the researcher hopes the study will lead to more informed White social work allyship with BIPOC communities.

### **Research Questions**

The following questions will be explored:

1. How do White social work students execute allyship towards BIPOC social work students at predominately White universities within the SEC? How is their allyship demonstrated? What are barriers to allyship?
2. What are the experiences of BIPOC social work students regarding allyship at a predominately White university? How do these experiences impact their well-being and sense of belonging at their university?
3. From the perspective of BIPOC social work students at a predominately White university, what defines allyship, and does that definition align with how White social workers define allyship?

## **Rationale and Significance**

The rationale for this study emerges from the desire to understand the experiences of BIPOC students within schools of social work. According to Weng & Gray (2017), BIPOC students experience marginalization and a lack of support from faculty, making it difficult to succeed in academic settings. Furthermore, master's level social work cohorts are predominately White (50.2%), with African American students comprising 20.1% and Hispanic/Latinx students encompassing 16.3% of the enrolled students (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2020). Therefore, BIPOC students are thrust into a White environment without adequate representation, which can create cultural dissonance and contribute to lower self-esteem and lower academic success (Weng & Gray, 2017). Thus, it is important to understand BIPOC experiences regarding allyship to improve allyship within schools of social work.

The findings of this study can help educate social work students on the experiences and challenges of BIPOC students. Ideally, this study will improve White social work students' understandings of allyship and benefit BIPOC students' experiences regarding allyship. It is the researcher's goal that White social work students would have increased awareness of how to support BIPOC students in their allyship efforts. With greater understanding of BIPOC students' experiences, the researcher hopes that White students become more aware of and committed to intervening as allies. This study offers a unique opportunity for schools of social work to gain insight into the lived experiences of their students and how this knowledge can improve both the understanding of and action required in effective allyship. It is the researcher's desire, that by educating social work departments on the experiences of BIPOC students regarding allyship, there will be positive changes.

## **Current Policies**

There are systems in place to protect BIPOC students at universities, specifically non-discrimination policies and diversity programs. One clear policy is Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which “prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, and national origin in programs and activities receiving federal financial assistance” (The United States Department of Justice, 2020). Universities that receive federal assistance must follow this policy. However, Title VI was implemented in 1964, well after many universities were founded. As the name suggests, PWIs are historically White and have gradually integrated students of color. Thus, at their core infrastructure, these universities maintain White ideologies (Templeton et al., 2016).

As a result, many PWIs have implemented diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs to promote a sense of belonging for students of color on college campuses (Solorzano et al., 2000). These programs promote community, increase retention, and create awareness of the experiences of minority students. These spaces can provide a positive environment on a primarily White campus for BIPOC students who may experience isolation, discrimination, and racial injustices (Solorzano et al., 2000).

While important, some of these programs do not address the systems of power at PWIs. Further, non-discrimination policies are not equivalent to a positive environment for students of color on college campuses, or in social work departments. Therefore, structural changes must be made for BIPOC students to truly experience inclusion on college campuses.

## Concepts

In order to provide consistency and understanding, the following terms will be used throughout the study and be defined as:

- **Ally:** A person from a dominant group committed to taking individual or social action to address systems of oppression that give them increased power and privilege based on their social group, to voice support for a nondominant group or people in a group (Broido, 2000; Cross, 2021).
- **Allyship:** Promotes social justice with an intentional choice to “support disenfranchised communities’ rights and eliminating social inequalities”, ensuring their dominant group identity offers support to nondominant groups and establishes meaningful relationships with and accountability among individuals who seek to be allies (Cross, 2021).
- **BIPOC:** An acronym that stands for “Black, Indigenous, and People of Color” (Garcia, 2020).
- **Microaggressions:** DeAngelis (2009) describes the indirect nature of microaggressions, stating “some racism is so subtle that neither victim nor perpetrator may entirely understand what is going on- which may be especially toxic for people of color” (p. 1).
- **Performative Allyship:** A person from a dominant group claiming to stand in solidarity with a disenfranchised group but approaches their allyship in a way that is unhelpful, and in some cases harmful. A performative ally is driven by a reward, which could include the perception of being a “good person” or being “on the right side of history” (Kalina, 2020). Their allyship is a performance and typically lacks action (Bourke, 2020).
- **Predominately White Institution (PWI):** A higher education institution with White enrollment at or above 50% (Lomotey, 2010).

- Unbalanced Labor: The racial dynamics people of color must navigate within primarily White institutions, and the emotional labor resulting from being othered that seeks to protect themselves from the damaging consequences of racism (Evans & Moore, 2015).
- White: People of Caucasian descent. When referring to race, White will be capitalized throughout, because choosing not to capitalize White while capitalizing other races would implicitly uphold Whiteness as the norm (Mack & Palfrey, 2020).

### **Summary**

The desire for this study is to understand how White social work students demonstrate allyship towards BIPOC communities at predominately White universities within the Southeastern Conference. Moreover, the study amplifies the voices of BIPOC communities surrounding allyship, particularly if they experience performative allyship and ways they believe allyship can be more effective. The goal of this study is to advocate for BIPOC individuals and to gain insight into both perspectives of allyship. The anticipated outcome of this study is more informed allyship among White social workers to better support BIPOC communities.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

### Allyship

Dominant group members have the ability to advocate for and support marginalized groups, also known as allyship (Broido, 2000; Brown, 2015; Reason et al., 2005). Allyship has distinct meanings in specific contexts, including providing comfort, vocal advocacy, and other vocal or silent actions (Bourke, 2020). Allies are dominant group members who seek to end prejudice and support non-dominant groups by relinquishing various privileges (Broido, 2000; Brown & Ostrove, 2013; Reason et al., 2005). Regardless of context, however, an ally must be willing to confront their own power and the privilege associated with that power, which may create tension and incite fragility within the ally (Bourke, 2020). Once an ally has wrestled with their privileged identities they can leverage them as they work alongside disenfranchised groups and advocate for justice.

Allies also encompass people from a non-dominant group who advocate for other marginalized groups (Brown & Ostrove, 2013). All allyship is important, but for the purposes of this study, the literature will focus on White allyship towards communities of color because White people encompass a majority of allies towards BIPOC communities. In fact in one study, BIPOC participants reported their ally's racial background most often as White (56.40%), demonstrating the importance of understanding White allyship characteristics (Brown & Ostrove, 2013).

### Current Research

When looking at White allyship, it is essential to look at the perceptions of these allies from the perspective of people of color, especially in regards to understanding the definition of allyship (Brown & Ostrove, 2013). Many studies focus on the perspectives of allyship from

dominant group allies (Broido, 2000; Reason et al., 2005; Smith & Redington, 2010), so it is necessary to examine the qualities BIPOC communities seek in White allies.

One study utilized interviews to gather data from non-dominant group members regarding their perceptions of allyship (Brown & Ostrove, 2013). A clear strength of this study is the perspective of non-dominant group members because their perspectives are often left out of the literature. Results from this study pointed to the importance of ally understanding, support, and action (Brown & Ostrove, 2013). Dominant group allies made the participant feel comfortable and did not treat them differently because of their racial background. Furthermore, allies showed support to non-dominant group members if there was a prejudiced event. Moreover, White allies demonstrated support through direct action, specifically helping a BIPOC friend (Brown & Ostrove, 2013).

Other major themes from the study include what allies can do to address discrimination. First, allies can acknowledge their own racial identity and privilege and how that ultimately impacts their relationship with out-group members. Additionally, allies must educate themselves about communities other than their own, both to be aware of issues impacting other cultures and to possess the ability to speak out against stereotypes (Brown & Ostrove, 2013).

A common theme within research on allyship is the concept of action (Smith & Redington, 2010). Research describes that allies must possess a combination of traits, to include characteristics of both a friend and activist (Broido, 2000; Brown, 2015; Brown & Ostrove, 2013). An ally should seek to be loyal, supportive, promote social and/or political change, recognize systemic inequality, speak up about inequality, join groups in solidarity, and more (Brown, 2015). Allyship is similar to friendship and activism in its qualities, but there are distinct differences in an ally's attributes and actions (Brown, 2015). Allies must possess both affirmation



and informed action (Brown & Ostrove, 2013), whereas a friend may simply possess affirmation and not informed action.

One study was conducted regarding allyship characteristics, specifically White allies versus allies of color. BIPOC participants revealed that informed action and affirmation were the two most important qualities in an ally (Brown & Ostrove, 2013). Affirmation was rated highly for both White and BIPOC allies, but White allies were rated lower on informed action (Brown & Ostrove, 2013). White allies were also described as less aware and lacking in initiative to educate themselves on racial issues than their BIPOC counterparts described by other participants (Brown & Ostrove, 2013). Moreover, there is a discrepancy between how people of color perceive White allies versus how allies perceive themselves (Brown & Ostrove, 2013). Regarding the quality of affirmation, people of color rate White allies lower than White allies rate themselves (Brown & Ostrove, 2013). This demonstrates a need for White allies to work harder in their quest for allyship. A strength of this study includes both the perspectives of White allies and non-dominant perspectives of these allies.

In critique, allyship certainly necessitates action (Smith & Redington, 2010), and allyship without action lends itself to be performative (Bourke, 2020), which will be discussed in further detail below. However, these studies did not discuss the pitfalls of allyship, specifically performative allyship. As previously discussed, the gaps in the literature include challenges within allyship, especially for social work students at predominately White universities.

### **Challenges in Allyship**

There are challenges within allyship, specifically the tendency for White allies to act as White saviors towards communities of color (Spanierman & Smith, 2017). These actions can cause harm to BIPOC communities, as it reinforces White privilege and does not challenge

systems of power. Further, White women have the non-dominant group identity of being female and therefore have experiences with oppression via sexism (Spanierman & Smith, 2017). These experiences, while helpful in fostering empathy for non-dominant groups, can create a "false empathy" (Spanierman & Smith, 2017, p. 610). This can lead White women to believe they identify with people of color's experiences, when in fact that is not the case.

### ***Performative Allyship***

As previously stated, there is typically a component of performance within allyship, and it can be isolated to one aspect of an ally's life (Bourke, 2020). For example, people may be allies at work but not in their personal lives, thus they turn it off like a light switch (Bourke, 2020). However, when one only shows up for disenfranchised groups when it is easy, it borders on performative allyship (Bourke, 2020). It is essential for allies to continuously fight alongside and on behalf of disenfranchised groups to effectively create change.

One way for allies to move beyond performative or inactive allyship is to consider their motivations (Radke et al., 2020). While performative allyship exists for numerous reasons, one is due to inauthentic motives. Radke et al. (2020) describes various motives within allyship and relates the concept of performative allyship to their notion of "personal motivation," which seeks to meet individual needs and advantage oneself (p. 292). Furthermore, this concept of personal motivation borderlines on narcissism and focuses on individualism (Radke et al., 2020). In order to move beyond performative allyship, Radke et al. (2020) suggests possessing an outgroup-focused motivation, which reflects a sincere interest in the wellbeing of the disenfranchised group. Allyship must be genuine to be effective, reflecting the importance of further understanding the experiences of allyship within social work.

## **Social Work Obligation to Allyship**

Social workers have an obligation to allyship based on the NASW Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017). Per the Code of Ethics, social workers are to be allies within practice and policy to be effective advocates for clients. Under Ethical Standards regarding Social Workers' Ethical Responsibility to the Broader Society, social workers are mandated to advocate via action in both social and political settings for social justice (NASW, 2017). More specifically, this includes advocating for culturally competent and equitable policies, seeking to eliminate discrimination against people with minority identities (NASW, 2017). Related to this study, social workers are expected to advocate for BIPOC communities and ensure there are policies rooted in social justice for these communities. To continue, the Code of Ethics describes Social Workers' Ethical Responsibilities in Practice Settings (NASW, 2017). One such responsibility is the importance of advocacy within administrations to meet clients' needs (NASW, 2017).

Furthermore, the Amendments to the NASW Code of Ethics require social workers to be culturally competent advocates, which is essentially allyship (NASW, 2021). The updated Code states, "Social workers must take action against oppression, racism, discrimination, and inequities, and acknowledge personal privilege" (NASW, 2021). Additionally, it describes the following:

Social workers should demonstrate awareness and cultural humility by engaging in critical self-reflection (understanding their own bias and engaging in self-correction); recognizing clients as experts of their own culture; committing to life-long learning; and holding institutions accountable for advancing cultural humility. (NASW, 2021)

In alignment with the present study, these obligations describe the importance of advocating for BIPOC students within social work education. Social work professors and administrators must ensure BIPOC students are supported both academically and socially within their schools of social work.

## **Ally Development in College**

College is a unique time in which students are surrounded by diverse perspectives, experiences, and ideas. Students are provided experiences to expand their worldview, change their perspective, and advocate for their beliefs. Thus, college is the perfect opportunity to grow as an ally. Broido (2000) conducted a foundational research study on ally development in college looking specifically at allies for the LGBTQ+ community. Broido (2000) was one of the first people to look at ally development in college, thus his study is important to examine. Strengths of this study include the qualitative nature of his query, providing in depth understanding of ally behaviors and experiences. However, Broido (2000) did not seek to understand the perspectives of LGBTQ+ individuals who would have experienced said allyship. Therefore, because his research lacks that perspective, it is unclear whether the LGBTQ+ communities on their college campus experienced allyship. Additionally, Broido's (2000) research was specific to LGBTQ+ allies, thus not providing information on BIPOC allyship.

A newer study built on Broido's regarding college student ally development, but looked more broadly and included allies towards racial minority groups (Munin & Speight, 2010). Similarly, Munin and Speight (2010) sought to understand the perspectives of allies, not perceptions of those experiencing allyship. Moreover, both Broido (2000) and Munin and Speight (2010) looked at factors essential to ally development, which will be discussed below, and provided guidance for higher education staff to design programs and curriculum surrounding allyship. One difference between the studies worth noting is that Munin and Speight (2010) explored ally development at a religiously affiliated institution, whereas Broido (2000) did not.

One characteristic found in both studies that is essential to ally development in college is self-confidence (Munin & Speight, 2010), something the participants in Broido's (2000) study

claimed they possessed before college. In fact, actions of allies are typically opposite of the dominant ideology within society, which correlates with self-confidence (Munin & Speight, 2010). It is important that discussions of self-confidence include how privilege influences how one may view themselves and what they feel they have to offer in support of others. Without self-confidence, many participants would have been unwilling to consider their privileged identities and dominant status in society (Broido, 2000).

In his study, Broido (2000) found that college students often gained information about allyship and created change through discussions. Students learned individually or through course lectures, but most saw discussion as a key component in understanding social justice issues (Broido, 2000). Discussions allowed allies to become self-aware of their stances on various issues and increased their knowledge of diversity matters (Broido, 2000). Providing the opportunity for college students to identify and clarify their beliefs and values surrounding social justice issues is also essential in ally development (Broido, 2000). Additionally, dominant group participants found hearing about direct experiences of and creating friendships with marginalized people influenced their allyship (Broido, 2000). Nonetheless, the perspectives of non-dominant groups were not considered in this study, thus emphasizing the importance of examining their experiences.

In conclusion, allyship includes both affirmation and action (Brown & Ostrove, 2013). There are clear pitfalls of allyship, to include White savior complexes and performative allyship, which can be avoided if social workers adhere to the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) mandate of advocacy and allyship both in practice and policy at large as well as specifically within social work education (Kalina, 2020; Radke et al., 2020; Spanierman & Smith, 2017). Allyship is prevalent within college settings, and it is important to understand both the perspectives of allies

and those experiencing said allyship. Combining all of these ideas, the present study will address the gaps in knowledge pertaining to social work allyship within predominately White universities.

### **Chapter Three: Study Framework**

The present study is shaped by the following frameworks: Social Change Theory, Intergroup Contact Theory, and Minority Stress Theory. These theories were chosen to better understand how people become motivated towards allyship and to examine the impact of a lack of allyship on BIPOC individuals.

#### **Intergroup Contact Theory**

Despite efforts toward equity and inclusion, discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender, race, and other identities is pervasive within higher education. Inequalities should not only be an issue for marginalized groups, but also privileged groups who are concerned with creating justice and fairness in society (Hässler et al., 2020). Intergroup contact theory posits that social change occurs when different social groups interact with one another in meaningful and positive ways (Hässler et al, 2020).

Research using intergroup contact theory has demonstrated that when people from both “advantaged” and “disadvantaged” identities have consistent and positive contact with one another, prejudice is reduced (Hässler et al., 2020). Moreover, it increases empathy and provides new perspectives for both groups (Hässler et al., 2020). As a result, collective action occurs to challenge social injustice (Di Bernardo et al., 2019). In fact, many movements such as Black Lives Matter, Stop Asian Hate, and other large-scale demonstrations for progressive policies have included both disadvantaged groups and their advantaged group allies (Hässler et al., 2020). Positive interaction between social groups encourages advantaged group members to advocate alongside disadvantaged groups to promote social change (Reimer, 2016).

### **Social Change Theory**

Social change theory places emphasis on examining power, privilege, and oppression to influence change (Murphy-Erby et al., 2010). Social conflict, including movements that force people to wrestle with privilege, necessitates social responsibility and therefore social change. Social change includes group action that challenges the status quo to promote social justice (Murphy-Erby et al., 2010).

### **Minority Stress Theory**

Minority stress refers to the unique stressors experienced by minority students that interfere with their integration into their university (Wei et al., 2011). Predominately White environments add to this stress, as it may be some students' first experience as the only BIPOC student in the classroom (Alvarez et al., 2009). Adding to that, some professors ask BIPOC students to speak for their entire racial group (Maramba, 2008). BIPOC students also experience a lack of support within primarily White institutions, which has the potential to increase stress for students already in a particularly difficult life stage (Jones et al., 2002; Solorzano, 2000). Further, many BIPOC students report experiencing microaggressions that contribute to minority stress (DeAngelis, 2009). In one study, a Black student shared he was only at his PWI to try and create change (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). These experiences have the potential to result in unbalanced labor and fatigue.

As a result, many minority students perceive their university negatively and as a hostile and unwelcoming environment (Ancis et al., 2000). Minority stress thus contributes to high attrition rates for predominately White institutions (Arbona & Nora, 2007). Protective factors for minority students include positive peer interactions and a sense of belonging on campus (Park, 2009). In summary, minority stress uniquely impacts BIPOC students at predominately White



institutions, demonstrating the importance of creating a sense of belonging for BIPOC students in schools of social work.

## **Chapter Four: Methods**

The purpose of this study is to better understand allyship in primarily White schools of social work in the Southeastern Conference. The primary research questions are: (a) How do White social work students execute allyship towards BIPOC social work students at predominately White universities within the SEC? How is their allyship demonstrated? What are barriers to allyship? (b) What are the experiences of BIPOC social work students regarding allyship at a predominately White university? How do these experiences impact their well-being and sense of belonging at their university? (c) From the perspective of BIPOC social work students at a predominately White university, what defines allyship, and does that definition align with how White social workers define allyship?

Ideally, this study will better inform schools of social work and social work students about the overall experiences of BIPOC students regarding allyship and how White social workers can be more effective allies.

### **Rationale for Methodology**

The methodology chosen for this study is qualitative and will utilize semi-structured interviews for data collection. Due to the nature of this query, a qualitative study is an ideal methodology to understand the lived experiences of those who identify as allies as well as those who may or may not feel supported by said allies.

### **Population**

The literature emphasizes the importance of allyship, especially for White social workers who are expected to work to uphold social justice (Davis & Fields, 2020). This study focuses on White social workers due to the anchoring NASW Code of Ethics that places expectations on allyship. BIPOC students and faculty were chosen due to specific movements such as Abolish

Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE), Black Lives Matter, #Blackatwork, and Stop Asian Hate, demonstrating a need for allyship towards these populations (Clark, 2019).

### **Demographic Variables**

The researcher measured both race and age as demographic variables in the study. As previously stated, race was chosen because White social workers may believe themselves to be allies but there may be opportunities for growth. Moreover, socio-political movements within BIPOC communities highlight a need for allyship (Clark, 2019), thus race is essential to evaluate in the study. Age was also chosen because allyship is a spectrum, thus social work students will be at different points along their journey of understanding and implementing allyship in their lives. Therefore, both race and age are important in the researcher's understanding of allyship within schools of social work in the Southeastern Conference.

### **Sample**

The present study used a purposive sampling method to recruit participants. Purposive sampling is a way to gather information-rich data which yields in-depth insight into the study (Patton, 2002). White and BIPOC social work students within the Southeastern Conference were recruited for this study.

Recruitment took place as follows: the researcher sent an email to all BSW and MSW Program Directors in the SEC requesting their assistance to send their students the recruitment script. BSW and MSW students directly emailed the researcher who confirmed eligibility with basic demographic questions. Students were sent a Doodle poll to request an interview time, which the researcher followed up with a Zoom link. The researcher sent two rounds of initial emails to the program directors to ensure all schools had the opportunity to participate if they

chose. As compensation for their time, each participant received a \$25 Amazon gift card when their interview was completed.

### **Demographics**

There was a total of ten participants, ranging in age at the start of their program from 18 to 35. The participants were given the following pseudonyms: Noah, Skyler, Carter, Nora, Isabel, Morgan, Madison, Juliana, Sarah, and Megan. Participants held various identities, namely Latina, Black/African American, Asian, and White. All participants were current social work students in the SEC and ranged from sophomore BSW students to final year MSW students. For a more detailed list of demographics, see Appendix A.

### **Overview of Research Design**

The following list describes the steps the researcher undertook to conduct the study.

1. The researcher examined relevant literature on allyship, specifically allyship definitions, challenges in allyship, performative allyship, and allyship development.
2. The researcher gained Institutional Review Board approval after submitting a proposal. The information given to the IRB included “all procedures and processes needed to ensure adherence to standards put forth for the study of human subjects, including participants’ confidentiality and informed consent” (Bloomberg, 2016, p. 171).
3. The researcher began recruitment by emailing Program Directors within SEC Schools of Social Work and speaking with social work administrators at the Council on Social Work Education national conference.
4. After individuals expressed a desire to participate in the study, a follow-up email was sent to confirm demographic information, such as race, age, online or in-person classification,

5. Participants received and signed the informed consent document online before the Zoom interview, and the researcher went over the document prior to the interview.
6. The researcher verbally completed the demographic questionnaire.
7. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 1.5 hours.

### **IRB Approval and Informed Consent**

Due to the sensitivity of the present study and its focus on BIPOC experiences, it was necessary for the research study to be approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Arkansas. In addition, there is a university requirement for all human subjects' research studies to be approved by the IRB. The researcher received approval from the Institutional Review Board at the University of Arkansas by submitting both the required application, informed consent, and interview questions for the present study in order to examine the experiences of social work students in the SEC. The informed consent and IRB approval can be found in Appendixes C and D.

### **Data Collection**

This study used semi-structured interviews and a demographic questionnaire for its data collection. The data collection methods used will be discussed further below.

### **Demographic Questionnaire**

The researcher conducted the demographic questionnaire via Zoom and asked questions on age, gender, sexual orientation, pronouns, ethnicity, age at start of program, year in program, and undergraduate institution, if applicable.

## **Interviews**

The researcher chose semi-structured interviews as the primary method for data collection in the study. The goal of interviews was to draw out the participant's experiences through conversation and follow-up questions. Semi-structured interviews were best suited for the study because they elicit "rich, thick descriptions," which are essential to fully understand an individual's lived experience (Bloomberg, 2016, p. 154). In addition, semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to ask clarifying questions to ensure they receive reliable information. This method of data collection also provides space for BIPOC students to fully describe their experiences. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were the most appropriate method to understand the experiences of social work students in the SEC.

### ***Interview Questions***

After conducting a thorough literature review, the researcher identified interview questions based on the literature. The researcher also received feedback from her thesis chair who provided additional interview questions based on her research on Black women's experiences in higher education. For a list of specific interview questions, see Appendix B.

### ***Interview Process***

The researcher communicated with all participants via email to schedule interviews and receive the signed informed consent document. The interviews occurred in whatever setting the participant chose. The researcher used the Zoom recording feature on her password-protected computer and transcribed the interviews verbatim.

## **Data Analysis**

After completing the interviews, the researcher transcribed each interview verbatim. The researcher printed and read through all interviews without identifying codes. After reading the

transcriptions multiple times, the researcher identified primary themes from the research questions and identified subthemes inductively from the data. Moreover, the researcher utilized the thesis committee chair as a second coder to guard against bias and ensure accuracy in the codes.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Several measures were taken to ensure the participants were treated ethically. First, the researcher collected an electronically signed informed consent from each interviewee before beginning the interview. The researcher used pseudonyms and removed any identifiable information disclosed by the participants. Moreover, the transcribed interviews were stored on the researcher's personal computer in the database Cryptomater, which further protected their information.

## Findings

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand allyship from the perspectives of White and BIPOC social work students at primarily White institutions in the Southeastern Conference. The researcher believed that understanding both perspectives would allow social workers to approach allyship from a more informed perspective. The study sought to provide definitions of allyship, understand how White allies demonstrate allyship, how it is received by BIPOC students, and if schools of social work address allyship in their curriculum. This chapter presents the key findings obtained from 10 semi-structured interviews, using pseudonyms to protect student identities. Four major findings emerged from this study.

1. There is not one agreed upon definition of allyship from White and BIPOC social work students, and there are multiple characteristics of an ally and ways in which one can execute allyship.
2. The majority of participants saw performative allyship from students in their cohort, to include White silence and White saviorsism.
3. The overwhelming majority of BIPOC participants experienced unbalanced labor in their program when they were the only ones to educate their cohort on racial inequalities and did so for the benefit of future clients, colleagues, and friends.
4. Most participants cited a lack of accountability and discussion of the NASW value “social justice” within social work classrooms.

Following is a discussion of the findings with details to support and describe each theme. The findings will include direct quotes from interview transcripts, both within paragraphs and block quotes, and may not be grammatically correct. The emphasis is to let the participants speak for themselves to fully understand their perspective on each theme.



## **Characteristics of an Ally**

The first primary theme identified was “characteristics of an ally.” Consistent with the literature, each student expressed differing perspectives on their definition of allyship.

Throughout the interviews, participants voiced various important qualities and characteristics that are essential to allyship. From the primary theme “characteristics of an ally,” three subthemes emerged: defining allyship, qualities of an ally, and executing allyship.

### ***Defining Allyship***

The first subtheme encompassed participants defining the concept of allyship. This theme emerged from the researcher’s desire to understand if White students define allyship differently from BIPOC students. White students defined allyship in the following ways:

Standing in solidarity with people. – Noah

People supporting people outside their group...across the lines of race or sexual orientation, gender, socioeconomic status, class. – Sarah

White participants identified allyship as using one’s privilege to advocate for people who have less privilege and being knowledgeable about various inequalities people experience.

Using the privileges we have to help be an ally to those who aren’t afforded those same privileges. And using the power that we’ve been given in this world, whether we ask for it or not, to uplift the people who weren’t given that same power, same voice. – Carter

You may not be in a discriminated or targeted group...but you are knowledgeable about, you know, different cultures, you're knowledgeable about what others are going through, and you're able to stand by those people and might be supportive. Whether it's through like activism, or just...being just a friend. – Skyler

Noah’s definition of allyship also includes making sacrifices for others.

When you’re being like, a successful ally, you’re like putting yourself in a vulnerable, vulnerable position...you’re putting yourself in the out group instantly...your safety is at stake...it could mean your job, um, it could mean so many other things. – Noah

Other students expressed that allyship encompasses supporting people without putting themselves at the center of attention.

Listening and taking in other lived experiences that are different than mine...gaining insight onto, like, just the disparities...and figuring out how to elevate those stories and those voices. So allyship for me looks sort of like not being in the spotlight, but trying to put those that need to be heard that haven't been heard, sort of in the spotlight. – Megan

Some of the biggest things I've been able to do for that is just trying to uplift them, in a way that doesn't make me at the forefront. – Carter

Our goal is not for our voices to be heard, but to use our voices to get the Black community heard. – Skyler

Using my privilege to like uplift voices that I come in contact with, especially if those people are part of a marginalized community. So, like being able to, like take a step back and allow those people to have space. – Noah

Noah expressed that allyship is a term given to someone with privilege, not an identity someone can claim. He also expressed that allyship cannot be passive and must be active, and provided an image that he thinks of regarding allyship.

You're either being an ally or you're not being an ally...you can't just like, chill out in the middle. – Noah

The famous picture of Bernie Sanders being arrested when he was in college. Like pictures like that, Angela Davis when she was young...I'm like to me that's what allyship is. That's being loud and disrupting. And like forcing change. – Noah

Black, Indigenous, and People of Color students defined allyship multiple ways, including showing support, advocating, working alongside others without speaking over them, and seeking understanding.

Showing support for another group, even though you may not be a part of that group. – Isabel

The understanding and like empathy towards a different group of people...so basically advocating for a group that may not look like you. – Juliana

I think it's just knowing how to advocate...maybe you're not Black, maybe you're not Asian, maybe you're not Hispanic, but also just being sensitive to the struggles that they

have. And you know kind of look at it from their perspective...and stand up for them, even if they're not in the room. – Nora

Working together with someone who is like considered a minority, whether that's like through race or sexuality...or gender. But it's like making sure that you're like working side by side and not like kind of stepping over them or trying to take the reins of like, what they're trying to do. And it's like letting them know that you're present, but not in a way that's...trying to overwhelm them. – Morgan

I think of it as like a friendly relationship with that particular race or ethnicity...like having that relationship and that understanding of what that demographic may go through...understanding one's culture. – Madison

One student described that allyship is not cohesive, in that this participant supports other groups, but that is often not reciprocated. They also believe that allyship is an inherent quality that someone either possesses or does not.

I think as far as allyship going to the other way, um, I just feel like it could be more cohesive...which is allyship to me, is like cohesive and not just this side and this side...bridging the gap. – Madison

It's something that has to be in you, I feel. Like that's no type of profession or anything, um, that can make you that way...if your heart's not in it, it shows. – Madison

### *Qualities*

The second subtheme that emerged was qualities of allies. This theme includes phrases from participants regarding qualities they believe are most important for an ally to possess.

**White Perspectives.** White participants shared that one important quality in an ally is to educate themselves and seek understanding and possess empathy.

Being an ally through like educating myself and like, not relying on people of color to educate me. – Noah

Someone who listens...who's seeking understanding. Someone who is supportive. – Sarah

Definitely understanding, empathetic, and honestly somebody who just like has interest in, you know, other people and getting to know other people and what they're really going through. – Skyler

Additionally, Carter describes an ally must have critical thought and the ability to question unjust treatment of others.

Connecting with your empathy and understanding like, this is wrong, this shouldn't be happening. And being able to do kind of self-reflection of, I don't get treated this way. Why are they getting treated this way?...Because if you can't question things, then you're never going to reveal the nuances underneath it. – Carter

Megan explains an ally must be humble and willing to accept feedback and question defensive thoughts if they arise, and work through

Someone who is willing to feel uncomfortable, someone who has the humility...if they receive feedback, and there's like negative feelings that come up...not act in a defensive way. – Megan

**BIPOC Perspectives.** BIPOC students expressed important qualities in an ally are speaking up, possessing empathy, listening, being educated, willing to learn, and being genuine.

Isabel describes important qualities in the following ways.

If you see or know something is wrong...how can I be an ally and not say anything when I know something is wrong? – Isabel

Making sure people who are allies are educated, because some people who are allies and don't know nothing about the community that they're supporting. – Isabel

A few students expressed empathy as an essential quality for an ally to possess in order for them to better understand others' experiences.

The thought of putting yourself in their shoes, I think that's something so important. And also just being a good listener...like sometimes that's all a person needs. Um, so just really being able to listen and like not put in your opinion. - Nora

Being willing to learn is a great quality...empathy, kind of putting yourself in the shoes of another person, in order to better understand their experiences. Of course you've never experienced it, but being able to kind of see like if that was me, how would I want somebody to treat me, and stuff like that. I think an ally's also kind of not really afraid of scrutiny. – Juliana

Students also shared their appreciation of when allies are genuine and give them space to talk.

They give the presence that, like, you are given a space to talk...approachability is really like, an important thing...they're listening to what you're saying, and like, hearing you out. – Morgan

Genuity, I just feel like you have to be real about the cause, and like you have to like basically show it in your everyday life. – Madison

### ***Execution***

The third subtheme within characteristics of an ally examines how both White and BIPOC students exemplify and execute allyship. An overarching idea, both in literature and among these participants, is the component of action that must be present for someone to be an effective ally. For two participants, action looked like doing the work to educate themselves.

It's extraordinarily important that like we do the work first. Um, that we're constantly searching and educating and questioning ourselves. – Noah

My primary way of allyship is just doing my work as a White person, and really trying to understand, um, like how White supremacy affects others in the country. – Megan

For Carter, allyship “should be practical”, and for him that looked like supporting a friend in their campaign without calling attention to himself. “One of my friends, who is a Black woman, she ran for a Senate seat here. And I helped do a lot of like, behind the scenes work for her...I wasn't really seen at all” (Carter). Carter also explained that him and his friends, “do ally of the month...it's mostly a joke thing, I once venmoed somebody for Juneteenth...but it's also a thing to be like, you wanna do a little more” (Carter).

Noah described action regarding the importance of educating and calling out friends, stating “when I like step into the like, ally position, it's more like calling in people that are like in my work environment” (Noah). Megan echoes his sentiments, and adds on by sharing the importance of discerning when action is necessary and when it is not.

Whether it's like confronting , you know, racist comments with other White people, or helping educate other White people...whether it's being at some sort of event, and...a person of color needs bodily protection, to like actually physically put a space in between

the threat and that person...and maybe sort of even discernment on when action is necessary and when it's not. – Megan

Further, Sarah describes calling herself out when she recognizes bias within herself, stating, "I'm able to say, okay stop. Why did I think that...it's just like, the experiences, the you know, social prejudices...and so those were all informing that and then I can take that and say, okay, incorrect assumption" (Sarah).

BIPOC students expressed multiple ways allyship should be executed. Nora discussed considering the businesses, authors, and brands you support, stating, "being mindful of...what you support, um, what you give your money to...and doing your own research as well" (Nora). Madison and her cohort responded collectively to an instance of racism where a cohort member and her family were thrown out of a restaurant in their college town.

We like drafted up like an email to that restaurant and was like hey this is not okay, like what you did at your establishment is not fair, it is very [unjust]...so we all like kind of like came together for her, right. Because her dad got arrested. – Madison

Another BIPOC student expressed that allyship "starts by having those quote unquote uncomfortable conversations, being willing to have those, um, and not glossing over them" (Juliana).

Overall, allyship encompasses many important characteristics based on both White and BIPOC perspectives. However, while White students can share how they believe they are allies and exhibit various characteristics, they also shared the title of an "ally" is not something someone can self-identify as.

Who gave you the title of ally? Like you don't, you don't give yourself that title. If people need an ally, hopefully, I'm already showing up. – Noah

I hate to say like, this is the way that I'm an ally, because I - I often don't know one, if I'm doing it right. And two, like what's the reception...maybe it really needs to be defined by them...It's not necessarily my place to judge whether or not that's an act of allyship I guess. – Megan

## **Performative Allyship**

The second primary theme that emerged from the literature was “performative allyship.” Within this theme, participants defined the concept and BIPOC students shared experiences of performative allyship from people in their cohort or school of social work. Participants defined performative allyship in the following ways:

They'll share a graphic, but won't do anything in real life. – Carter

Lots of people [will] hang a Black Lives Matter poster in their room. But then the person they're dating is racist at the same time...people who just kind of did it for the trend really when it was a trend. – Carter

If you asked them do you believe that Black lives matter, they'd be like yeah totally, 1000%, but then they're like using racial slurs, and it's just like mmm, like you, you definitely know better. – Nora

I think it's more like I'm in the [social worker] role and like maintaining my status, more than actually helping, if that makes sense. – Madison

People know when your heart isn't in it, like people know when you're being performative...it's almost like an instinct...you're doing this but your lifestyle is totally different from what you know, you put on your social media. – Madison

### ***Intention vs. Impact***

The first subtheme of “performative allyship” is “intention versus impact.” There is a tendency in many settings, including social work, to excuse the impact of something because someone has good intentions. However, even if someone has good intentions, it does not excuse a negative impact. The following section will include quotes from participants that describe this phenomenon in schools of social work.

Noah describes being in a group project with a White student who claims to be an ally but acted in the opposite way. He states:

In this group project, they were being like the opposite of an ally. They were like speaking over this Black woman and her field of expertise, like disregarding her input on the project...exemplifying the traits that you wouldn't want in a social worker and was

very unaware that she was doing this...the definition of a performative ally. Like she posted the black square on her Instagram. As soon as like she's somewhere out of the public eye. She's like the total opposite. – Noah

BIPOC students describe that their cohort members believe that posting on social media is all they need to do to support others as an ally, which they describe below:

With certain classmates...they'll be like oh you know I'm here for you if you need anything...they'll put it in their Instagram bio...that's like the...extent when it comes to like standing up for like social injustices of people of color. – Madison

Half of the cohort...they've never done any protest...they did say if they feel connected to something, which they rarely kind of do, they'll post it on their social media...to raise awareness...I think they have it in their minds that if I post it on my Instagram story that means I'm, I'm supporting...but the way they said it, it was kind of just like, I just wanna post it to make it look like I'm not a bad person. – Juliana

If your only idea of like, being active or an ally is just to post on social media, and like nothing else, that's kind of like, not great...it's not very helpful. And like it doesn't really present you as an ally. It just kind of seems like it's for the likes...or views. – Morgan

Another BIPOC student expressed that many students come from various backgrounds and have good intentions pursuing the social work profession, but there are negative impacts when they do not take their learning to heart. She states:

I understand how some people don't come from the same background, but how can you sit there and go to like a university, go through all this stuff, pick social work and still not understand why certain POC groups feel the way they feel...How do you come into social work with no empathy. – Isabel

The phenomenon of intention versus impact is seen within White participants, specifically one who described her thought process when confronted with the idea that all White people are racist. She states:

Like when someone says, you know, oh White people are racist. I immediately go to...well, I know people that are of different cultures. And so it's not like my intention is to be like...look how good I am because I have a Black friend...that's how my thought process comes along. I think, yes, it happens, and no, I don't think it's good. But I understand how it happens because I've seen it in myself unintentionally. – Sarah



Another White student has good intentions going to protests but does not believe there is more she needs to do regarding activism. She states, “I participated in, like, protests and stuff like that. So like Black Lives Matter. So I feel like on activism, I'm pretty active I'm like pretty there.” – Skyler

### *White Silence*

The second subtheme within “performative allyship” is “White silence.” As previously discussed, performative allyship encompasses posting on social media without taking action. Additionally, performative allyship can include stating you are an ally but not speaking up when necessary. BIPOC students described instances in which their White cohort members heard instances of racism and ignorance and remained silent.

Okay if you're gonna say you're my ally...and you're hearing like a classmate say like, oh what did George Floyd do...you know that he had a criminal record...I feel like you're just as complicit at that point...you're just sitting there doing nothing. – Juliana

I'll be like did they really just say that...People will sit there and be like why would they say that, and whisper to somebody instead of telling that person like why would you say that, that's wrong. – Isabel

Juliana described that her cohort has great class discussion and participation on topics like foster care or clinical work, but there is silence when they discuss any topic involving race. She states:

When we get into Black history, or we get into mass incarceration...there's silence...I think that's a really big microaggression because when we're talking about...a different group of people...you have no thoughts...if you have so much to say last week, where is the same energy this week. – Juliana

Moreover, Juliana expressed how that could be due in part to the fact that her White counterparts want to be seen as “good people,” which is an identifying variable of a performative ally.

Some of them don't say anything cause they don't care, and some of them...their beliefs will only allow them to say ignorant things...they don't say anything, to avoid just being ignorant. Cause they know what they say probably is not going to be received well...but they also feel like...with me not saying that I'm still a good person. I'm still seen in a

positive light. When it's like, you not saying anything is not making you look like a better person at all. – Juliana

### ***White Saviors***

The third subtheme within “performative allyship” is “White saviors.” White saviors are people who, as previously discussed, have good intentions, but approach their allyship in a way that places them at the center. Moreover, many White saviors do not consider the perspective of those they want to help when approaching allyship. One student shares, “Just because they're in social work they feel like they are good people...but I think they need to also realize that there's a lot of like White saviors in the field of social work” (Juliana). Another student shares there must be discernment regarding allyship to avoid White saviorism. He states:

Put your safety at risk for a good reason...I think it quickly can fall into the idea of like White saviorism...so it's not just like you go out and are protecting everyone and get arrested. It's like you are advocating for a reason, regardless of um, how safe you are in that situation. – Noah

One participant shared the reason she started her social work degree and exhibited White savior characteristics in her response. She stated, “So then I went into social work...I ended up writing a paper my senior year of high school about, like, our juvenile justice system here. And I was like, oh my God, like I need to change it” (Skylar).

As social workers, we want to avoid performative allyship and White savior characteristics. Participants shared ways in which social workers can avoid being performative and exhibit true allyship. They stated:

Being able to see something and be like, okay, that's racism. How do I a) not do that, and b) combat that. I think those two things together just prevent you from being a performative ally. – Carter

When it's in the headlines, people are going to be more involved. But what when it's not in the headlines? What are you doing? Are you still doing that work? Are you still paying attention? – Megan

I think numbers is a big thing...be sure we're not tokenizing people of color, like we're not, we're not just trying to check boxes...but generally speaking to make sure that if there are minority voices that, that they are included, and...they do have space in whatever space we're working in. – Megan

### **BIPOC Unbalanced Labor**

The third primary theme that emerged from the data was “BIPOC unbalanced labor.”

When White allies do not do the work to educate themselves and inevitably say ignorant or racist things, BIPOC students find themselves in a situation where they either speak up for themselves or allow their cohort members to remain ignorant.

One participant describes a lack of speaking up in 2020 specifically, stating, “It was like very lopsided, in 2020 to me...there were people scared to speak up about those injustices and so you're kind of looking like, okay, so like when are you gonna say something” (Madison).

Madison also states, “often times, like when...things are considered like an allyship, sometimes one party can give more than the other, so it's kind of like lopsided. It's like okay like I stand up for you. but are you going to do the same” (Madison). In these ways, there is unbalanced labor for people of color, and the following quotes describe this within schools of social work.

### ***Cohort Experiences***

Many BIPOC students spoke to the unbalanced labor they feel in their cohort.

***Educating cohort.*** BIPOC students were asked if they feel the need to educate their cohort members on various inequalities, and responded in the following ways:

Oh, definitely. Especially now, like, you can correct it now. But like, once you go into like the workforce, it's going to cause like, a lot more problems. – Morgan

I do feel like it's a responsibility as a person who...doesn't want to see this person go out into the field and offend somebody who's just coming in simply for help...telling people to educate themselves and um just making sure that they know that what they did was wrong. Cause don't want nobody going out into the field and offending a future client or a person. – Isabel

If White people are asking Black people hey, okay, like I am very uninformed obviously, can you give me like some resources or where do I start, then you know that's up to us to be like okay this is where you can start...obviously that's not our full responsibility, but at least we can give them a head start of saying like, this is like the trajectory of where you're supposed to be going almost. Like if they're like willingly trying to help then I'm like okay, like here's some resources. – Madison

One student described the opposite, that she does not feel a duty to educate her White cohort members. Additionally, she hopes that people do not expect her to do so because there is an abundance of resources available.

I don't think it's my duty to educate, um, especially at our ages, where we have phones, we have the news, we have history books, we have documentaries, so many to name, um, that I don't feel like it's my responsibility to educate you on my history...now if you ask me a question I'll answer it, but if you're just like saying ignorant stuff like what [a student] said to me, it's not my job to educate you on that. – Juliana

I hope that they don't think it's you know, people of color, or Black peoples' jobs to educate them, when...we all see what's going on and stuff like that, that there's no reason for you not to do your own research, and I think it's part of them that's just feels like they don't have to. They just expect when they say ignorant stuff they expect...us to just jump and get defensive and correct them...I've come to a point where I just allow you to be ignorant...I think they choose ignorance. – Juliana

*Speaking up for themselves.* White students should not always speak for students of color, especially when considering there are White saviors in social work. However, many BIPOC participants expressed a desire for their White cohort to recognize instances of racism and speak out before they have a chance to do so themselves.

The POC is always the person to go, say something on it or reach out to the professor, like...our White cohort don't like to do that...when it comes time to talk to the professor everybody else is silent. – Isabel

I am standing up for people...I want people to do the same for me...9 time out of 10 times it doesn't happen...like you have to stick up for yourself. – Madison

Some of my White friends, they can't really like identify it as like an issue...it takes them awhile to realize that you shouldn't say stuff like that. Meanwhile, like me and my like, minority friends...immediately it's like, you can't say stuff like that. – Morgan

I feel like they kinda think, they're tryna be non-confrontational but I'm like, it's not trying to be confrontational, it's really trying to educate a person. And they sometimes feel like it's not their place. And it's like why it gotta be my place? – Isabel

**Impact of labor.** Based on the above quotes, there is clear unbalanced labor that has consequences for BIPOC students. The following quotes describe these in detail:

There was one student who was so hostile with me, that I was like oh my God I feel like I did everything right to make you feel comfortable about the way you felt, even though I feel like you were wrong....but she never tried to understand where I was coming from. – Madison

At this point I'm tired. Like I'm fatigued...I am standing up for people...and I want people to do the same for me. – Madison

We have to kind of go the extra mile. We have to kind of do twice as much...to be kinda on the same playing field. Um, I feel like as a Black student I kind of have to, I kind of don't have the privilege to just not speak on things...whereas a White peer of mine they cannot say anything and we can just move on. Like they have that privilege to not share if they don't want to. – Juliana

I can be uncomfortable, but I still have to, to push through, whereas like my White counterparts, like they can be uncomfortable and they still don't have to, they don't have to do anything. – Juliana

**Coping.** One student describes how she works through unbalanced labor at a PWI, “kind of just learning how to you know, how to cope with it and almost become numb to it” (Isabel).

Another student explains her perspective, stating:

I honestly think it's how you approach the situation....cause if you allow people to just walk all over you they will. – Juliana

I also had to continuously kind of tell myself not to lose myself at a, you know, in a predominately White environment cause I feel like when it's literally just you, you kind of hide yourself or hide parts of yourself and kind of like dim your light. Because it's like there's not a lot of you...I told myself to kind of do the opposite. – Juliana

I don't leave people enough room to use micro- microaggressions with me. And it's not that I'm like mean or anything like that, I just don't allow for a window of opportunity for people to disrespect me. – Juliana

### ***White Student Placing Labor***

The previous quotes demonstrate how White students place unbalanced labor on their BIPOC cohort members. The following quotes provide evidence of ways in which a White student placed labor on their Black friend who they rely on to educate her about competency and how to respond in various situations.

I got curious...and I was like, what do people say to you? What do you consider offensive? – Skyler

I had to go and I had to sit down with her and be like what do I, you know, do when these kids come to me and they're being bullied for their skin color?...How did that look for you? – Skyler

### **Institutional Culture**

The final primary theme found within the data is “institutional culture” within schools of social work. It is important to understand student experiences within classroom, regarding faculty and curriculum, and the NASW values.

### ***Curriculum***

The first subtheme within “institutional culture” is “curriculum,” specifically regarding if schools of social work address allyship in its curriculum. Many students expressed they learn about concepts within allyship but not the term in their coursework.

So within the School of Social work, I wouldn't necessarily say that they address allyship well, but I think certain students and teachers have brought it up in classes to help me understand it better...I wouldn't say that it's in the curriculum anywhere. – Sarah

I don't know that I've learned anything new in the program...I think everything I've learned from allyship has been...outside the social work program. And just work and reading...that I've done on my own. – Megan

The term allyship was not built into the curriculum...in most of the classes, like the concept was there, but the term allyship wasn't there...and what is performative allyship, and how that can be detrimental to, you know, to the work that's being done is not addressed at all. – Megan

Along these lines, one participant shared that she did not know allyship was a goal because the curriculum did not address it. She expressed, “I would’ve liked to know that [allyship] was a goal” (Sarah).

One student expressed how their curriculum is centered on making White people feel comfortable, which does not allow for them to learn about other cultures in meaningful ways.

Our curriculum, it talks about cultural competency...but it really doesn't talk about how to help Black people, African Americans, people of color to the extent that it should...I also think the curriculum is kind of biased...it is kind of surface level...rooted in making White people feel comfortable...because the program is predominately White, we don't wanna make the majority feel uncomfortable by diving into it and looking at social work from a different perspective, when in all reality the clients that we're gonna be running into will be people that look like me, will be people of color...so I do think the curriculum needs to be a lot more inclusive than what it is. – Juliana

The curriculum should be so diverse that it allows people that are ignorant to kind of get a better understanding and work towards being an effective ally...those are ways that allyships can be built within our social work program. – Juliana

Lastly, the same student describes that even if a person does not come into their program with the knowledge of allyship or cultural competency, the curriculum should prepare you to be an effective ally.

You don't have to come in as an ally, but I think an effective social work program would definitely have you leave as one. – Juliana

Another student described one assignment where she was required to interview a “minority” person and attend an event. This is a common assignment within schools of social work, and she described it as a great experience.

It's so enlightening. It's fun, because we have to do projects where you have to go and like experience something from a different like group or population that you might have never like interacted with before. – Skyler

I talked to somebody who is Native American, and actually, like, grew up on a reserve. I had never like talked to someone like that before...everybody really had a good time. Just understanding people's culture better. – Skyler

**NASW Values.** Schools of social work are obligated to follow the NASW values, which include service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. Participants were asked to reflect on whether or not their curriculum is in alignment or misaligned with these values. Many participants shared that social justice is misaligned.

Social justice...I think it's misaligned because we don't talk about it enough...like something happens within the news, they'll send out an email - that's it. there's no resources...no type of like you know, oh if you need counseling or something like that, nothing. It's just oh, we're sending our condolences. – Isabel

Social justice, I've really only seen it, like addressed or like emphasized in like, two of my classes...I expected...them to kind of emphasize how important like, allyship and like social justice is, as a social worker, because those are like, really important aspects of a social worker. – Morgan

One value that I think we should um, become more involved in, would probably be social justice...there's not a lot of discussion on things that are happening in the world around us. – Juliana

Further, other participants shared that competence, specifically cultural competence is lacking in their school of social work curriculum.

Competence really sticks out to me like a sore thumb when it comes to misalignment. Um, just because I feel like in order to get competence with somebody's culture you have to actually be out there in the world...that can't be taught in a textbook...I think they put it in a textbook and like forget about it, and I think that's very ingenuine, because...how are you going to say, oh I know this culture and it's like literally a paragraph...and then people go out in the world and they're like oh well I know this culture and then they fall like flat on their face. – Madison

Cultural competence, um, I won't say the program does a bad job at it, I just think they kind of do the bare minimum...with cultural competence...I feel like as long as they don't appear racist, or appear as prejudice, they're good to go...when cultural competence, there's a lot more than that. – Juliana

One participant specifically points to the lack of faculty representation in his school of social work as a barrier to cultural competency.



Cultural competency...I do feel like that's lacking in the University. Quite a bit. For obvious reasons, like the demographics of the University just don't particularly allow it, like the staff that we have...there just isn't the ability for the University [to] be that culturally competent. – Noah

**Faculty representation.** Similar to the quote above, other students reflected on the absence of faculty of color in their school of social work. One student shared they have only taken classes with White women but have seen Black women teaching advanced classes. He states, "so far I've only had White professors. But, I've seen professors that are people of color in higher up social work classes...mostly Black" (Carter). Another student shared similar thoughts, that it is important to add more diversity within faculty because she has mainly White professors, sharing, "a lot of our professors are Caucasian...I had one Black woman as my professor last semester...we have predominately White women in our classrooms that are teaching us. So it's just adding diversity within like certain things" (Isabel). Additionally, this student shared, "How a White woman teaching us about diversity and oppression" (Isabel).

Lastly, one student expected more faculty representation coming into her social work Master's program. She explained, "I think another expectation I had was, I guess more people of color as my professors...we have some...but it's definitely...not that many" (Juliana).

**Student representation.** Other participants noted the large presence of White women in their classes, with few students of color.

I go to a PWI...and I probably have maybe three other Black females in my cohort...there's a lot of White women, like we probably have, like, 90 something percent White women...it's just a lot of White women. – Isabel

I thought [social work] would be more people who look like me...even if my cohort didn't really look like me, I thought we would kinda have the same values. – Juliana

The same participants shared that many White students in their cohort do not exhibit characteristics necessary for a social worker, which hurts the integrity of the social work program.

I feel like some people within this program honestly should not be in this program...they don't stand for what certain things that calls for us to be a social worker...that kind of hurts the integrity of the program. – Isabel

Not all people that are in the social work program want to be social workers. Um, and what I mean by that is, if we look at...what an effective social worker is...I don't see that in a lot of people...so many people that are in this program...don't have the qualities that make a great social worker. – Juliana

### *Safe Spaces*

The second subtheme within “institutional culture” was “safe spaces.” Schools of social work are known for trying to create safe spaces within their classrooms, where students feel comfortable sharing their opinions no matter what. One participant described safe spaces the following way, “Social work, everything's a safe space, everything is like okay, all opinions...when you have that environment, you know, people are comfortable saying you know their opinions” (Madison). Another student describes safe spaces in this way:

Classes that I've taken at the...social work program have had an open conversation where you can talk about things and feel like it's a safe place...in the way of creating a safe space, will help you talk about any hard subject." – Sarah

However, one participant shared that many safe spaces do not provide room for accountability.

If you say something like ignorant in a classroom full of, uh like social work students, usually people are pretty nice...but if you say something ignorant in a class where it's mostly like students of color, they're gonna like tell you that you're ignorant...it's like a reality check. Of like, you can't just say ignorant things and act in ignorant ways. I don't say this to sound like a bash against safe spaces...but it just feels like people aren't very like willing to correct each other in the social work classrooms. – Noah

Additionally, another student described a cohort interaction where many students shared they would never attend a protest, and there was no accountability from the classroom. She shared, “Most people kind of just like, overlooked it or like kind of ignored it...no one really knew how to like respond to it” (Morgan).

**Classroom discussion.** It is important that students feel safe in a classroom, but many BIPOC students shared experiencing instances of microaggressions and racism in the classroom. Isabel shared, “Class says a lot about a person...how people answer certain questions...put up red flags.” Additionally, Juliana shared two experiences, one with a professor who singled her out in class, and one with a student who expressed ignorant thoughts about her historically Black undergraduate institution.

I had an experience with one of my professors...last semester I was the only Black person in two of my classes...and it was one time I got singled out kind of. And she was just saying how like studies show that if you're the only race or ethnicity in the room then you're most likely not willing to really speak...since we're talking about allyship I, I feel like it was wrong to single me out. Um, like it's obvious that I'm the only Black person in the class, but like for you to emphasize that is just like...that was just one instance where I didn't feel allyship with a professor. – Juliana

I've had a classmate say to me, cause I went to a historically Black college, and he told me in like a breakout room that I came to [my institution] because I didn't get the education that I needed or wanted at my undergraduate institution...I've never had anybody like say nothing that ignorant to me. And then it kind of made me sit back and say...you're okay with your ignorance...cause there was no type of remorse. – Juliana

### ***Positive Experiences***

While there are ways in which schools of social work can grow in their competency and implementation of social justice, many participants also shared positive experiences in their program. A few students, despite negative cohort interactions, pointed positive experiences back to the faculty and institution, stating, “No matter how my cohort experience has been, I feel like

my faculty, institutional, you know, people has been pretty, pretty solid. And I'm very grateful for that" (Juliana). Another student shared her sentiment about faculty, expressing:

I also really like that our professors...they don't really sugar coat it. or try to avoid the question...they'll just be like no, it's like that. That's what happened...I don't think I've observed much performative allyship in my social work program. – Carter

Madison shared how important it was for them to see Black faculty members, especially at rough points during the semester, “there are so many times, so many times when my mental health was deteriorating, and it was such an inspiration to see Black professors” (Madison).

One student shared that her school of social work was instrumental in addressing injustices of 2020, even at a policy level with the NASW Code of Ethics. They explained, “the school of social work...they were actually pretty responsive um, with the things that were happening during 2020...I honestly didn't think it was performative, I know the chair...she's very like out there on the front lines” (Madison). Moreover, they shared:

The school of social work they were writing the NASW...if you remember they changed in 2020, the code of ethics...there's like amendments from 2021 that put you know, social workers must stand up for you know, social injustices...[my school of social work] was a part of it. – Madison

Another student identified her program director as a source of support, stating, “the program director...she does really, really well with like being inclusive and making sure that everybody, students of color, whatever, receive the same opportunities as everyone else” (Juliana).

One student noticed her program addresses allyship, sharing “the social work program is pretty good on like...talking about allyship...in our classes and stuff” (Morgan). Another student found belonging in her program where she could not find it on campus. “[On campus] I want to be like part of different groups and different clubs, so, but every time I join a club, I kind of look around, and I'm like I don't think I belong here...in my social work program, mm, I don't really feel that as much” (Nora).

## **Summary**

The themes in this study emerged from careful analysis of each interview. The findings present that there are many ways to define allyship, and White students mostly defined it with specific qualities, while BIPOC students defined it in terms of direct action. Additionally, many participants saw performative allyship from White students in their cohort. BIPOC students also experienced unbalanced labor, which included speaking up for themselves and educating their cohort, resulting in exhaustion and fatigue. Lastly, participants reported a lack of accountability within social work classrooms due to safe spaces and a need for more discussion surrounding the NASW value of social justice.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine social work allyship within primarily White institutions in the Southeastern Conference (SEC). More specifically, the researcher sought to understand how White social work students exhibit allyship to their Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) counterparts, and how that allyship is received. Therefore, interview questions were tailored to consider students' definitions of allyship, understandings, and experiences of performative allyship, unbalanced labor, and institutional culture in their program. The following will discuss the key findings and conclusions the researcher drew from the data. It will delve into the relationship of this study with respect to the current literature, and present implications for practice, policy, and research.

The main themes from the study included characteristics of an ally, including definitions and ways to execute allyship. It also addressed performative allyship by asking participants to define and provide examples and share potential experiences within their social work program. Additionally, the current study revealed that many BIPOC students experience unbalanced labor regarding educating their White counterparts, which was directly connected to their desire to not harm future clients. Lastly, the study addressed institutional culture in schools of social work, which included a discussion of safe spaces, NASW values, and positive experiences in their program.

### **Characteristics of an Ally**

The first key finding was the various definitions participants provided for allyship. Most White participants described allyship as people with privilege supporting people who do not have the same privilege. BIPOC students shared similar thoughts of advocating for a group you do not identify with. Correspondingly, the literature described allyship as support of

nondominant groups (Broido, 2000; Brown & Ostrove, 2013, Reason et al., 2005). An important component White participants identified within allyship is awareness of privilege, specifically being able to recognize that people with privilege are treated differently than people with less privilege. Bourke (2020) also found the ability to confront power and privilege as essential components of allyship. Other White participants identified the ability to question and critically think as essential within allyship.

White participants also defined allyship in the context of not being the center of attention. This sentiment was shared by BIPOC participants who believe allies should work together with disenfranchised groups without stepping over them. Further, allyship is not speaking over other people, but rather using one's privilege to get other voices heard.

White and BIPOC definitions of allyship aligned, but there were a few differences in the qualities they believed are important. Most White students shared qualities such as empathy, awareness of privilege, educating themselves, and showing interest in others' experiences as important qualities for an ally to possess. BIPOC students also shared the importance of being educated, willing to learn, genuine, and approachable. However, BIPOC students shared the significance of speaking up when hearing microaggressions, a quality that White participants did not identify. Similarly, Brown & Ostrove (2013) noted informed action to be essential within allyship, a quality White participants in their study were rated lower on.

Moreover, some White participants in this study thought of allyship merely as attending protests and activism, whereas BIPOC students shared the act of speaking up for others in smaller settings as extremely important. Students also shared that many White people attend protests and support groups but lack awareness of the issues impacting that group. Other White

participants shared that an ally must be willing to place themselves in a vulnerable position. This was connected to potentially being disliked for their beliefs.

BIPOC participants noted that execution of allyship starts by not avoiding uncomfortable conversations. Correspondingly, intergroup contact theory posits that discussion and time spent leads to reduced prejudice, increased social change, and greater allyship (Hässler et al., 2020). White participants also shared the importance of doing the work as White people to learn how their privilege impacts others.

Within this study, the White participants are on the right track in defining allyship in terms of educating themselves, not being the center of attention, and possessing empathy. However, BIPOC students noted other White students do not take advantage of educational opportunities to learn. Thus, there needs to be more consistency. Additionally, there must be more emphasis on executing allyship through informed action and speaking up.

In addition to similar characteristics, both groups agreed one should not self-identify as an ally. One participant addressed this, and shared that there would never be an instance in which he would self-identify as an ally. Essentially, it should be obvious and discernable that a person is an ally, not an identity you share in a conversation. BIPOC students stated they knew based on interacting with someone whether a person would be an ally to them or not, and qualities of an ally are inherent, meaning a person either has or does not have what it takes to be an ally. That said, the title of “ally” is a term that people of color or others would give someone they believed was an ally to them.

### **Performative Allyship**

The second key finding was that the majority of BIPOC students experienced performative allyship from White students in their cohort. They experienced performative



allyship when there was a lack of genuine support and an incongruence between the words and actions of their cohort. Many White students in their cohort claim to be allies but demonstrate this by only posting on social media and not taking action in their everyday lives. BIPOC participants identified how being an ally solely through posting on social media is not helpful, especially when people pick and choose when to be vocal.

These experiences reflect the idea of intention versus impact. Students may have good intentions by saying they support others by posting on their social media, but that does not negate the negative impact when the words are not supported by action. These findings were consistent with Kutlaca (2020), who found that performative allyship lacks action, an essential component to effective allyship. Some BIPOC participants believed their cohort posted on social media because they wanted to appear to be good social workers instead of actually helping others achieve liberation or equity. Similarly, literature defines a performative ally as someone who wants to be perceived as a good person (Kalina, 2020).

The performative allyship demonstrated with incongruence between words and actions is something BIPOC students believe is easily identifiable. Some participants shared they can immediately determine if someone is a performative ally because they can see if someone's heart is not in it. This is directly related to the quality of genuineness an ally must possess.

BIPOC students also shared that there is a lot of White silence in their cohort from people who claim to be allies. Participants experienced White silence when students had no desire to discuss matters of race or mass incarceration. They attributed their silence either to the fact that White students may be afraid of sounding racist or they may only have ignorant thoughts. Either way, their silence was interpreted as a large microaggression against students of color when they could not bring themselves to discuss history that did not relate to their own.

BIPOC participants experienced White silence in other forms, such as when a cohort member made an ignorant statement, and no one spoke up to correct them. Moreover, when their cohort heard something ignorant, they would talk to each other instead of directly confronting the individual who made the ignorant statement. As a result, many BIPOC students believe their White counterparts do not have qualities necessary to be social workers based on their performative allyship.

Performative allyship was also discussed in reference to White saviors. Many people choose the field of social work to “help people” without doing the work to educate themselves on the tendency for social workers to become White saviors. For example, one White participant chose social work because she needed to change the criminal justice system, demonstrating White savior complex. BIPOC participants think their cohort believes they are good people without recognizing the downfall of White saviors. Correspondingly, the literature warns social workers against the tendency to be White saviors in the field (Bourke, 2020; Spanierman & Smith, 2017). Further, while allyship can include putting one’s safety at risk, participants shared that can quickly fall into White saviorism, so discernment is essential to determine if action is necessary.

To avoid performative allyship, participants described consistently educating oneself and doing the work when it is not trendy or in the news. Additionally, one must be able to recognize performative allyship in order to avoid it.

### **Unbalanced Labor**

The third focused theme was “unbalanced labor.” Within this theme, BIPOC participants expressed the unequal balance of educating their peers on inequalities in the classroom. Throughout the interviews, BIPOC participants voiced experiences such as being stereotyped,

hearing insensitive comments, and feeling pressure to speak in class at higher rates than their White counterparts. Every BIPOC participant expressed various challenges in the program that directly related to their minoritized identities.

Participants experienced unbalanced labor in many forms. BIPOC students almost unanimously expressed the unspoken obligation to educate their White counterparts on racial issues. Further, the BIPOC participants who expressed this did so because they did not want their cohort to offend future clients. They expressed that ignorant attitudes and comments can be corrected now but will cause more problems with clients and coworkers in the workplace. Similarly, literature suggests some BIPOC students seek to create similar change within their institutions (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). In contrast, one BIPOC participant shared they do not feel the need to educate their cohort because there are enough resources available, and it should not be her responsibility.

Additionally, BIPOC participants described an unequal balance of labor in classroom disagreements and seeking to understand other viewpoints. In certain discussions such as police brutality, BIPOC students worked hard to understand the perspectives of their White cohort which was not reciprocated back to them. BIPOC students also experienced being called out in class as the only minority student, and others felt pressure to share at higher rates than their White counterparts. These experiences are consistent with current literature that describe students experiencing microaggressions and pressure to share on behalf of their entire race in class (Maramba, 2008; DeAngelis, 2009; Jones et al., 2002). Participants expressed frustration in these situations, because many students and professors they believed were allies exhibited these behaviors, which they expressed made it difficult to know who was an effective and genuine ally, because we can never fully know everything about everyone.

Furthermore, BIPOC participants described that something would have to impact a White student personally for them to speak up. However, if a microaggression occurred towards a BIPOC student, their White cohort would not speak up, leaving the BIPOC students left to speak for themselves.

There is a clear impact of unbalanced labor for BIPOC students, including higher levels of stress when they are the only ones responding to injustices. Additionally, BIPOC students expressed working twice as hard, pushing through discomfort, and experiencing fatigue as a result. These findings are consistent with Black female doctoral students who also felt they had to work twice as hard to be seen as average (Fields et al., 2021). A few BIPOC students described ways of coping that include becoming numb, not dimming their light at a PWI, and carefully considering their approach to each situation. One noteworthy finding is that Black participants experienced higher rates of unbalanced labor than other BIPOC students. This is also consistent with a previous study that found the African American community at a PWI experienced the most disparate treatment compared to other racial groups, with the Asian and Hispanic groups subsequent to them (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2003).

### **Institutional Culture**

The fourth and last theme was “institutional culture.” Within this theme, students discussed the absence of allyship or social justice education in their school of social work curriculum, minimal faculty and student representation, and a need for more accountability in social work classrooms.

Many participants described the lack of curriculum centered on allyship. Participants shared that allyship was not built into their curriculum at all, and they gained most of their knowledge of allyship from outside sources like social media. Other students shared that their

curriculum discussed cultural competency but in a way that made White students feel comfortable instead of challenging them. Moreover, one student at the end of her program shared she did not know allyship was a goal, meaning the curriculum did not prepare her to be an effective ally.

One fascinating finding was that social justice was misaligned for most participants in their social work curriculum. A few students had not seen social justice addressed in more than two classes and others had not seen it discussed at all. Other participants shared the absence of cultural competency in classroom discussions. Correspondingly, the NASW only recently updated the Code of Ethics to reflect an emphasis on cultural competence (NASW, 2021).

Some students directly related the department's inability to be culturally competent to the primarily White female staff and student population. The limited diverse faculty within these institutions included Black women who taught upper-level social work classes, meaning students would not take classes with them until their junior or senior year, if at all. Further, most students were taught their introductory 'Cultural Competency' or 'Diversity and Oppression' class by a White woman. Similarly, the literature points to a lack of diverse faculty, which can negatively impact student experiences (Fields et al., 2021).

Another important component within institutional culture is classroom dynamics and the concept of safe spaces. Participants described how their social work classrooms seek to be open-minded and accepting of all opinions, a safe space, in order to facilitate discussion around hard topics. However, participants noted that safe spaces lead to a lack of accountability in classrooms, allowing students to feel more aware and educated than they really are. These findings are consistent with Brown & Ostrove (2013), who found that White allies rated

themselves higher on allyship than BIPOC students rated them, demonstrating that White allies believe they are more advanced in their allyship than others receive them to be.

Students experienced the negative impacts of safe spaces when their cohort did not speak up when hearing ignorant comments or microaggressions towards BIPOC students. Further, some White students simply would not engage in classroom discussion on topics that related to mass incarceration and did not receive pushback from the professor. Participants related this lack of accountability to passivity in the classroom which they believe will translate directly into the field.

In contrast, many students had positive experiences within their school of social work. Some participants shared that the social work administrators were very responsive to social injustices, especially during the pandemic and resurgence of Black Lives Matter in 2020. Black participants specifically explained how encouraging it was to see Black professors in their department, especially at difficult points in their program. Similarly, literature points to increased faculty representation and professional support being essential to students thriving at predominately White institutions (Fields, 2020).

## **Implications**

The findings from this study have implications for potential change at various levels, including practice, policy, and research.

### ***Practice***

At a practice level, BIPOC students expressed the desire for allies to take informed action and speak up when they hear microaggressions. It is difficult to fully eliminate stereotypes and microaggressions, but White social work students can practice “calling in” other cohort members and faculty members when they hear racist or ignorant comments.

Furthermore, while safe spaces are the norm, there needs to be more accountability to foster growth among future social workers. The concept of brave spaces is better suited for social work classrooms. Brave spaces, first introduced to the researcher by a faculty member, is a space created in the classroom where students will likely be uncomfortable discussing topics of race and privilege (L. Fields, personal communication, August 30, 2020). Nonetheless, students are challenged to speak from their own experience because growth happens at the edge of discomfort (L. Fields, personal communication, August 30, 2020). There is a need for schools of social work to adopt brave spaces instead of safe spaces. When brave spaces are the norm, students can feel confident calling in their classmates instead of allowing them to feel more educated than they are.

As previously discussed in the literature, discussion and intergroup contact are important methods for reducing prejudice and increasing allyship (Broido, 2000; Hässler et al., 2020). Additionally, one participant shared that allyship starts by having uncomfortable conversations and not shying away from them. Therefore, brave space discussions within schools of social work are the perfect way to collectively work towards allyship.

### ***Policy***

In this study, participants voiced a lack of structured training or education on allyship within their social work curriculum. While basic components were present, such as discussion of cultural competency, participants felt it was surface level at best. Additionally, White professors have different levels of competency teaching on matters of social justice, which could be due in part to their own racial identity. Therefore, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) should require every school of social work they accredit to include allyship into their curriculum

with specific instructions for implementation. Macro-level policy can take time to implement, so schools of social work should add allyship into curriculum even if the CSWE does not require it.

Further, the CSWE should require training on allyship as part of Continued Education Units (CEUs) for licensure. Ideally, if White social work professors and students are better trained in cultural competency and effective allyship, we can start reducing minority stress for BIPOC students.

### ***Research***

Existing research studies mainly report on allyship from the dominant group perspective. Future research should focus on the experiences of allyship from the perspective of non-dominant groups, and across lines of sex, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and other identities. Additionally, there should be more research conducted among people with minority identities demonstrating allyship to other marginalized groups. There is some research on this topic but not enough to fully understand their experiences. Future studies should also examine allyship from the perspectives of social work faculty and administration. The present study considered BSW and MSW perspectives, with critical implications for classroom discussion and curriculum. Therefore, faculty and administrator voices are important to examine.

Allyship requires someone with a privileged identity to care about issues that do not directly impact them. It would be noteworthy to understand critical moments in which a person decides to be an ally. There is literature on ally development in college settings, but further studies could examine critical moments that motivate people with dominant identities to begin the work of allyship. A separate study could compare schools of social work who have allyship-based curriculum and those who do not. The study could consider whether students with allyship training are better prepared than students who do not.



Finally, most studies on allyship are cross-sectional, meaning their study focuses on one period of time. It would be beneficial to conduct a longitudinal study to look at potential growth participants experience regarding allyship over the span of five to 10 years. Longitudinal studies could point to methods and experiences that foster growth for allies.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, this study considered the perspectives of allyship from White and BIPOC social work students at predominately White institutions within the Southeastern Conferences. The data from this study provides a deeper understanding of characteristics of allyship, specifically the importance of informed action. It also serves as a guide to avoid performative allyship. Additionally, the findings reveal BIPOC students experience unbalanced labor and fatigue that results from ignorance in their cohort. Finally, the study reveals that social work classrooms should have brave space discussions to provide room for accountability and growth. Ideally, this study will improve White social work students' understandings of effective allyship, reduce minority stress, and improve BIPOC student experiences in schools of social work.

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### Appendix A: Demographic Questionnaire Results

Pseudonym	BSW/MSW	Ethnicity	Pronouns	Sexual Orientation	Gender	Age at start of program	Year in Program
Noah	BSW	White	He/him	Queer	Male	19	Senior
Skyler	BSW	White	She/her	Straight	Female	18	Senior
Carter	BSW	White	He/him	Gay	Male	19	Sophomore
Nora	BSW	Latina	She/her	Straight	Female	22	Freshman
Isabel	MSW	Black	She/her	Straight	Female	23	1st year
Morgan	MSW	Asian/Filipino	She/they	Bisexual	Female	24	1st year
Madison	MSW	Black	They/them	Lesbian	Non-binary	23	1st year
Juliana	MSW	Black	She/her	Straight	Female	22	1st year
Sarah	MSW	White	She/her	Straight	Female	27	2nd year
Megan	MSW	White	She/her	Lesbian	Female	35	1st year

## Appendix B: Interview Question Guide

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Institution: \_\_\_\_\_

### *Background Information:*

1. What is your age?
2. What is your race/ethnicity?
3. What are your pronouns?
  - a. What is your sexual orientation?
  - b. What is your gender?
4. How old were you when you began your social work program?
5. For master's level students, where did you complete your undergraduate degree? Was it in social work?

### *Questions for BIPOC Students:*

6. How do you define allyship?
7. What are important qualities in an ally?
8. What have been your experiences regarding allyship from people (faculty, classmates, cohort members) in your social work program?
  - a. Does your institution address allyship within its curriculum?
    - i. If so, please explain:
9. Are you familiar with performative allyship? (ask if definition needed)
10. Have you experienced performative allyship from people within your cohort, faculty, or program generally?
  - a. If so, please explain:
11. Have you experienced microaggressions (ask if definition needed) within your social work program?
  - a. If yes, please describe to your comfort level:
12. List the NASW values (social justice, dignity and worth of the individual, importance and centrality of human relationships, integrity, and competence) to ensure everyone is on the same page:
  - a. In what ways have your experiences within your social work program been in alignment or misaligned with the NASW values?

- b. What were your expectations going into your program? Were you aware of the values of social work upon entering your program?
- 13. Was there anything you did to prepare yourself for a social work program at a PWI?
- 14. What institutional supports have helped you as a BIPOC social work student?
- 15. What are some key things you know now you wish you would have known beginning your social work program?
- 16. Do you feel responsible for educating or calling out your classmates on various inequalities?
- 17. Are there ways you would feel more supported by White allies?
  - a. If so, please explain:
- 18. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience that would further my understanding of what it has been like being a BIPOC social work student at a PWI?

*Questions for White Students:*

- 19. How do you define allyship?
- 20. What qualities are important in an ally?
- 21. Does your institution address allyship within its curriculum?
  - a. If yes, please explain:
- 22. In what ways do you exemplify allyship towards BIPOC communities in your social work program or more generally in your community?
- 23. Are you familiar with performative allyship? (ask if definition needed)
  - a. What are your thoughts?
  - b. Have you seen this in your social work program? Or in general?
  - c. In what ways can social workers avoid being performative?
- 24. List the NASW values (social justice, dignity and worth of the individual, importance and centrality of human relationships, integrity, and competence) to ensure everyone is on the same page:
  - a. In what ways have your experiences within your social work program been in alignment or misaligned with the NASW values?
  - b. What were your expectations going into your program knowing the values of social work?
- 25. Are there ways you could grow in your allyship towards BIPOC communities?
  - a. If so, please explain:
- 26. What institutional supports have helped you as a social work student?



27. What are some key things you know now you wish you would have known beginning your social work program?
28. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience that would further my understanding of what it has been like being a white social work student at a PWI?

## Appendix C: Informed Consent

### White Social Work Allyship Within Primarily White Institutions

#### Informed Consent

**Principal Researcher:**

Aubrey Franke  
Graduate Student in School of Social Work  
University of Arkansas – Fayetteville

**Faculty Advisor:**

Dr. LaShawnda Fields  
Assistant Professor of Social Work  
University of Arkansas – Fayetteville

**Invitation to Participate:** You are invited to participate in a research study about White social work allyship towards Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) communities within primarily White universities (PWIs). You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a social work student at a primarily White university within the Southeastern Conference (SEC).

**Description:** The purpose of this study is to gain insight into allyship among White social workers and their commitment to allyship for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) communities. It is the researchers' desire to understand if White social work students demonstrate allyship to BIPOC communities, and to explore how that allyship is received. This will be accomplished by comparing demographic questionnaires and semi-structured interviews.

**Participants:** The researcher expects a total of 12 participants, to include six White social work students and six BIPOC students whose ages will range between 18 and above.

**Benefit and Risks:** The benefit of this study is increased awareness that will lead to more informed allyship among White social workers in order to better support BIPOC communities. There is the potential for minimal risks, such as emotional labor or distress from recalling unpleasant or negative experiences which may be triggering.

**Study Length:** Your participation will include filling out a demographic questionnaire and a one-time 1 hour interview.

**Compensation:** Participants will receive a \$25 Amazon gift card for their time. You will not have to pay to participate in this study.

**Voluntary Participation:** Participation in this study is voluntary. Participants have the right to decline participation or withdrawal from this study at any time. There are no penalties for declining to participate in this study.

**Confidentiality:** All information gathered during this study will be recorded under aliases. The semi-structured interviews will be recorded on a password protected device. The researcher will be the only one with access to the interviews. The researcher will know your name but will not divulge it or identify your answers to anyone. Results from the research will be reported as aggregated data (i.e. names and locations will be changed). All interviews will be kept confidential.

**Results of Study:** At the conclusion of the study you will have the right to request feedback about the results. You may contact the Principal Researcher, Aubrey Franke (([Broido, 2000](#); [Brown & Ostrove, 2013](#); [Reason et al., 2005](#))), or the Faculty Advisor, Dr. LaShawnda Fields ([lnfields@uark.edu](mailto:lnfields@uark.edu)).

**Questions About the Study:** You have the right to contact the Principal Researcher or Faculty Advisor as listed below for any concerns that you may have.

**Aubrey Franke, [amf025@uark.edu](mailto:amf025@uark.edu)**  
**Dr. LaShawnda Fields, [lnfields@uark.edu](mailto:lnfields@uark.edu)**

You may also contact the University of Arkansas Research Compliance office listed below if you have questions about your rights as a participant, or to discuss any concerns about, or problems with the research.

Ro Windwalker, CIP  
 Institutional Review Board Coordinator  
 Research Compliance  
 University of Arkansas  
 109 MLKG Building  
 Fayetteville, AR 72701-1201  
 479-575-2208  
[irb@uark.edu](mailto:irb@uark.edu)

**If you agree to participate**, you are asked to sign the bottom of this form. By signing the bottom of this form you are authorizing the principal researcher to use your interviews and demographic information in the research.

**Informed consent:** I, \_\_\_\_\_, have read the description, including the description of the study, the procedures to be used, the potential benefits and risks, the voluntary participation, and confidentiality statement. I recognize that I can withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Each of these items have been explained to me by the researcher. Additionally, the researcher has answered all of my questions regarding the study. My signature below indicates that I freely agree to participate in this study and that I have received a copy of this agreement from the researcher.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**If you have any questions or need additional information, contact [amf025@uark.edu](mailto:amf025@uark.edu)**

## Appendix D: IRB Approval



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**To:** Aubrey Franke  
**From:** Justin R Chimka, Chair  
IRB Expedited Review  
**Date:** 11/08/2021  
**Action:** **Expedited Approval**  
**Action Date:** 11/08/2021  
**Protocol #:** 2109359857  
**Study Title:** White Social Work Allyship Within a Primarily White Institution  
**Expiration Date:** 10/14/2022  
**Last Approval Date:**

The above-referenced protocol has been approved following expedited review by the IRB Committee that oversees research with human subjects.

If the research involves collaboration with another institution then the research cannot commence until the Committee receives written notification of approval from the collaborating institution's IRB.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without Committee approval. Please submit continuation requests early enough to allow sufficient time for review. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in the automatic suspension of the approval of this protocol. Information collected following suspension is unapproved research and cannot be reported or published as research data. If you do not wish continued approval, please notify the Committee of the study closure.

Adverse Events: Any serious or unexpected adverse event must be reported to the IRB Committee within 48 hours. All other adverse events should be reported within 10 working days.

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, study personnel, or number of participants, please submit an amendment to the IRB. All changes must be approved by the IRB Committee before they can be initiated.

You must maintain a research file for at least 3 years after completion of the study. This file should include all correspondence with the IRB Committee, original signed consent forms, and study data.

cc: LaShawnda Fields, Investigator