

American Journal of Orthopsychiatry

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Online First Publication, August 28, 2025. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/ort0000861>

CITATION

Eschmann, R., Pousman, B., Belkin-Martinez, D., Reeder, K. G., Toraif, N., & Stevenson, M. K. (2025). Storytelling for social change: Using emerging technology to develop antioppressive social work training and practice. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*. Advance online publication. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/ort0000861>

Storytelling for Social Change: Using Emerging Technology to Develop Antioppressive Social Work Training and Practice

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Social justice is a value central to the social work profession and paramount for scholars and practitioners invested in public behavioral health. How can social workers and behavioral health researchers and practitioners approach practice, often dealing with personal and individual-level issues, while maintaining a systemic antioppressive and social justice-oriented focus? In this article, we present a model for leveraging emerging technologies to engage behavioral health practitioners and researchers in antioppressive behavioral health practices and generate technology-based training modules. We explore an experimental course taught at a school of social work that engaged participatory design methodologies to (a) introduce students to an antioppressive social work practice model centering institutional, cultural, and societal barriers to wellness (including racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and ageism), (b) explore immersive storytelling for social impact and the costs and affordances of emerging technologies, and (c) empower students to design and create their own virtual reality experiences.

Public Policy Relevance Statement

As technology increasingly mediates the ways we communicate, learn, and work, it is critically important to understand how digital interactions perpetuate oppression. This article demonstrates engaging these emerging technologies to address justice issues in participatory and democratic ways.


In 2020, there was a reckoning against racism in the United States. The murders of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd brought attention to anti-Black police and vigilante violence and the persistent evils of racism in our society (Chang et al.,

2020). Millions of people hit the streets to demand justice, putting pressure on businesses, corporations, and universities to demonstrate a commitment to antiracism. Countless businesses and organizations put out statements condemning racism, and for a while, the discourse seemed to change (Toraiif et al., 2023). It was reported that \$7.5 billion was spent on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in 2020 alone (though the degree to which that money went to surface-level vs. substantive change is unclear; Ellingrud & Baller, 2023).

In 2024, the momentum slowed, and talking about racism, injustice, and DEI efforts seemed to be going out of style. Companies like Target and Bud Light faced boycotts because of their support of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer communities (Liaukonyte et al., 2024; Valinsky, 2024). Data from AlphaSense

pointed to sharp declines in mentions of DEI, and sustainability in U.S. company earnings calls (E. Peck, 2024). In 2023, Oklahoma and Florida banned spending on diversity, equity, and inclusion programs at public colleges and universities (Asmelash, 2023). Through 2025, 18 states banned or restricted teaching about racism and sexism, and 26 other states introduced similar bills (Schwartz, 2021). Across 40 states, 530 anti-lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer bills were proposed in 2024 alone (ACLU, 2024). These efforts came to a head in January 2025, as newly reelected President Trump signed anti-DEI executive orders, leading to sweeping federal sector changes, and funding threats to organizations continuing to use language concerning social justice issues (Cox, 2025; Veltman, 2025; White House, 2025).

Kendell L. Coker served as action editor.

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This work was supported by the National Institutes of Health (Grant KL2TR001874), awarded to Rob Eschmann.

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For those tracking our nation's history, this pendulum swing away from justice is not surprising. C. Anderson's (2016) book, *White Rage*, details how periods of Black advancement, whether real or symbolic, are consistently followed by periods of intense retrenchment. For example, the Jim Crow laws were designed to dismantle the progress seen during the reconstruction era, and after Obama was elected, we saw renewed conservative efforts at voter suppression. If Anderson wrote another edition of the book, we would expect to see a chapter detailing the 2020 uprisings as a period of advancement followed by the anti-DEI and critical race theory witch hunt that has characterized the past few years, a clear example of white rage.

Now that attention to antiracism and antioppression is less popular, and in some places illegal, the litmus test begins. Who will continue to push against oppression when there are consequences for speaking truth to power? How can we maintain the movement when such powerful forces are working so hard to dismantle it?

Social justice is a value central to the social work profession and paramount for scholars and practitioners invested in public behavioral health. How can social workers and behavioral health researchers and practitioners approach practice, often dealing with personal and individual-level issues, while maintaining a systemic antioppressive and social justice-oriented focus?

In this article, we present a model for leveraging emerging technologies to engage behavioral health practitioners and researchers in antioppressive behavioral health practices and generate technology-based training modules. We explore an experimental course taught at a school of social work that engaged participatory design methodologies to (a) introduce students to a model of antioppressive social work practice centering institutional, cultural, and societal barriers to wellness (including racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and ageism), (b) explore immersive storytelling for social impact and the costs and affordances of emerging technologies, and (c) empower students to design and create their own virtual reality (VR) experiences. The insights generated from this project can inform future adaptation of emerging technologies into justice-oriented research, education, and clinical training.

Background

Antioppressive Social Work

Though the National Association of Social Work¹ (NASW)'s Code of Ethics (2021) clearly outlines social justice as one of the field's core values, several texts have thoroughly outlined the profession's legacies of complicity in perpetuating colonial, racist, and paternalistic attitudes toward marginalized groups—particularly indigenous, Black and Brown, disabled, trans, and queer communities (Brady et al., 2019; Chapman & Withers, 2019; Gebhard et al., 2022). Brady et al. (2019) "Debunking the myth of the 'radical profession'" provided an overview of the ways social work, though often touted as radically progressive, is wedded to neoliberal ideologies, such as individualism and capitalism, leading to a focus on personal responsibility and the commodification and privatization of social services. Still then, champions of the profession may argue that despite U.S. social systems historically built to perpetuate anti-Black, capitalist, and dehumanizing outcomes, social workers are trained to both disrupt and repair such systems in the service of those in the margins. Chapman and Withers' (2019) *A Violent History of Benevolence* and Gebhard et al.'s (2022) *White Benevolence* both aimed to capture the violence behind such well-intentioned "service", detailing how deeply imbedded early professionalized social work was in White supremacist, colonial projects—most often in the name of moral good. This history of (often institutionalized) benevolence and White saviorism underscores the need for a critical examination of power dynamics within social work education and practice.

In line with Michel Foucault's (1977) concept of social control in *Discipline & Punish*, Specht and Courtney's (1995) publication, *Unfaithful Angels: How Social Work Has Abandoned Its Mission* discusses how social work has historically been used as a tool for regulating social behavior, particularly in the context of the Black Power movement. This

¹ Founded in 1955, the NASW determines the field's widely recognized Code of Ethics. In 1968, a group of Black social workers stepped out of the NASW to found The National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW), allowing for a professional organization that centered Black liberation and self-determination, uninhibited by the oppressive structures and culture of the NASW (2024). While the NABSW is widely recognized and respected, NASW retains influence in overseeing the field's professional standards.

historical account is reemphasized in Bell's (2014) *The Black Power Movement and American Social Work*, which outlines the challenges faced by social workers in addressing issues of racial inequality and social justice within the profession and society at large throughout the 1960s and 1970s. These texts offer reminders of the profession's complicity in maintaining racial and social hierarchies, emphasizing the need for social workers to actively resist oppressive structures.

Understanding the insidious nature of White supremacy and colonialism and recognizing the presence of these systems within social work pedagogy and practice, it is not enough to emphasize social justice when teaching traditional social work curricula. It is instead essential that social work educators foster learning environments in which students are encouraged to grapple with the profession's oppressive legacies, embody an understanding of the field's historical impacts, and move forward intentionally engaging antioppressive practice and research. Building such learning spaces in the social work academy is inherently challenging, as so many of the racialized relational ruptures and systemic injustices social work students will encounter in the field can be difficult to replicate within classroom settings. Therefore, social work education has relied heavily on having students read, write about, and role-play scenarios, all of which often fail to adequately assess a student's ability to disrupt, respond to, or foster repair for oppressive dynamics in the heat of a professional or clinical moment. With the increased use of VR in classrooms, the landscape for teaching antioppressive practices could shift dramatically, allowing social work educators to emulate real-life situations through immersive technologies (Marks & Thomas, 2022).

Liberation Health Model

In 2022, social work's accrediting body, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) released a new educational policy and accreditation standard strengthening social work's commitment to antiracism, equity, inclusion, and diversity (Council on Social Work Education, 2022). This recently developed educational policy and accreditation standard led to increased interest in antioppressive practice teaching models in schools of social work (Martinez, 2022). While multiple theoretical frameworks define antioppressive practice, guiding principles include understanding

dynamics of power and privilege, recognizing the impact of racial capitalism on individuals, ideas, and institutions, and committing to dismantle systems of oppression (Baines, 2020).

Liberation health serves as both a theoretical framework and a practical application method for antioppressive practice. Developed in Boston, Massachusetts, by clinicians working collaboratively with individuals and families, the model draws on and synthesizes critical elements from the works of Paulo Freire, Antonio Gramsci, Ignacio Martin-Baro, Black feminist intersectional theory, racial psychology, and the historical activism of the rank-and-file social work movement (Martinez, 2022). The model builds on the longstanding ecological framework of social work, expanding this conceptual frame to include a specific method of assessment and intervention. These assessment and intervention processes can be interpersonal, social, and political. Effective liberation health practice involve challenging consciousness and rewriting individual, social, and political stories to transform one's life and the broader world.

The key liberation health assessment tool relevant to our study is the sociopolitical problem analysis process. Liberation health social workers use the figure of a triangle to visually identify the personal, cultural, and institutional factors affecting the identified problem (see Figure 1). Personal factors encompass individual or developmental issues; cultural factors consist of ideological messages about race, class, gender, ability, stigma, sexual identity, individualism, competition, and consumerism; and institutional factors pertain to systems like capitalism, health care, education, and the criminal legal system. This tool allows students to grasp the complexity of individual experience.

Liberation health interventions map on to Bell's (2010) framework of *storytelling for justice*. The first step involves identifying dominant worldviews or *stock stories* that are oppressive and contribute to an identified problem. These messages were created to reinforce our system of racial capitalism, pitting individuals and groups against each other (Ferguson et al., 2005). Utilizing Hall's (1997) theory of signaling practice, social workers can investigate whether a story in question essentializes members of a racial or oppressed group by asserting that all the members share and are best understood through oversimplified, exaggerated characteristics, traits, or behaviors.

Once the dominant worldview is identified, the next step is to deconstruct and

unpack this stock story to identify what Bell and her colleagues call the *concealed story*, often hidden from public view (L. A. Bell, 2010, p.44). Concealed stories rarely make front-page news. However, by interrogating the dominant narrative, introducing new information and sharing stories of contemporary and historical resistance, communities can develop new levels of awareness and consciousness. This process enables communities to "talk back" to dominant or mainstream narratives (L. A. Bell, 2010, p.19).

The liberation health model is a meta theory, but its methods of practice are practical and easy to apply in the material world. These methods equip social workers and health care providers with a tool kit to intervene in real-world situations of oppression and injustice.

Storytelling and VR and Extended Reality for Good

Technology-based learning interventions have increased in both K–12 environments (Pérez-Sanagustín et al., 2017) and early childhood education (Myrttil et al., 2018). However, the evidence regarding the effectiveness of these interventions is mixed. Some studies suggest that technology has improved educational outcomes, while others argue that factors such as teacher training and student demographics are more predictive of learning outcomes than the use of technology in the classroom (Kiger et al., 2012; Pérez-Sanagustín et al., 2017). In schools, technological interventions are utilized to facilitate socio-emotional learning, particularly in addressing social issues such as bullying and peer victimization (Fage et al., 2018; Mechling, 2007; Williford et al., 2012, 2013). They also provide assistive technologies for students with special needs or intellectual disabilities and help to create more positive and inclusive learning environments (Ybarra et al., 2016).

In 2014, Barry Pousman and Gabo Arora filmed *Clouds Over Sidra*, the first VR documentary about a 12-year-old girl in a Syrian Refugee camp in Jordan (Arora & Pousman, 2015). The film premiered at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January of 2015 and was presented at a private donor conference hosted by Ban Ki Moon, the United Nations' Secretary General at the time. Added to the event at the last minute, the experience was credited to have raised an additional \$1.5 billion beyond the expected \$2.3 billion of donor support, resulting in

\$3.8 billion being raised (M. Anderson, 2015). Indeed, research on this VR film found that it increased sympathy among users from various political backgrounds, an outcome associated with higher donations (Borah et al., 2024). This dramatic effect has spurred a cottage industry of VR for social impact. By August of 2015, Discovery Communications launched Discovery VR as a new channel for science communication, and the New York Times launched NYTimes VR for immersive journalism. Facebook's Oculus launched the VR for Good initiative by the end of 2015, and HTC Vive launched VR for Impact at the 2016 World Economic Forum, announcing a \$10 million fund to support VR for social impact.

These efforts have led to the creation of hundreds of VR experiences specifically designed to achieve social impact. Some notable projects in this category include *Notes On Blindness* (Colinart, 2016), *Step To The Line* (Laganaro, 2017), *Home After War* (Parameswaran, 2018), *Traveling While Black* (Williams, 2019), *1,000 Cut Journey* (Cogburn et al., 2018), *Goliath: Playing With Reality* (Murphy & Abdalla, 2021), and *Maya: The Birth of a Superhero* (Basu & Clarke, 2023).

In the field of VR, interventions target a wide range of participants and intended outcomes, including distance education, vocational training, substance use and mental health treatment, and psychological well-being (Bordnick et al., 2005; Farley, 2016; Freedman et al., 2015; Valmaggia et al., 2016; Wong et al., 2021). Other VR interventions have targeted incarcerated populations, similarly focusing on various psychosocial areas including educational attainment, vocational training, and psychological well-being and rehabilitation (Dolven & Fidel, 2017; Howell, 2017). VR has also been designed to capture the underlying issues that lead to incarceration, including but not limited to domestic and intimate partner violence, as well as substance use and dependence (Farley, 2016).

There is increasing evidence supporting the efficacy of VR experiences in influencing attitude and behavioral changes. Research comparing the effects of the same film shown in a traditional 2D format versus VR reveal that VR videos have a larger impact on empathy and alternate perspective taking than flatscreen videos (Cummings et al., 2022; Hasler et al., 2021). Other research finds that an VR experience depicting anti-Black racism increases awareness of both structural inequality and empathy (Cogburn et al., in press). Still, we do not assert that these VR

experiences alone are enough to create social change. Nakamura (2020) cautioned against overstating the positive benefits of VR, and confusing “feeling good” about watching a justice-oriented VR experience with working to create meaningful and lasting social changes at the societal or structural level. We do not believe the technology we use will fix entrenched systems of oppression. Instead, we allow our use of VR to extend organizing and educational efforts to promote an antioppressive theoretical framework and the ways it can be applied in everyday direct practice situations.

Within VR technologies, a subset of programs has focused on reducing implicit racial and ethnic bias. For instance, Wayne (2018) investigated how utilizing VR avatars from racial backgrounds different from their own can help users reduce implicit racial bias. The study’s findings indicate that using VR to experiment with other cultural and racial selves increases implicit bias self-awareness, indicating that such technologies could have significant social implications (Wayne, 2018). Research supports the social potential of VR in reducing racial bias. Studies show that users who experience embodiment—adopting a virtual body of a different racial group or of a similar racial group but with darker skin—demonstrate racial biases. These studies’ results indicate that racial embodiment can both increase self-awareness of biases and directly reduce implicit bias (T. C. Peck et al., 2013; Wayne, 2018). Research in this area has also demonstrated nuances in racialized behaviors and responses during emergency situations, highlighting that racial discrimination may increase in certain emergencies but not in others, such as during fires (Gamberini et al., 2015).

Interestingly, and contrary to Groom et al.’s (2009), T. C. Peck et al.’s (2013), and Wayne (2018) found that embodying Black avatars activated stereotypes and attitudes of anti-Blackness. These stereotypes overcame any ostensible benefits that might have come from taking on others’ perspectives to reduce stereotype threat. This demonstrates a potential limitation in using the virtual embodiment of racial others as a means of reducing racial prejudice, underscoring the need for further investigation.

WebXR and the Metaverse

The Metaverse, or Web 3.0, is the natural progression in the evolution of the internet from web pages to web experiences, redefining how we interact with people, places, and

things online. Popular Metaverse experiences include Fortnite, Minecraft, and Roblox.

WebXR is a web standard developed by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) that enables augmented reality and VR experiences in web browsers through a set of application programming interfaces. The goal is to make augmented reality and VR experiences more accessible to everyone, no matter the device. For the presented experimental social work course, we opted to leverage the GMetriXR platform, a no-code toolkit that allows users to create, manage, and track their own metaverse—a three-dimensional virtual world.

Method

Participatory design is, “just as much about design—producing artifacts, systems, work organizations, and practical or tacit knowledge—as it is about research” (Spinuzzi, 2005, p. 164). We utilize participatory design methods to engage in a community-driven research and design process that encourages collaboration and develops products that are responsive to real-world concerns and needs. An example of the participatory design process being used to generate social justice-oriented technology comes from Teng and Gordon’s (2021) work with incarcerated women. The authors conducted focus groups with incarcerated women, exploring participant anxieties about their upcoming release from prison, and created VR scenarios that were written by participants during these sessions. These scenarios were designed for therapeutic use, aiming to ease the transition from prison to reentry. Used this way, participatory design methods can be both empowering and democratizing (Bossen et al., 2016).

Recent research has used collaborative filmmaking, a participatory research method, in public health studies (Baumann et al., 2020). This method trains research participants in filmmaking and analysis and provides them with the tools needed to create films. Through this method, the films created by participants can not only be analyzed as data but can also be presented as research and advocacy products to be shared with the community. Accordingly, we see these three student-led films as both data and a research product that can be shared by practitioners and the general public. Future research can build on this process and study the effect of participant and student-led films on antioppressive attitudes and behavioral change.

The design strategy we used was also influenced by the film, “Overcoming personal

biases in Social Work (Belkin-Martinez, 2016).” This film begins with an explanation of the liberation health framework and then proceeds to include two scenes, with each character role acted out by a social work student or professor. In the first scene, a social work intern meets with a client, discussing their struggles and needs. The social worker’s analysis of the client’s situation is shaped by dominant worldview messages—that is, narratives of personal responsibility. In the second scene, the social work intern meets with her supervisor, who uses the liberation health framework to explain how the client’s issues are connected to societal-level problems. Following this strategy, the assignments were designed to give students a step-by-step approach to identifying and creating stories based on real-world examples of antioppressive social work, social work practice that is inconsistent with social work values, or both.

Stage 1: Peer Interviews

The first stage of the participatory design process was research. We asked students to pair off and meet with a partner for an hour, taking 30 min each to interview the other about their field placement experiences (master’s level social work students are required to work an internship for 16–24 h weekly). Suggested questions included:

- Where is your field placement?
- Who are the clients you work with? (self/organization)
- What services do you provide?
- What are the dominant worldview messages about the populations/clients you work with?
- Does the philosophy/intervention style of your organization reflect the dominant worldview, or a counternarrative? If the latter, what is this counternarrative?
- Does the way people are treated reflect the dominant worldview, or a counternarrative? (practice may not always follow principles)
- Can you think of a time when you witnessed a social worker–client interaction that reflected the dominant worldview?
- Can you think of a time when you witnessed a social worker–client interaction that reflected a counternarrative?
- (For these last two questions, remember to focus on specific stories, not generalizations.)

Students were instructed to turn in “field notes” describing their partner’s answers (i.e., the assignment need not be refined prose but could be cleaned up into bullet points). The questions were designed to elicit reflection on real-world experiences that reflected either consistency or conflict between social justice values and practice. Throughout our professions and within society at large, consistency and conflict can each be instructive as we seek to interrogate the role of behavioral science workers and scholars in resisting oppression.

Through this assignment, each student acted in the dual role of researcher and research participant, ensuring that the stories they would eventually create were based on research and real-world scenarios. Because the stories students told were based on the practices they witnessed in their field placements, in regard to how clients were treated and regarded, students were not pressured to tell stories based on their own experiences with bias. Still, student perceptions of their experiences in the field were undoubtedly influenced by their own social positions, that is race, gender, orientation, religion, or other dimensions of identity.

While students were asked to incorporate the liberation health framework into their interviews and fieldnotes, some required more help in understanding how organization-level practices were influenced by societal-level biases. Through group work, classroom discussion, and one-on-one meetings with the instructor, this first assignment helped to both assess and develop student understandings of antioppressive practice.

Stage 2: Vignette

The second stage of the participatory design process asked students to create a one-page single spaced vignette based on their peer interview. The vignette would describe a situation wherein a social worker or behavioral health worker in a clinical setting must decide how to engage with a participant using the liberation health framework. The vignette needed to be 200–400 words and include three–five discussion prompts, formatted as a classroom style training “role-play” (Altaha et al., 2023). The vignettes were meant to include a client statement (description of the client in an ecological context, with explanations of the issues they were facing at individual, group, community, and societal levels), a description of the work a social

worker is assigned, and questions for a consultant to answer regarding their observation and assessment of the role-play. Three students would engage in a role-play of this style, with each taking on the following roles: social worker, client, and consultant.

Stage 3: Script Development

The facilitators reviewed all the vignettes and picked three that would be turned into scripts for VR films. While the majority of vignettes were of high quality and could be turned into films, we picked the three vignettes based on the diversity of stories and feasibility (i.e., could this story be told given our time and budget constraints).

Students were divided into three groups, with each group assigned a vignette. None of the students were assigned a vignette that (a) they wrote or (b) came from their peer interview. This ensured that student ownership and participation was equal across each group. Students were then asked to draft a five-page double-spaced script depicting the scenario described in the vignette. To aid in the writing process, we brought in a guest lecturer who was a master’s-level social worker turned full-time children’s book writer to discuss elements of writing and storytelling. We also discussed some of the technical aspects of screenwriting in-class lectures. Many of the students in the class had prior experience with writing, acting, improv, or film or theater production—we imagine this was a self-selection process, as these students were interested in a class with “storytelling” in the title.

Students were given multiple rounds of peer and instructor feedback on their scripts. Each group workshoped their scripts during live class sessions. These workshops included “table reads,” where students took on roles of the characters in the scripts, and read the script out loud in front of the class. In these sessions, students and instructors provided thoughtful feedback and presenting students took notes in order to make changes to their in-progress scripts. Feedback included notes on plot, characterization, feasibility, and how scenarios might strengthen their connection to antioppressive theory and practice. Feasibility was a notably necessary part of the discussion, as student scripts were very imaginative, and instructor feedback had to account for technical limitations (i.e., filming with a low budget, on a green screen, in a small research lab).

Stage 4: Preproduction

There are several forms VR films can take, including fully animated films, films shot with a 360° camera (with photorealistic characters and backgrounds), or hybrid films, with video of characters placed in virtual backgrounds. We utilized the latter mode, filming students in 2D with a green screen backdrop and placing them into a 3D virtual world.

Students were asked to identify setting backgrounds for their films. We used free artificial intelligence (AI) 360° image generators to create unique settings for each student video.

Once the AI settings were in place, we conducted in-class dress rehearsals in which students were assigned characters and acted out the scenes from their scripts. Students who were not comfortable speaking on-camera could opt for behind-the-scenes or nonspeaking roles.

During this class session, we focused on “blocking,” or mapping student location in their 360° environments. Because we were shooting on a green screen, it was important for students to know the direction in which to look, in order for the editing process to go smoothly.

Stage 5: Filming

All the filming took place in a research laboratory. We purchased some basic equipment, including a 10-foot-tall green screen (\$40), six studio lights (\$120), a used iPad for students to use as a monitor and script teleprompter (\$150), an iPad stand (\$10), a cell phone stand for filming student actors (\$10), and two clip-on cell phone microphones (\$20). All of these items were purchased from Amazon, but they can be bought from a number of retailers. Filming was done with student cell phones, and we used iPhones that were new enough models to have a “cinematic mode.”

Each group had 1 day of filming, consisting of a 2-h window. One instructor was present to help with the technical aspects of filming and provide any additionally needed support, but efforts were made to ensure students made all creative decisions. The other instructor was with the other two groups, engaging in troubleshooting, planning, or editing of content that had already been filmed. See Figure 1 for a behind-the-scenes look at students recording their video/audio in front of the green screen.

Because students were filmed in front of a green screen, and later placed into the 360° environment, each student actor was filmed

Figure 1
Students Recording in Front of a Green Screen



Note. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

exported and processed to reduce their size so that they could be uploaded to the Gimetri website (described below).

Outside of class time, the instructors uploaded final student videos to the Gimetri platform. Then, during class, the instructors imported these videos into the 360° environments. Students were encouraged to make creative choices in placing characters in the environments, sizing characters, and making adjustments so that character eyelines matched as well as possible.

Results

The course project was originally published on an interactive GMetri webpage. Users landed on a 360° gallery and were given an introduction to the project by the two coinstructors. The instructions include a description of the theoretical model for antioppressive social work and technical instructions for navigating the space. Using a mouse and keyboard, users could navigate the gallery the way they would a video game, reading more information about the class and projects on the wall.

At the time of the project, GMetri had an option for users to create and host extended reality experiences for free. This was one of our reasons for choosing the platform, as students would be able to create their own experiences after the course ended, even with little or no production budgets. Currently, however, users must pay in order to have access to the platform. As we are unable to maintain a paid subscription, we have archived these videos on YouTube. A link to an audiovisual screen recording of a user navigating the full project can be found in Table 1.

alone. One microphone was used to capture audio from the on-camera actor, and the other microphone captured audio from an off-camera actor. When there were multiple off-camera actors, only one had their audio captured at a time.

We were careful to maintain correct lines of sight so that when placing individual video files into the 360° environment, it would appear that characters were looking at each other. In preparation for filming, students created (a) shot lists (a list of the order in which scenes and actors would be filmed) and (b) a diagram depicting the direction in which actors would need to look during those scenes. An example of a blocking and sightline diagram generated by a student group can be seen in Figure 2.

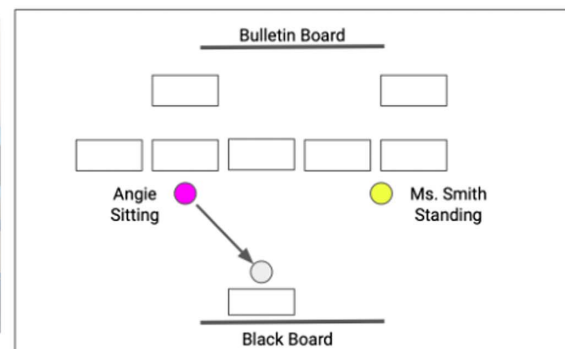
Some students memorized their lines, but more often, the scripts were put onto a free

teleprompter app so that they could read their lines from the iPad. This allowed for fewer mistakes and quicker filming. After each take, we all listened to the take together to determine whether the audio quality was strong enough for us to move forward.

Stage 6: Postproduction

Students were responsible for picking which takes were best and sending them to the instructors. Using Adobe Premiere, a video editing program, the instructors edited individual clips together, working to match the audio between different takes. For example, while each video clip had its own sound, in order to have the full scene fit together, there could only be one audio file between all the video files. The final edited videos were

Figure 2
Blocking and Sightline Diagram



Note. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

Table 1
Film Links

Video description	Link
Screen recording of the full interactive experience and all films	https://youtu.be/VO8EFPM9CUo
Group 1's film, "Boundary Crossing."	https://youtu.be/UyUPV2cqUuU
Group 2's film, "Justice. Period."	https://youtu.be/vrao0MPJG2o
Group 3's film, "Why don't you speak English?"	https://youtu.be/EIY5PeTQ9c8

Student projects on the wall include a title, description of the project, a trailer describing the project, and a worksheet with discussion questions that can be used to guide discussions of the scenarios. Each student project has a yellow door that, when clicked on, transports the user from the landing gallery into the 360° world designed for the student projects. See Figure 3 for an example of student projects within the online gallery space, and Figure 4 for an example of the welcome message users will see after clicking on a yellow door and beginning one of the experiences.

The user is then given a brief description of the scene and told to click on the screen when they are ready to begin. In these scenes, users are not able to walk around as they do in the landing zone (gallery), but they can turn around in a full circle to take in the digital environment. Links to student videos can be found in Table 1.

Group 1's film, *Boundary Crossing*, explores a White facilitator leading a workshop

and pushing a participant of color out of their comfort zone (Asrar et al., 2023). A screenshot from *Boundary Crossing* can be seen in Figure 5. Group 2's film, *Justice. Period.* depicts a young student who has gotten a period for the first time but is not allowed to leave the room to go to the bathroom due to the teacher's assumptions about the student just trying to get out of class (Huff et al., 2023). A screenshot from *Justice. Period.* can be seen in Figure 6. Group 3's film, *Why Do Not You Speak English?* explores a refugee woman's interactions with a social worker who is upset by their language barrier (Genty-Waksberg et al., 2023). A screenshot of *Why Do Not You Speak English* can be seen in Figure 7.

The three films apply the storytelling for justice intervention model to elucidate examples of oppressive versus antioppressive interactions, mapping onto the larger liberation health framework. In each group's film, users experience two scenes: (a) an initial scene reflecting dominant worldviews (or dominant

narratives) and (b) a second scene reflecting concealed stories (or counternarratives).

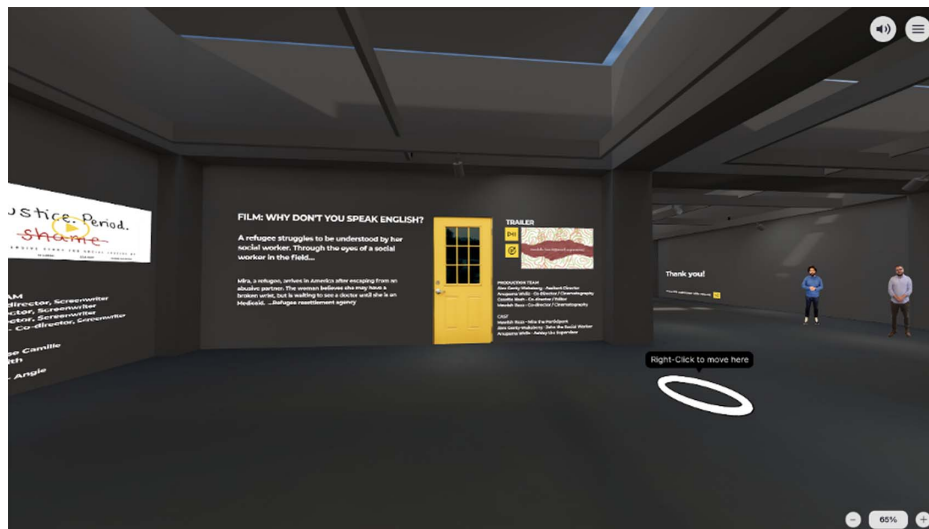
The second scenes present users with an opportunity to interrogate dominant ideologies by interacting with a version of the same story, but this time in a way that invites users to engage in critical structural analyses. Concealed stories aim to make visible the sociopolitical factors underpinning individual-level needs presented across the films and offer tools for users to engage in antioppressive practice.

This section outlines specific dominant worldview messages and concealed stories users may participate in through an individual analysis of each group's film and delineates three specific learning implications for users including: (a) naming systems of dominations, (b) identifying applied antioppressive social work practices and (c) observing examples of maintaining social justice-oriented approaches in social work and behavioral health within the controlled environment of the films, with opportunities for real-world application (see guided discussion worksheets).

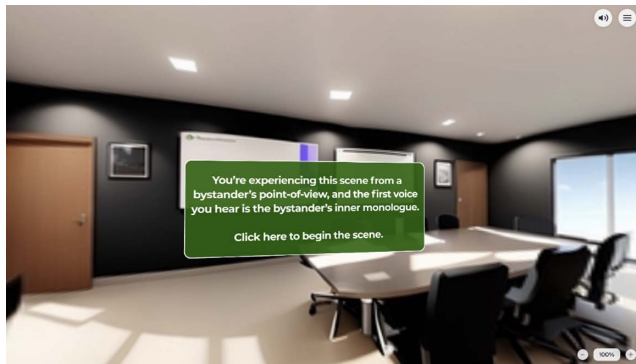
Group 1's Film: Boundary Crossing

This film represents the dominant worldviews of racial capitalism and xenophobia. Alicia, a White facilitator, leads a session for participants of color writing about their experiences of hate crimes. During the workshop,

Figure 3
360° Project Gallery Space



Note. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

Figure 4*Welcome Message to Begin a Virtual Reality Experience*

Note. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

Alicia ignores a participant of color's discomfort and pushes the writer to relive her past trauma. In Scene 1, we can hear the inner dialog of another participant in the group who expresses a lack of trust in Alicia's abilities to facilitate the conversation without reinforcing harm.

This upholds a stock story as Alicia promotes White supremacist ideology by referring to the participant of color as an outsider, misattributing her ethnic background, and seeking to understand the participant's experience through her own worldview without engaging in critical reflexivity (Ferreira & Ferreira, 2019). This represents an oppressive way of doing social work as—even unconsciously and unintentionally—Alicia's putatively trauma-informed approach did not account for the ways in which racialized violence appeared in both the participant's story and her responses to it as a facilitator (Menakem, 2017). Alicia did not ground her

facilitation in a recognition of the power imbalance or asymmetric privileges she carries as a White facilitator working with writers of color, which actively created emotional distress for the participant she forced to participate.

Under the guise of a safe environment, Alicia fails to attend to neoliberal ideologies that perpetuate misguided notions that all members of our society maintain equal opportunities to assert individual agency without naming the function of racial capitalism to inequitably constrain resources for those at the margins. Antioppressive social work recognizes these overlapping systems of domination that misdirect attention away from sociopolitical power imbalances toward problematizing the individual, which serves to obfuscate collective opportunities to challenge colonial narratives (Brady et al., 2019).

Social workers committed to antioppressive practice are tasked with attending to the ways in which continued harm against people of

color, women, sexual minorities, and other marginalized identities is enmeshed in current intervention models of our field (even those that are well meaning; Chapman & Withers, 2019). In doing so, social workers are able to recognize pathways for change alongside the communities that center antioppressive counternarratives and shift responsibility away from the fallacy of an individual or culture failing to acknowledge the lived cost of maintaining unequal social structures.

In the offered concealed story, where the director stops Alicia and asks her to speak with her outside of the room, we can imagine this as an opportunity for Alicia to critically contend with issues of power, race, oppression, and privilege in her social work praxis that invites transformative opportunities for a more humanized approach to her facilitation (Kolivoski et al., 2014). One that recognizes the racial power imbalance and the need for recognition of ongoing racialized violence in trauma-informed care to come alongside future participants on their journey to liberation in antioppressive ways to not add to existing harm.

Group 2's Film: Justice. Period

This film represents the dominant worldviews of heteropatriarchy and the politicization of the bodies of people with uteruses. It also represents a power imbalance between teachers and students; where we see young people are often bereft of opportunities to have their voices heard or respected (Lovorn et al., 2012), especially students who hold multiply marginalized identities (Crenshaw, 1989). Angie, a student in the film, experiences pain and reaches out to her teacher, Ms. Smith, for support. Lily, another student, witnesses Ms. Smith chastise Angie for not focusing and proceeding to dismiss her pain. When Ms. Smith eventually and reluctantly allows Angie to see the nurse, the viewer learns that Angie is experiencing her period for the first time.

Ms. Smith is upholding colonial projects that seek to exert social control over female-identified, people of color, and other marginalized communities' bodies. Rather than listening to Angie express her pain and discomfort, Ms. Smith makes assumptions about Angie's lack of ability to focus that are rooted in the power dynamic between teachers—students and gender-based oppression. Ms. Smith assumed to know Angie's experience and what was best for her rather than listening radically to understand the ways Angie was

Figure 5*Screenshot From "Boundary Crossing"*

Note. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

Figure 6
Screenshot From “Justice. Period.”



Note. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

expressing needs for support in that moment. This is coupled with the larger culture of shame associated with menstruation in our global society (Olson et al., 2022).

In our sociopolitical context that gains power from a social order that oppresses women and people with uteruses, natural biological changes are vilified as signs of deviance or something to be tended to privately and on an individual level. This allows for the continued commodification of menstruation and monetization of women’s pain under racial capitalism, which disproportionately impacts marginalized communities (Sebert Kuhlmann et al., 2019). Social worker practice is anti-oppressive when it can name these intersecting attempts of our system to marginalize, in order to create opportunities to destigmatize health needs and shift focus back to dominant structures that reinforce ideologies that actively oppress young people, women, and people with uteruses.

The concealed story in this film is offered through a conversation between Angie and Nurse Camille. As an example of anti-oppressive social work practice, Nurse Camille listens intentionally to Angie, seeking to understand her pain as Angie is experiencing it and offering support that accounts for the individual-level impacts of social forces of domination (Brady et al., 2019). Nurse Camille explains what menstruation is to Angie, provides her with the information and tools she needs to take care of her body, and offers the counternarrative against the shame associated with menstruation by telling Angie it is a normative aspect of biological development and nothing of which to be ashamed.

The concealed story creates opportunities for users to navigate a conversation that suspends judgement, leans into curiosity, and centers a student’s individualized experience. This offers tools and language for users to experience that when social workers and

Figure 7
Screenshot From “Why Don’t You Speak English?”



Note. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

behavior health researchers make visible power dynamics and oppressive systems, we are able to better support the communities we work alongside.

Group 3’s Film: Why Do Not You Speak English?

This film represents the dominant world-views of White supremacy, heteropatriarchy, classism, and xenophobia. Mira is a refugee who struggles to find support from her social worker. She is a recently arrived migrant to America after escaping an abusive partner and it appears she has a broken wrist, but she is unable to see a doctor until her Medicaid coverage is active. She sits across from a social worker, John, with the Refugee Settlement Agency to ask for support. John has trouble understanding Mira due to a language barrier and becomes frustrated with Mira for not understanding English. Mira, in turn, becomes increasingly dismayed as she hears John telling her that there is nothing he can do to support her as she awaits Medicaid coverage.

In the stock story, John is promoting oppressive practice by not interrogating the ways his identities as a social worker, American citizen, and native English speaker are privileges that afford him with more power to navigate existing medical models and structures (Metzl & Hansen, 2014). He makes assumptions about what Mira should be able to understand in the context of their conversation, including that she should hold the same level of proficiency in English as he does. He also fails to acknowledge the barriers that come with navigating a social service such as Medicaid, and how Mira’s overlapping identities as a woman of color, interpersonal violence survivor, noncitizen, and person seeking financial support make it uniquely challenging to navigate the United States health care system that privileges Whiteness, cisgender men, and higher socioeconomic status in accessing timely and quality of care (Snowden, 2003).

In the concealed story, users can experience the benefits of antioppressive practice centered supervision. John’s supervisor, also a social worker, encourages him to bring awareness to his identities and make visible the apparatuses of social control in order to empathize with Mira’s experience and frustrations (Kondrat, 1999). In doing so, John is able to acknowledge how racism, the stigma around refugee status, and institutional barriers to the public benefits systems in the

United States and global contexts, including limited proficiency in English, can account for the frustration Mira is experiencing (World Health Organization, 2023).

The concealed story creates space for users to evaluate how domestic violence is linked to issues of social and environmental power dynamics and not the result of individual circumstances alone. Through this anti-oppressive counternarrative, users are offered a shared language of liberation and care that they may practice in communication with communities who are adversely impacted by ongoing institutional inequalities, state, and interpersonal violence.

Discussion

Internet technologies have changed and are changing society. Social media has transformed the way we communicate, learn, do politics, and engage in activism. It has also amplified more overt expressions of racism and led to the proliferation of misinformation. New AI tools are shaking up multiple industries, as work that previously needed expertise—photography, digital design, even writing—is threatened by the potential of being reproduced by AI with a simple prompt.

Research has identified the ways new technologies can reproduce old biases and generate new forms of social inequality. For example, facial recognition technology that was developed with biased and nondiverse data inputs (i.e., the tech was developed for White faces) has difficulty recognizing Black faces (Buolamwini, 2024). Similarly, researchers have identified biases in the algorithms that determine what we see from search engines, social media, and now AI (Benjamin, 2019; Noble, 2018). It is critically important to engage these emerging technologies in justice issues, and in ways that are participatory and democratic, as demonstrated in this article.

Moreover, we suggest that storytelling is an essential component of doing critical scholarship and activism. Drawing on research on storytelling workshops with young Black women, Toliver (2020) wrote that counters-tories can, “challenge dominant narratives and create new realities (p. 507).” Within critical race theory, there is an emphasis on storytelling as a legitimate form of knowledge (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Folks of color—who are marginalized in a society that privileges Whiteness—have a unique perspective that can shine the light on the hidden mechanisms of racism. In addition, the liberation

health framework places an emphasis on rescuing the memory of history change or telling stories about activism that challenge dominant narratives about the status quo (Martinez, 2014). There is pedagogical utility in using stories from the margins to help people understand how power and oppression work.

Yet other research warns of the potential dangers of storytelling for individuals marginalized by race, gender, or sexual orientation. Srivastava and Francis (2006) investigated antiracist and antihomophobic workshops, and how queer folks and folks of color can be pressured to talk about their experiences—however, painful the process might be—for the benefit of their straight and White peers. These findings are consistent with Nakamura’s (2020) critiques of VR refugee documentaries that allow privileged users to temporarily experience poverty or oppression as their headsets transport them into the homes and lives of women in the global south or resource poor environments. Nakamura (2020) argued that these short-term digital experiences fall short of true embodiment and threaten to encourage users to feel, “good about feeling bad,” without their taking any real steps toward making social change (p. 47).

The current project acknowledges these critiques in several important ways. First, while Srivastava and Francis (2006) wrote about a certain style of antiracist workshop and discourse that is about individual-level learning and attitude change, to the detriment of the challenges of, “systemic and organizational aspects of racism (p. 281),” we are using a framework that is built around understanding historical and structural antecedents of societal- and individual-level social problems, from health disparities, to individual-level clinical work. We do not assert that the extended reality projects undertaken by students are alone enough to create societal change (nor, in this process-oriented article, do we seek to evaluate the projects). But we do center the systemic nature of racism and other isms.

Second, Srivastava and Francis (2006) also discussed dangers for marginalized folks who might prefer to remain silent as a form of protection, who are forced to discuss oppression in workshops. In our case, students are not sharing experiences of how they are victimized, but how their clients or community members have been treated by people and organizations that purport to do good. While there were certainly students with identities marginalized by race, gender, orientation,

ability, religion, and class participating in our storytelling work, the work did not require them to tell stories of their own oppression. Moreover, our projects seek to depart from the types of projects Nakamura’s (2020) critiques, as the aim is less to put the viewer in the position of people in marginalized positions, but also in the position of a social worker or bystander, and struggle with the decision of how to respond when witnessing interactions that are inconsistent with antioppressive values. We affirm that power dynamics must be taken into account in research and education using storytelling in order to prevent the farming of stories from vulnerable groups as a means to increase the vanity of social justice minded practitioners. Social work is a field that cares for the marginalized. But those who are most concerned about the discipline—those who critique it—have pointed out ways that social work can reinforce oppressive dynamics. This can happen intentionally or unintentionally when our practice is inconsistent with our values—when our care is influenced by dominant narratives and myths or stereotypes about our clients (Brady et al., 2019; Chapman & Withers, 2019; Gebhard et al., 2022). Social work educators are tasked with teaching both practical methods, and social work ideals, and social work students spend time in the field, where they are able to witness examples of moments or strategies that are inconsistent with social work’s principles of justice.

Antioppressive social work understands social work practice as taking place in an unequal society. This framework challenges dominant understandings of social problems as having cultural- or individual-level origins and instead understands social problems originate with systems of oppression that do harm to people of color, women, sexual minorities, and those with other marginalized identities. In using emerging technology to tell stories inspired by real-world events, we answer the call for scholars from social work to leverage the profession’s values in the development of new technologies (Patton, 2020).

Keywords: social justice, emerging technology, antioppressive social work, education, virtual reality

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