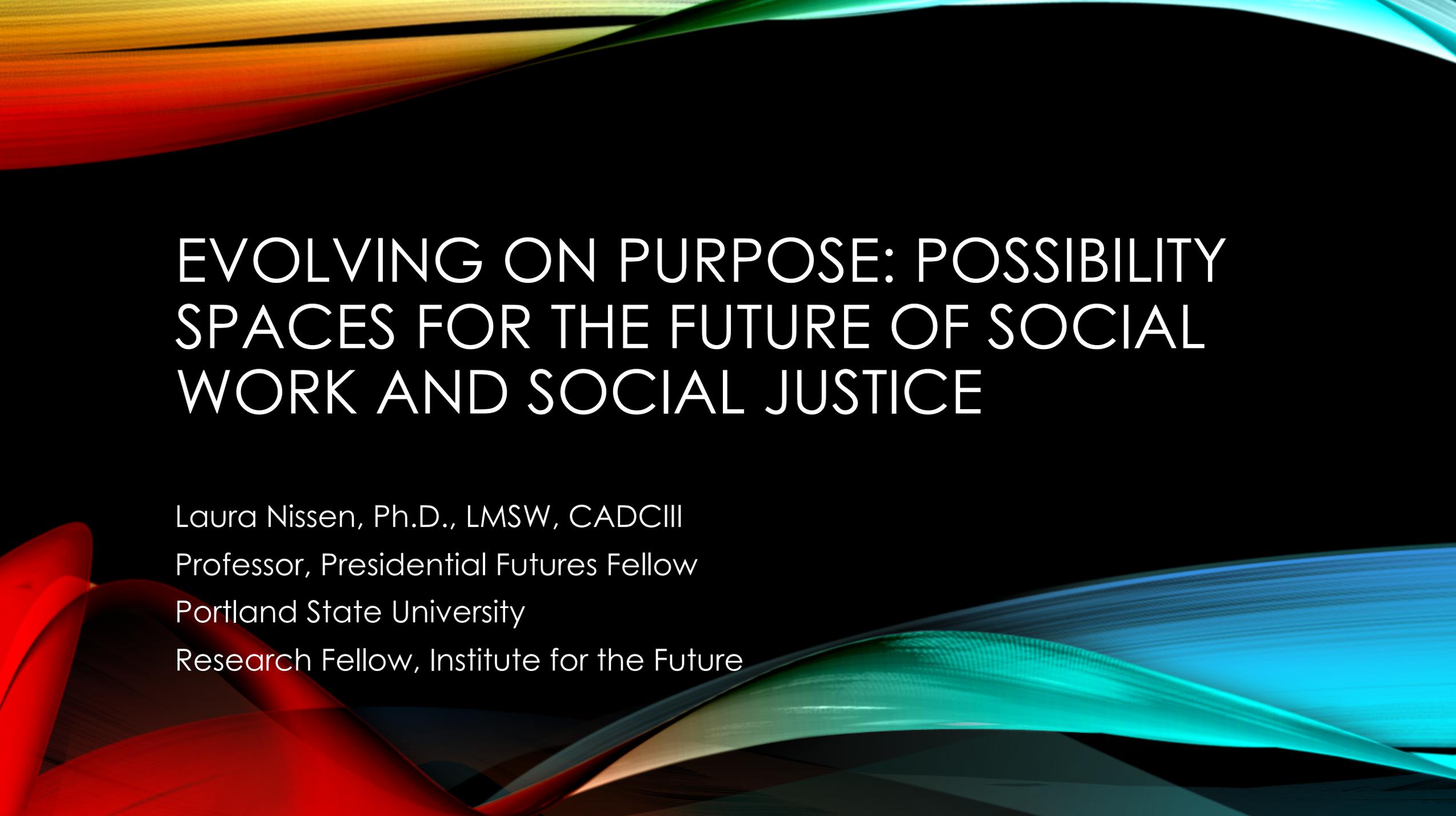




THE NETWORK FOR  
SOCIAL WORK MANAGEMENT



# EVOLVING ON PURPOSE: POSSIBILITY SPACES FOR THE FUTURE OF SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Laura Nissen, Ph.D., LMSW, CADCI  
Professor, Presidential Futures Fellow  
Portland State University  
Research Fellow, Institute for the Future

BLACK LIVES MATTER.  
BLACK TRANS LIVES MATTER.  
BLACK CHILDREN MATTER.  
BLACK LOVE MATTERS.  
BLACK MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS.  
BLACK ART MATTERS.  
BLACK DREAMS MATTER.  
BLACK FUTURES MATTER.

©BLESSTHEMESSY

# #BLACKLIVESMATTER



# AFROFUTURISM



Billboard by artist Alisha B. Wormsley, on display in Detroit, Michigan this past year, for the exhibition Manifest Destiny curated by Ingrid LaFleur at the Library Street Collective

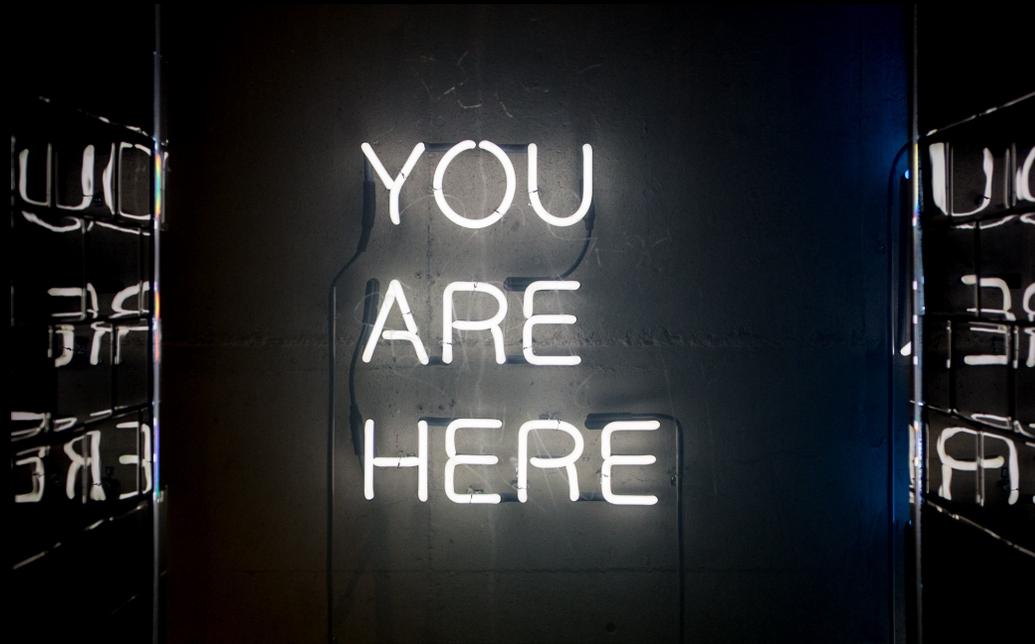


Why are there no Black People in the Jetsons? (Novak, 2013)

# AFROFUTURISM DEFINED

- Afrofuturism is the reimagining of a future filled with arts, science and technology seen through a black lens. The term was conceived a quarter-century ago by author Mark Dery in his essay "Black to the Future."
- It is also considered an epistemology and encapsulates a liberatory connection of the history of Black thought, knowledge and artistic production from the past to re-imagined futures (Alondra Nelson).
- This framework inspires deep and imaginative possibilities for other ways of thinking, operating. It challenges "whiteness," colonialism, heteropatriarchy and other "isms" by intentionally operating beyond them.
- By creatively expanding assumptions, boundaries and histories - Afrofuturism creates new kinds of potential and power. These very kinds of spaces are essential in generating post-normal solutions to contemporary challenges - and are guided by Black voices and imaginations.
- Please visit my website for a launch pad for social workers ([www.socialworkfutures.com](http://www.socialworkfutures.com))

# WEBINAR #3 – A 3-PART SERIES



- Last two sessions – (1) “What is futures thinking? Why is it important in post-normal times?” AND (2) “How does futures practice work?”
- (3) How do we prepare for social work to be “future ready?” How do we use these tools to evolve the social work profession on purpose?
- How do we build a sense of possibility and hope in these times?

# FUTURES THINKING IS:

- About deepening and strengthening the ability to “anticipate” and imagine in new ways.
- Commit to reducing “short-term-ism” in our immediate and extended circles of influence. How can futures thinking help us make better decisions? (Deeper commitment to exploring “unintended consequences” and “underdeveloped possibilities)
- Resisting powerful actors who “dictate” what the future is going to be in favor of increasing agency and democracy in co-constructing desired futures while protecting/resisting undesired futures.
- Not neutral – it is powerful. Who gets to wield that power? Is it democratic?

# WHAT FUTURES THINKING HAS TO OFFER RIGHT NOW

- Connect the past, present and the future
- Learn from the past, make sense of the present as we deal with it and connect both of these to an arc of meaning and the choices we have about what happens next.
- “Unlearn” our way of thinking about what is and isn’t possible. The veil between these things is especially porous right now.
- Critical, post-modern, anti-racist, anti-colonial, cultural, interpretive, participative, holistic
- Bow to Indigenous lens
- Futures thinking instead of magical thinking
- Learn, play, grow, act in new ways

# WHAT IS FUTURES PRACTICE?

- Something individuals do (in networks with other futurists)
- Something groups or collectives do (in teams)
- Something organizations do (Red Cross, AARP, World Bank, Facebook, Federal Foresight Network in the U.S.)
- Something countries do (or groups of countries): Scotland, Finland, European Futures Network, United Nations

Apply theories, ethics, practices and disciplined study of the social science informed elements of futures knowledge and action to increase “foresightfulness” and make better, more thoughtful decisions together.

Deepen readiness, anticipation, agency, agility, intelligence and imagination to the problems of today to increase possibilities for a better future.

“WE ARE IN AN IMAGINATION BATTLE.”  
– ADRIENNE MAREE BROWN



Yesterday's problems, yesterday's solutions...what comes next?

- 
- What would it look like if social work “was ready” for the future in a new way?
  - What would we be thinking? What would we be doing?
  - What might our profession look like in 10 years if we started truly investing in these questions now? What would it look like if we don’t?
  - What are these “possibility spaces?”

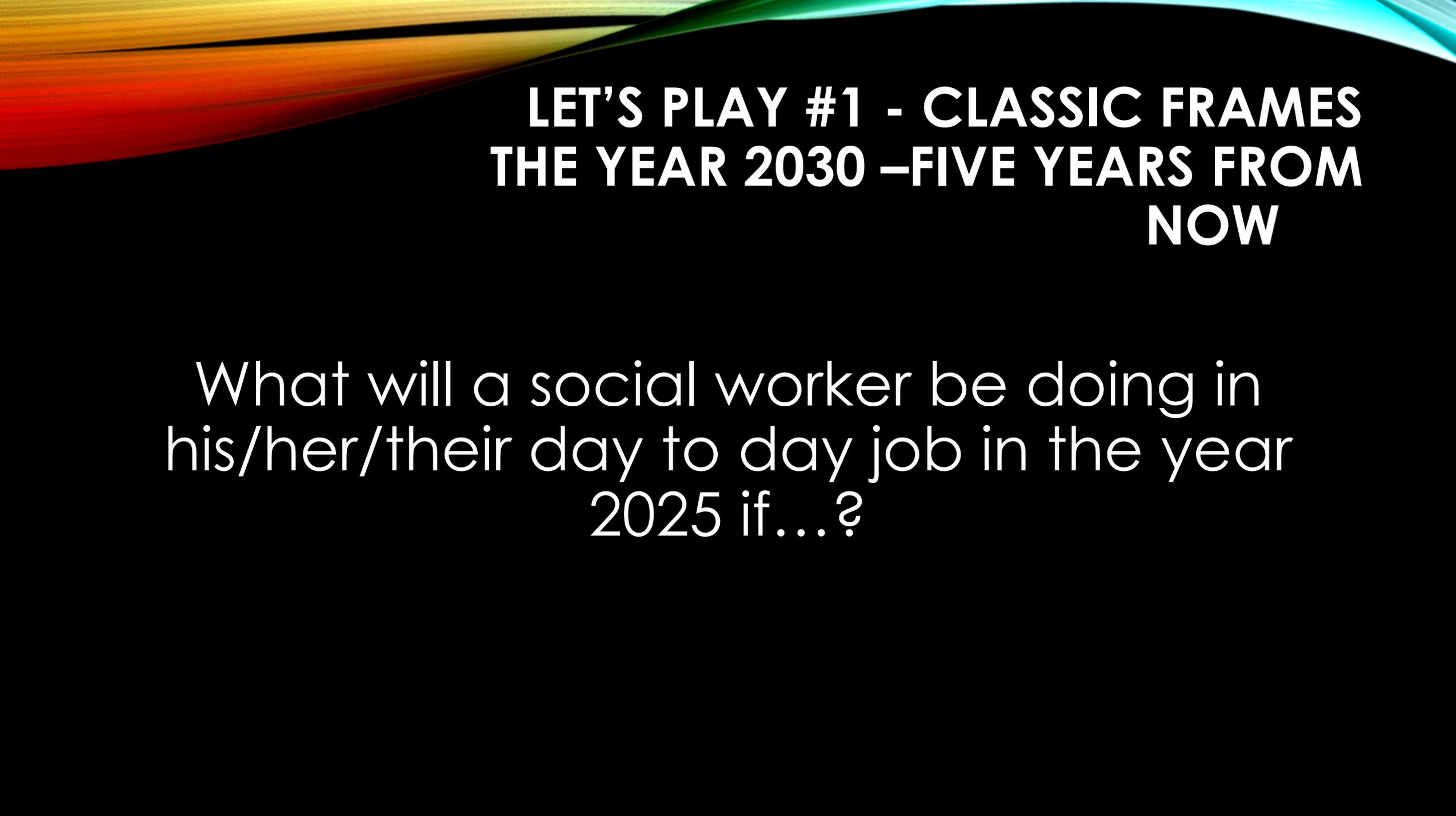
# LOOKING BACK TO LOOK FORWARD

- Progressive era profession born a time of deep structural inequity
- Incrementalist tradition (bit by bit rather than big leaps)
- Divide between individual and collective well-being
- White savior and/or race-centered social control roots to reconcile
- Push for credibility and professionalism in the midst of “good works” and improvement of the human condition
- Cultivation our discipline – building a foundation as an emerging site of knowledge production and community impact
- Divides along the political spectrum (conservative to progressive) – all one family but sometimes deeply annoyed with each other
- Embrace of licensing, evidenced based practice and manualized treatments to boost quality and consistency our impact

# LOOKING BACK TO LOOK FORWARD (CONTINUED)

- Increasing neoliberalism devolving/absorbing our education/practice ecosystems
- Production of authentic and original knowledge has accelerated
- Setbacks, lack of progress – alongside breakthroughs, both disheartening/hopeful
- Continuing to evolve, reinvent ourselves – there are increasing equity concerns within our own profession, and there are increasing challenges about the effectiveness of our profession to work with the state or markets so ultimately slow and/or indifferent to addressing equity and the other concerns of social change.
- Increasing ‘evidence-based’ tradition with related gains and sophistication, but prioritizing this has precluded focus on the grass roots, the emergent, the improvisational, as well as de-prioritized respect and focus on communities who never stopped trying to solve their own problems.
- Retrospective rather than prospective “gaze.”
- Urgent complexity of social problems/challenges (also opportunities) multiplying.
- Professions themselves in a state of transition for a next era – deployment of expertise in an era of ubiquitous information and artificial intelligence.
- Welcome to 2020!





**LET'S PLAY #1 - CLASSIC FRAMES  
THE YEAR 2030 –FIVE YEARS FROM  
NOW**

What will a social worker be doing in  
his/her/their day to day job in the year  
2025 if...?

# Things get better (Improve)

We will be busy rebuilding things to make them better. (Earned) faith in institutions returns. Equity improves. We will start setting goals again and will not feel like we are under assault. We will feel hopeful.

What will social workers be doing in this future?



No Service 7:28 PM

AA google.com

## Coronavirus Means the Era of Big Government Is...Back

History shows that national shocks—the Depression, World War II, the financial crisis—have a way of expanding the role of government in lasting ways. This one is looking like no exception.

By *Gerald F. Seib and John McCormick*  
April 26, 2020 1:46 pm ET

SHARE

History shows that big national shocks have a way of changing the role of government in lasting ways—and any shock as big as the coronavirus pandemic inevitably will [alter political life and philosophies in America](#).

The crisis has been not just a public-health

< > ⬆️ 📖 📄

# Things get worse (Collapse)

New kinds of threats/challenges (maybe out of old issues) cause even worse risks to vulnerable populations than now.

Further breakdown in community well-being ensues.

What will social workers be doing in this future?



A screenshot of a Medium article titled "We Must Fight Face Surveillance to Protect Black Lives" by Joy Buolamwini. The article is displayed on a mobile device, showing the Medium logo, the title, and the author's name. The article is categorized under "Artificial Intelligence" and has a "Get started" button. Below the title, there are social media sharing icons for Twitter, LinkedIn, and a bookmark icon. The author's profile picture and name are visible, along with the date "Jun 3" and a "6 min read" indicator. The article's content is partially visible, showing a black and white photograph of a woman being held by another person. The caption below the photo reads "re(Sisters) Unite | Credit: \$han". The article is shared by "A.II. Family".

## Things stay the same (Conservation)

Vaccine takes longer than we think it should and “market issues” complicate availability and use. We muddle along. Flares continue and people gradually learn how to live long-term with a “rolling pandemic.” Deaths level off due to heroic efforts by communities.

What will social workers be doing in this future?

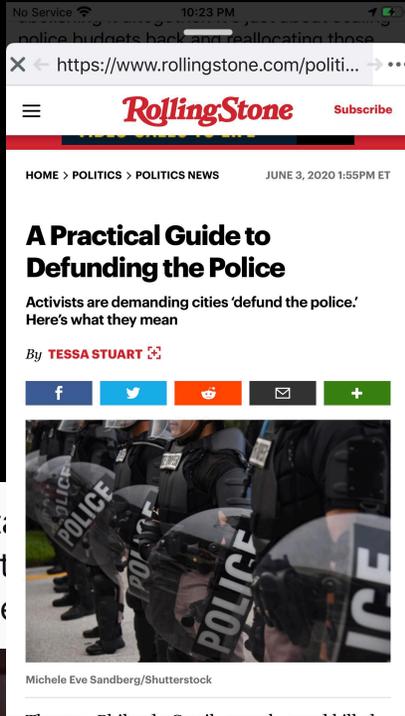


Imagine bigger. #futuresthinking  
#beyondpolicing



NPR.ORG  
**How Much Do We Need The Police?**  
For many Americans, it goes without saying

defunding the milit  
not a pipe dream. it  
safety, voice, conn



MONEY.YAHOO.COM  
**Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti, City  
Officials Cutting \$100 Million-\$150 Millio...**

3

1 Share

# Transformation

Something happens that is so big, the world will not be the same on the other side of it.

What will social workers be doing in this future?

# LET'S PLAY #2 – IMAGINE BIGGER



What are 100 things we would do if half of the money currently spent on policing in the U.S. were spent on something else?

# LET'S PLAY #3 – SOCIAL WORK JOBS OF THE FUTURE



# SOCIAL WORK JOBS OF THE FUTURE

- Community peace coach (alternative to policing)
- Algorithm race and justice community review organizer (preventing and interrupting race and justice bias in commonly used algorithms)
- Digital access navigator (ensuring equitable access to technology and internet)
- Decarceration deconstruction specialist (deconstructing prisons)
- Reparations program coordinator (distributing reparations)
- Well aging specialist – (linking tech and community to enhance equitable longevity)



# MORE SOCIAL WORK JOBS OF THE FUTURE

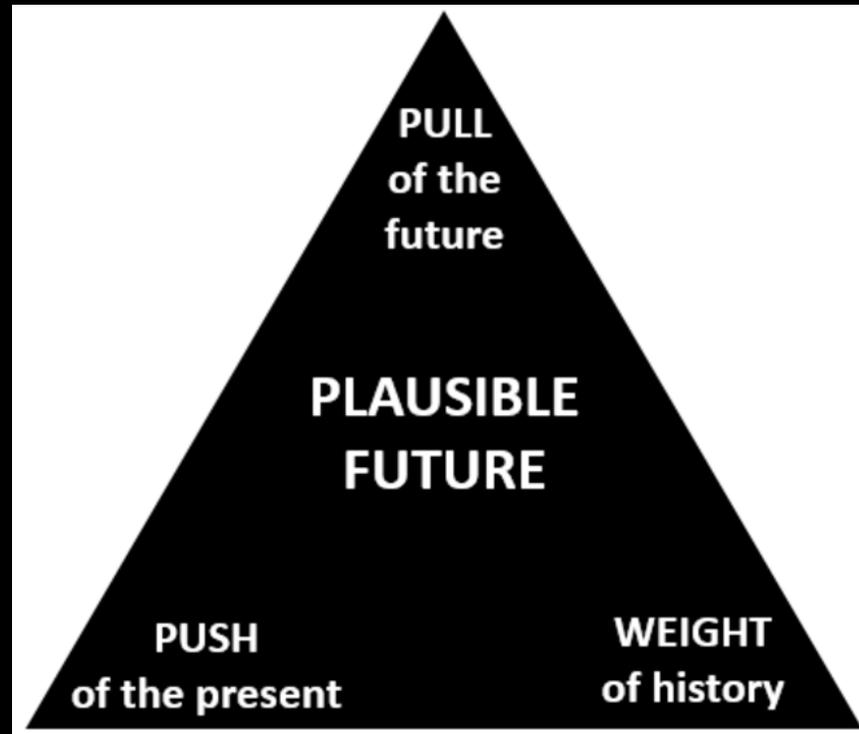


- Community smart city governance board developer (ensuring citizens are primary beneficiaries of smart city technologies)
- Neurotech rehabilitation specialist (removes malfunctioning gaming brain implants and helps people live without them)
- Universal basic income coach (to coach people through the economic transition – from surviving to being meaning and purpose focused)
- Home health robot personalizer (calibrate your personal care robot to your unique health needs)
- ADD YOUR OWN!! PLAY ALONG AT HOME!!!



WHAT'S  
THE  
POINT?

# THE FUTURES TRIANGLE AND SOCIAL WORK



# HOW TO THINK ABOUT SOCIAL WORK AND THE FUTURE

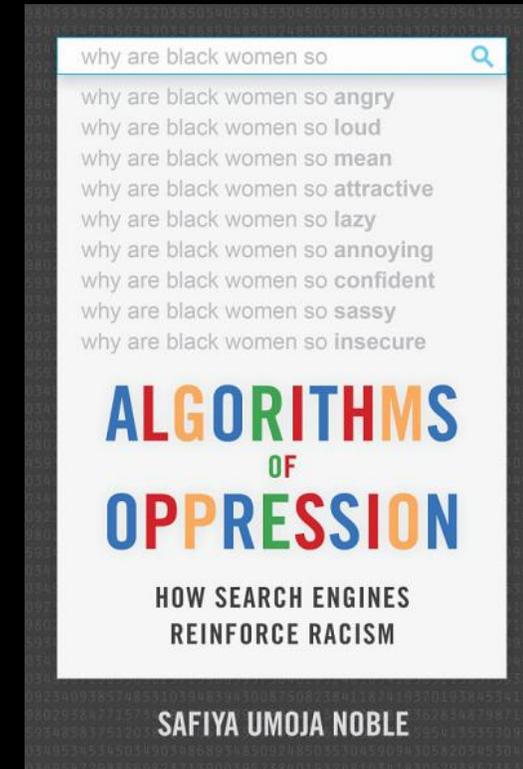
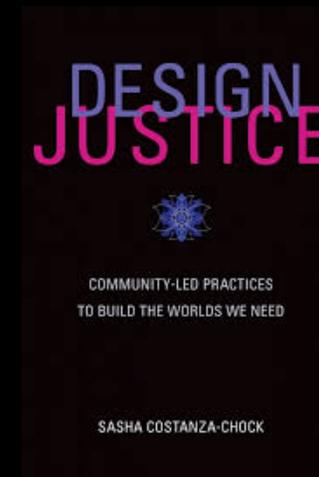
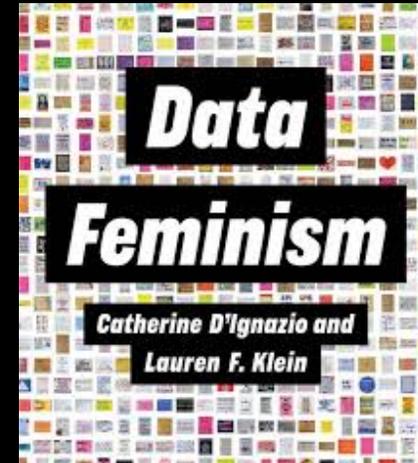
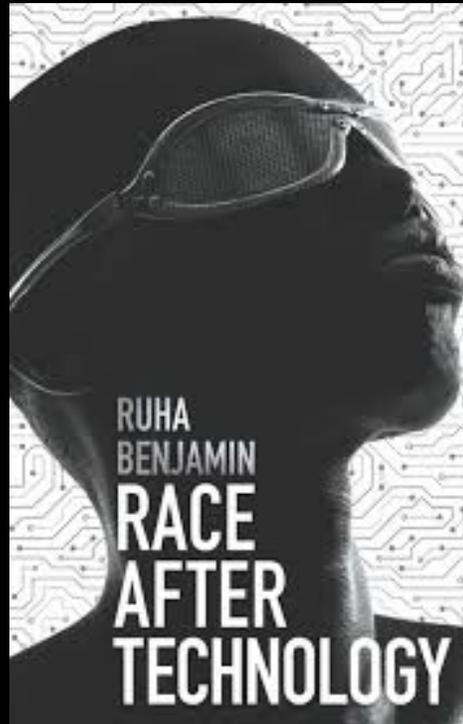
- Not just the 'way it's been' (history)
- Not just the 'way it is' (present and recent background)
- Not just the 'way it is emerging' (current trends)
- But also the 'way it is forming around the corner from where we can see.' (futures lens)

What new social problems/challenges and solutions are 'just around the corner' from our current view?

Sites of consideration for social workers...

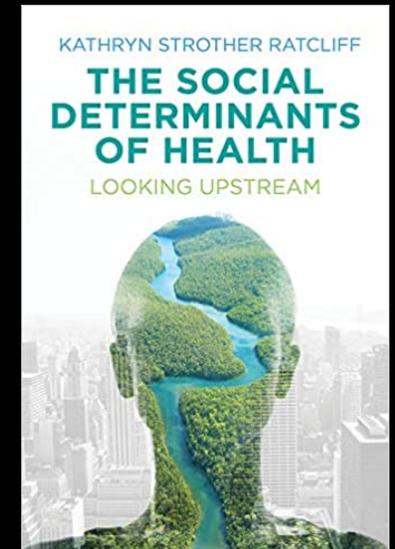
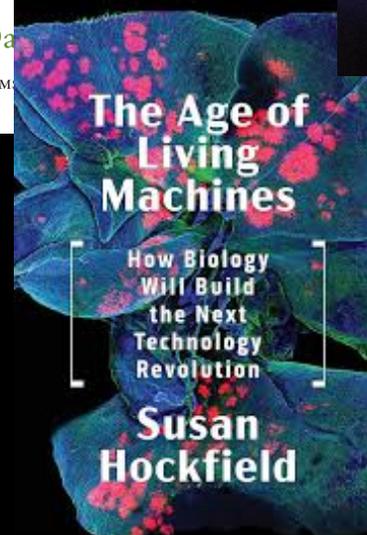
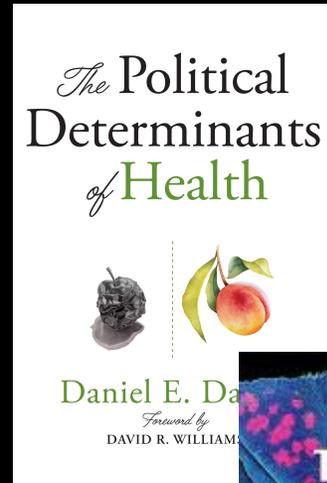
# RACISM AS AN EXAMPLE

- How it's been (look at history)
- How it is (both progress and setbacks in our streets and society)
- How it's evolving (in our tech)
- What's around the corner?
- What is the cost of not being aware/engaged with what is coming?



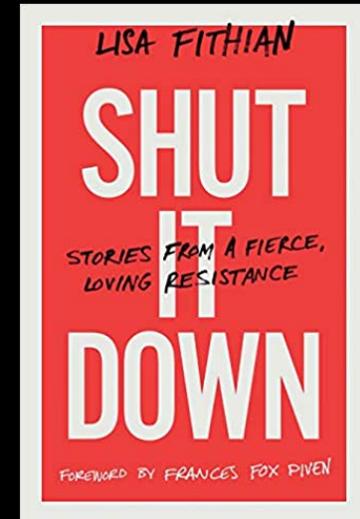
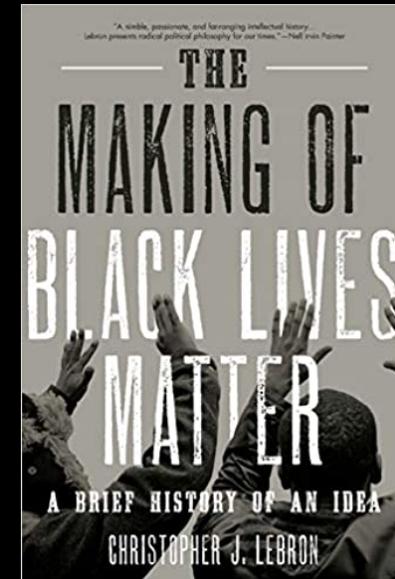
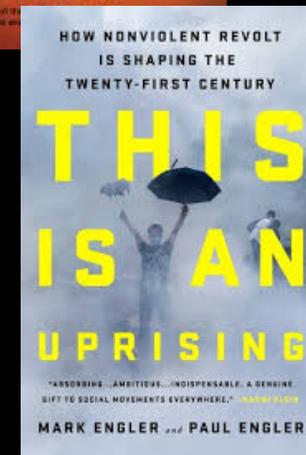
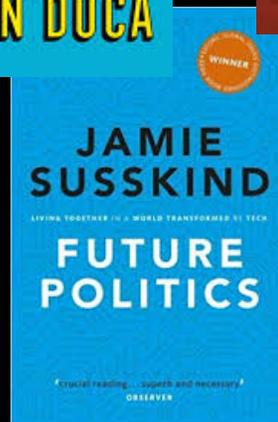
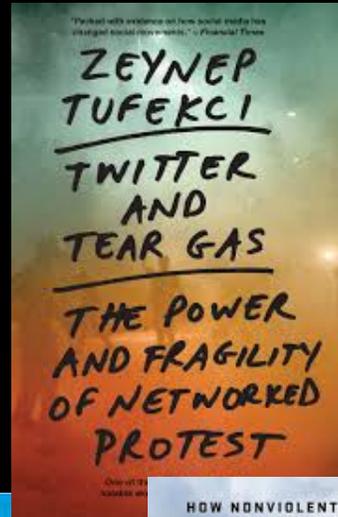
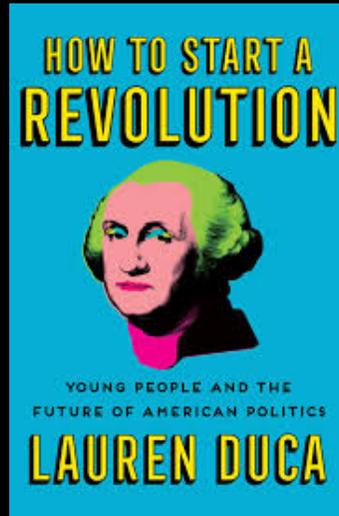
# HEALTH AS AN EXAMPLE

- How it's been (look at history)
- How it is (both progress and setbacks in our streets and society)
- How it's evolving
- What's around the corner?
- What is the cost of not being aware/engaged with what is coming?

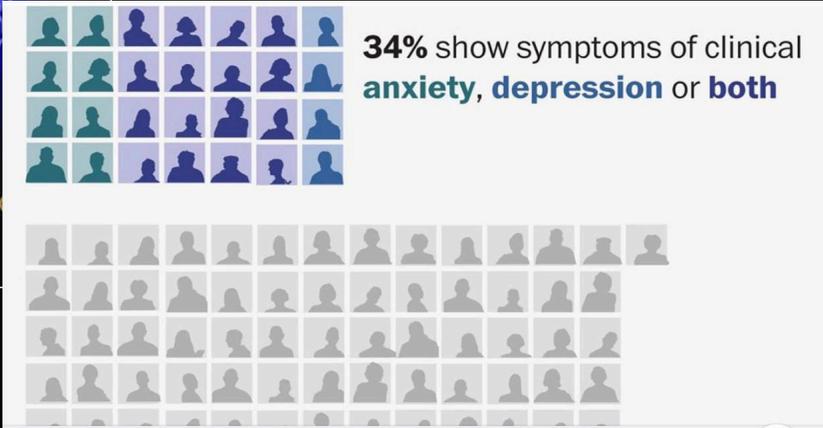
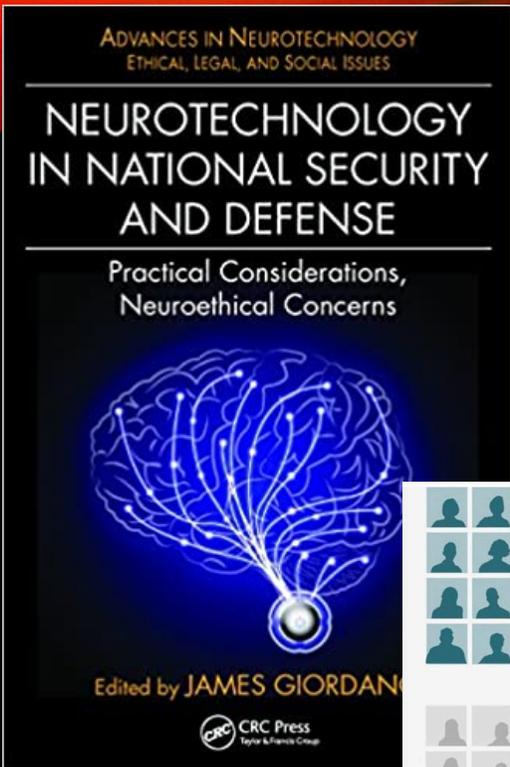


# COMMUNITY ORGANIZING/DEMOCRACY AS AN EXAMPLE

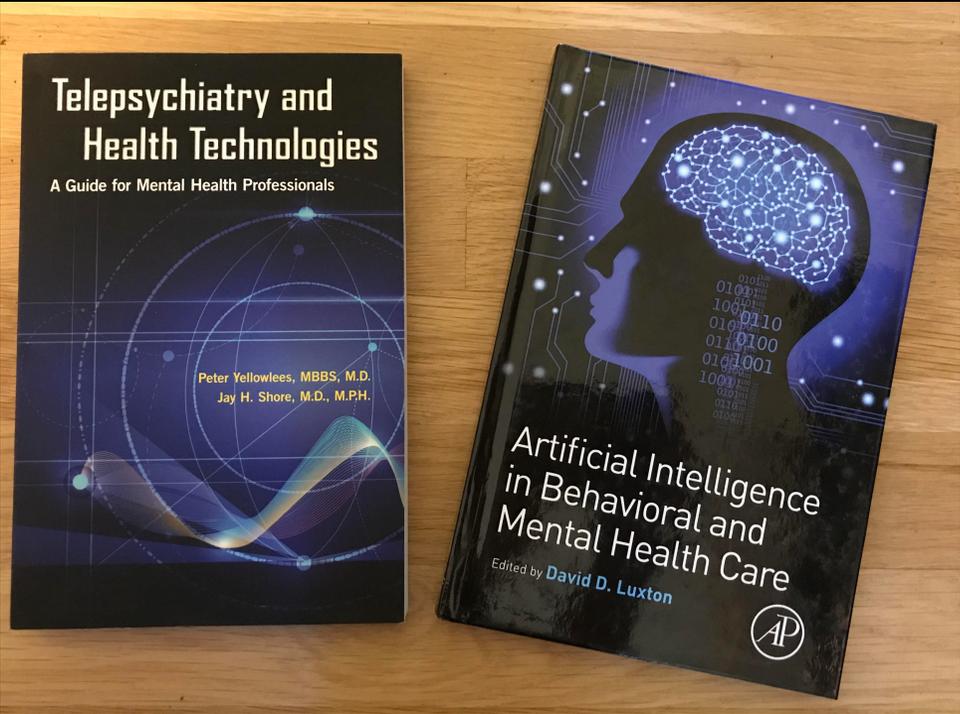
- How it's been (look at history)
- How it is (both progress and setbacks in our streets and society)
- How it's evolving  
What's around the corner?
- What is the cost of not being aware/engaged with what is coming?



# WHAT'S NEXT IN MENTAL HEALTH?



WASHINGTONPOST.COM  
A third of Americans now show signs of clinical anxiety or depression, Census Bur...



# FUTURE OF WORK AND ORGANIZATIONS WILL IMPACT SOCIAL WORK IN A BIG WAY

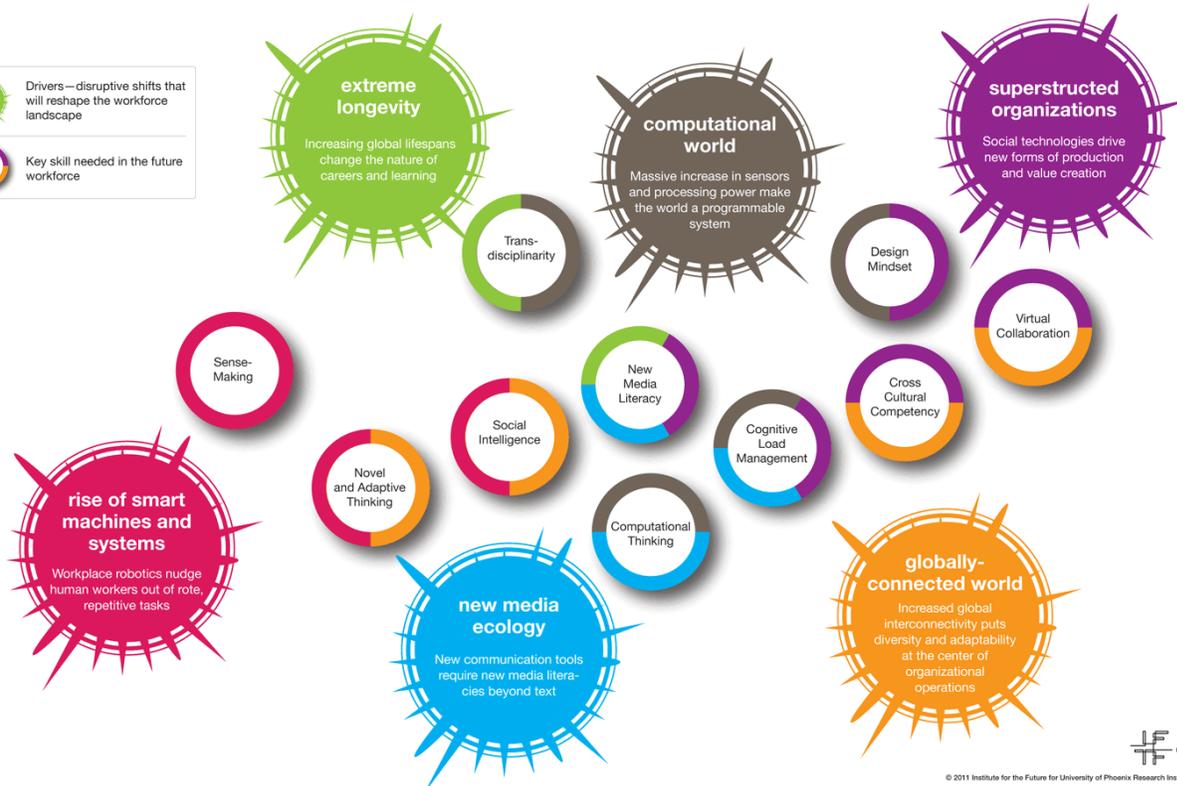
## Future Work Skills 2020

While all six drivers are important in shaping the landscape in which each skill emerges, the color-coding and placement here indicate which drivers have particular relevance to the development of each of the skills.

### KEY

 Drivers—disruptive shifts that will reshape the workforce landscape

 Key skill needed in the future workforce



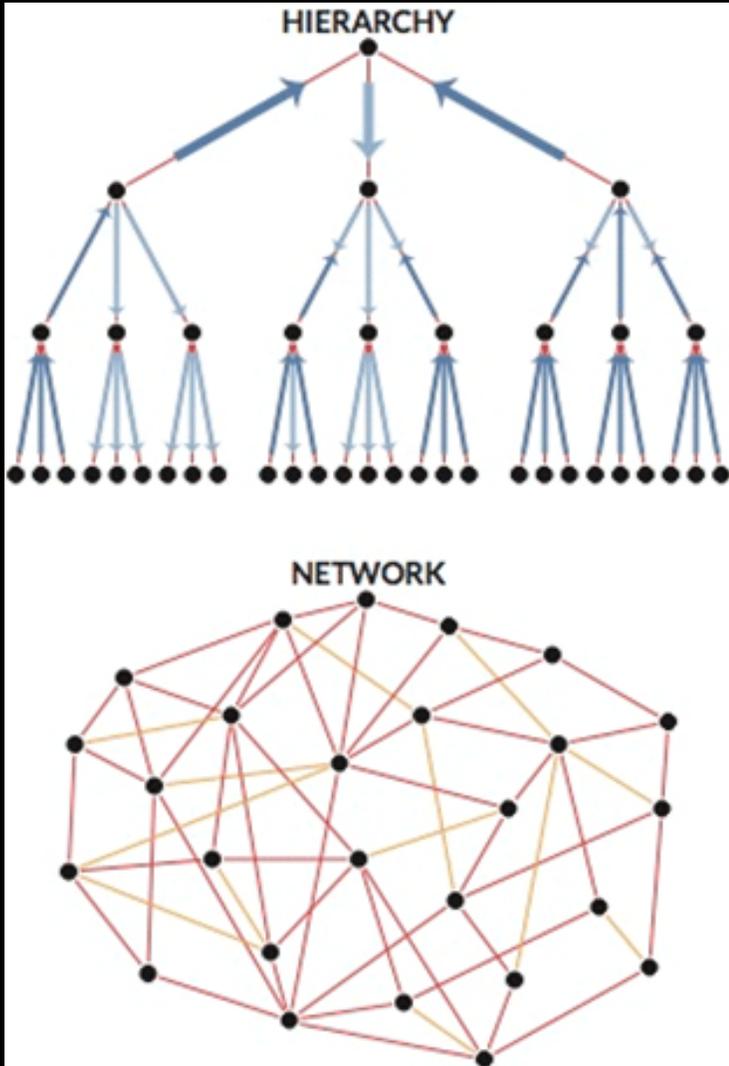
© 2011 Institute for the Future for University of Phoenix Research Institute. All rights reserved.

# A WORLD WITHOUT WORK

Technology, Automation, and How We Should Respond

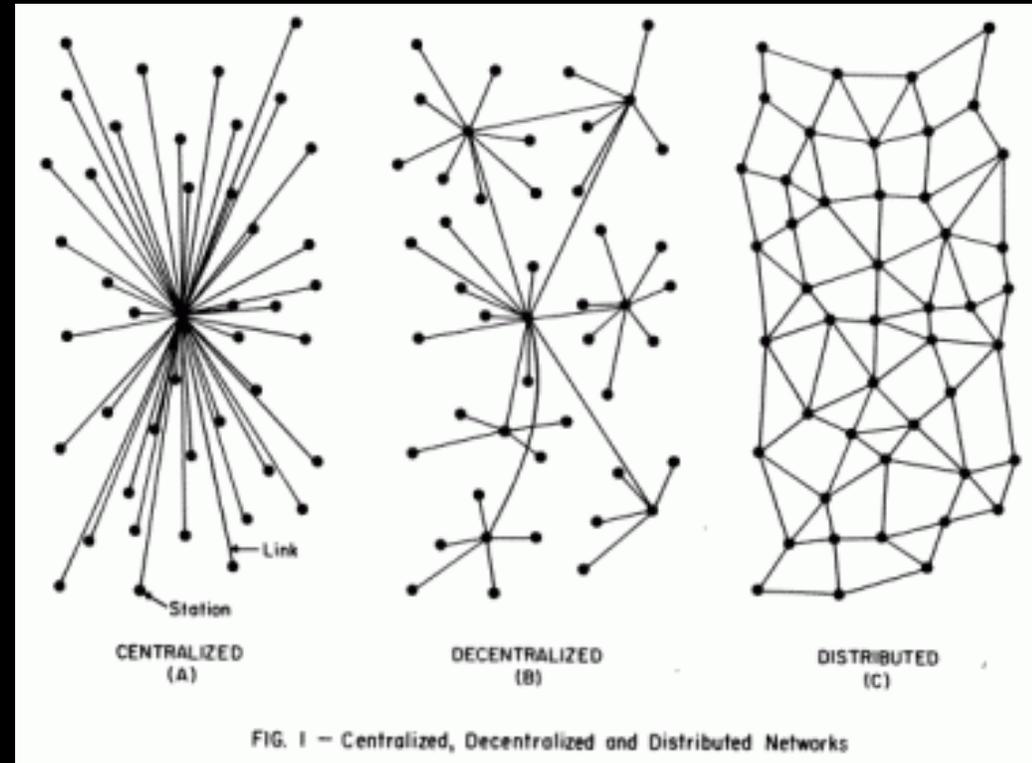
# DANIEL SUSSKIND

## Hierarchies vs Networks



# THE FUTURE OF POWER

## Types of Networks



# BUILDING A MAP FOR SOCIAL WORK – 7 KEY AREAS FOR SOCIAL WORK FOCUS

(Spaces where change is accelerating exponentially.)

- Accumulated, multiplied and distributed equity issues
- Technology
- Climate change
- Economic disparities
- Health disparities
- Geopolitical issues (migration and others)
- The emergent

\*Note – each one of these topics is complex and multi-faceted.

# TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL WORK

IS NOT ONE THING...IT IS A RAPIDLY SHIFTING COMPLEX ARRAY

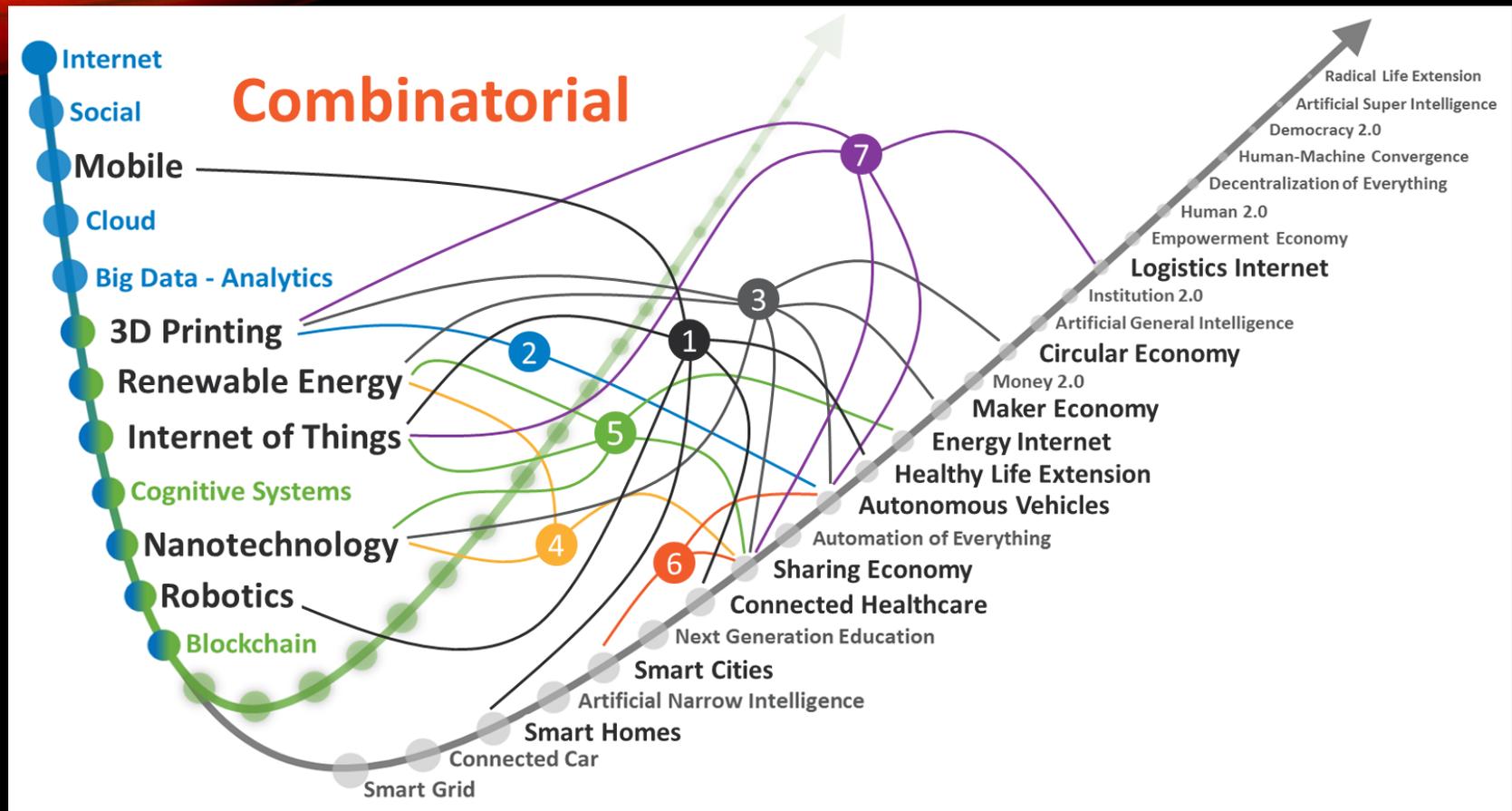
- Smart cities
- Big data and analytics
- Social media
- App development
- Artificial intelligence
- Data justice
- Citizen technologists
- Data, privacy and security (surveillance)
- Virtual/augmented reality
- Children's development and tech
- Health and mental health tech (personalized medicine)
- Neurotechnologies
- Education technologies
- Social change technologies
- Access to technology as a human right
- Emerging human rights via tech
- Assistive technologies
- Tech across the lifespan
- Robotics
- Internet of things

	Equity	Tech	Climate	Econ.Dis.	Health Disp	Geo Political	Emergent
SW Practice (SW in action)							
SW Education (SW in preparation)							
SW Research (SW knowledge production)							

	Equity	Tech	Climate	Econ. Dis.	Health Dis.	Geo Political	Emergent
Equity							
Tech							
Climate							
Econ. Dis.							
Health Dis.							
Geo Political							
Emergent							

Signals practice + Anticipating how these intersections will impact vulnerable people and social work innovation space to partner to prevent/intervene in social problems

Spectrum not categorical thinking.... Bob Johansen



Who wins – Who loses – Who decides – What emerges – Who is vulnerable?

# OUR NATIONAL KNOWLEDGE AND ACTION CENTERS – BUILDING AN AGENDA

- Practice – NASW
- Education – CSWE
- Education Leadership – NADD
- Practice Leadership – NNSWM
- Research – SSWR and Grand Challenges
- Community organizing - ACOSA

# SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

- Engage in new levels of truth and reconciliation with the history of our profession.
- We have to acknowledge that the ecosystem of professions is getting and about to get much more complicated – we need to do anticipatory ethics work.
- Prepare social workers to navigate the “curves” of change that are upon us in the modern era (something is always winding down, while new things are always emerging – we are perhaps overinvesting in the old things and underinvesting in the emergent).
- Validate and encourage futures thinking as an essential aspect of ethical social work practice – and to share futures tools and resources with community leadership.
- Deepen our resolve and resources to be engaged in more sophisticated ongoing learning as professionals.
- Prepare for deep transition of the structures – the “non-profit” ecosystem is deeply fragile.

# SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE (CONTINUED)

- With our eyes open, prepare to partner with artificial intelligence and co-create ethical tools to liberate workers from the drudgery and encourage 'next level' practice (after clarifying what that might be).
- Greater alliance with community leaders.
- Greater activism to divest from/change increasingly neoliberal and neocolonial funding and regulatory sources.
- Value, create and reinforce ethical, experimental and improvisational practice spaces – and learn from them.
- Value and encourage social work participation in increasingly “non-traditional” spaces (e.g. big tech, climate justice spaces).
- Influence licensing boards to become more engaged with futures issues/preparation.
- Influence our national governmental and membership organizations to be more engaged with futures issues/preparation – provide more learning spaces.

# SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

- Engage our accrediting body to consciously re-invent for a new age (shorter and more accessible core degree with expanding menu of continuing learning/certification opportunities across virtually unlimited practice types).
- Re-calibrate social work education to better fit a) the existing (strained) practice ecosystem and b) the lifelong learning imperative of the next generation of professionals.
- Incorporate many of the elements mentioned in the future of practice ideas.
- Deepen cross-disciplinary problem-solving/solution-building approaches during the educational process.

# SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION (CONTINUED)

- Balance evidence-based practice and practice-based evidence lenses with moral imagination, improvisational and community-led ethos and discovery.
- Beware of the “educational industrial complex” threats that increasingly will pit schools against each other for “market share.” Resist this more vocally.
- Future ready social work faculty (see blog post on this topic for more).
- Imagine that a social work student entering school right now as a BSW will easily be practicing in the year 2060. WHAT WILL SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE BE LIKE IN 2060? Our only close imagination tool is to think exponentially.

# SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH

- Complicate how "knowledge production" occurs across the social work profession and acknowledge/challenge the increasingly "industrial knowledge production" apparatus.
- Innovate social work research to contribute from it's unique perspective while participating (and influencing) the larger social science research ecosystem.
- Influence the trajectory of change in our world through asking social work research questions that will not otherwise be asked, as well as expand the range of methodologies that challenge limited and positivist and empirical ways of knowing.
- New methods, new partners, new ways of reporting, new ways of communicating, new types of accountability

QUESTIONS NOT ANSWERS – FUTURES  
PRACTICE = SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE



# VITAL QUESTIONS FOR OUR FUTURE

- How will we evolve to resist further devolution/encroachment and moral assault on our profession? How do we create/protect the spaces to CREATE WHAT WE WANT IT TO BE, not just resist what we don't want it to be?
- How will we clarify what we can do that artificial intelligence cannot?
- How do we cultivate/renew and enliven our moral imaginations at this time? How do we best develop our anticipatory intellectual "muscles?"
- How are the things we most care about likely to change and who will win/lose because of this?
- How should we organize/prioritize our practice, our preparation, our inquiry?



# FUTURES PRACTICE = SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

And central/essential challenges of our time:

- How will we center mutating, distributed, historical and intensifying inequity (justice, health, economic and others) across our many domains of practice?
- How will we participate in global peacemaking and unity more explicitly?
- How will we participate in climate change and renewal?

# WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR SOCIAL WORK TO BE READY FOR THE FUTURE?

- Build on our strengths.
- Identify where we are we stuck in our own wind tunnels/echo chambers.
- Get clear on what we **MUST** resolve to move successfully into the future.
- Get beyond limitations do we put on ourselves as a profession.
- Get clear on what opportunities are most important to avail ourselves of.
- Find consensus on what is most important to protect about our profession.
- Clarify what we can do that artificial intelligence cannot.



## Mapping Our Roles in A Social Change Ecosystem



Created by Deepa Iyer (Solidarity Is and Building Movement Project)  
Available for individual and organizational use with attribution

DEEPA  
IYER

# SHOUT OUT TO A SAMPLE OF FUTURE FACING SOCIAL WORKERS YOU SHOULD BE FOLLOWING (AN INCOMPLETE BUT HEARTFELT LIST)

- Desmond Patton
- Courtney Cogburn
- Melanie Sage
- Laurel Hitchcock
- Lauri Goldkind
- John McNutt
- Karen Zgoda
- Nancy Smyth

- Ellen Belluomini
- Stevara Haley Clark
- Stephen Cummings
- Nathalie Jones
- Lena Dominelli
- Jimmy Young
- Rachael Dietkus
- Gokul Mandayam

Plus explore the SW Grand Challenges where you'll find many future trend threads.

- Tom Felke
- Jonathan Singer
- Dorlee Michaeli
- Lakeya Cherry
- Maria Rodriguez
- Carol Scott
- Craig Sewall
- Matt DeCarlo
- Ruby Guillen
- Monaca Eaton
- Rose Singh
- Brenden Beal

# A DREAM AND AN OPPORTUNITY



**SOCIAL WORK**  
—HEALTH FUTURES LAB—

# WHAT IS COMING

- Funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
- National "possibility space" for social work futures thinking, exploration and knowledge building
- Call for engagement/nominations – this summer
- Select 20—25 Social Work Health Futures "Fellows"
- Engage with global futurists but also build our own vision
- Ignite national (or broader) futures conversations to explore/develop our own "voice" on these matters as social workers
- Why health? Intersection of the most important social work focal areas – social (political) determinants of health incorporates all our major issues.
- Website coming soon - for now follow me at @lauranissen for updates

# CREATING A LEARNING/ACTION NETWORK FOR SOCIAL WORK FUTURES

- Social Work futures book and action groups
- Webinars on futures topics/with futures experts
- Journal and publication work
- Future of social work creative play, production and creation
- Coursework and curriculum guidelines
- Contributions to the larger futures field
- Social work practice = futures practice

- 
- What would it look like for social work “was ready” for the future in a new way?
  - What would we be thinking? What would we be doing?
  - How might our profession look like in 10 years if we started truly investing in these questions now? What would it look like if we don't?
  - What are these “possibility spaces?”



**It's up to us.  
The future is  
plural.**



“We are all learning what it means to be somebodies who shape the future, to operate at the scale of transformation.” Adrienne Maree Brown

# YTASHA WOMACK

AFROFUTURIST AND (ACCORDING TO HER TWITTER HANDLE)  
CHEERLEADER FOR UTOPIA

- In Afrofuturism, time is nonlinear, it can see in all directions. An action, word, thought, belief in the present can shape a past and shape a future. One can pull wisdom from the past and wisdom from the future. Are there insights from the future that can help you today? Imagine.
- What occurrences in the future would comfort you today? What future occurrences would give you a sense of resolve? A sense of peace? You don't have to share, just think on them. Keep the vision in line with ideals that value humanity.
- What moments in the past remind you of your resilience? Personal experiences, world experiences. What moments in history inspire you? What words of wisdom, practices from family or notables keep you encouraged? Think on these things as you like.
- Now that you're informed on all sides of time, think on how you feel. Note any newfound insights and think on how these new insights inform actions you can take or beliefs you can tweak in the present..as you value humanity. Stay lifted.

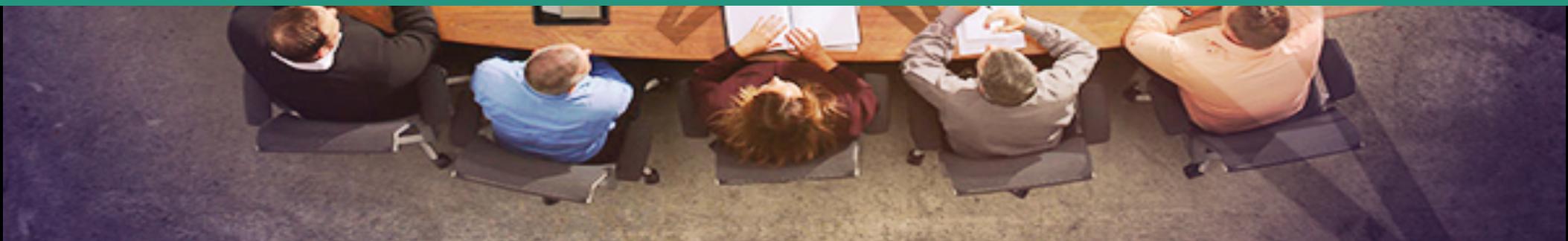
# APPRECIATION

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Thank you for your participation



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