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Interrupting White Supremacy in Field Education: Experiences of Microaggressions in Placement Settings

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Abstract: *As social work's signature pedagogy, field education socializes students into their professional roles as practitioners. However, for students and field instructors of color, racial microaggressions add another dimension to the practice experience. Utilizing findings from a qualitative study exploring the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) social work students and agency-based field instructors, this paper highlights experiences of microaggressions in field placement settings. Specifically, BIPOC students and field instructors described being tokenized in agencies, feeling invisible in placement settings, experiencing microaggressions from service users or students, and witnessing microaggressions. Experiences of microaggressions had emotional impacts, and affected participants' sense of professional identity and confidence. Based on findings, we share recommendations for addressing racial microaggressions within social work field education in order to promote racial equity, including: grounding microaggressions in an ecological approach, unpacking the concept of professionalism, and building capacity of field instructors and agencies to respond to racism and microaggressions. Addressing microaggressions in field education is necessary to support BIPOC students in field placements, honor the work and well-being of racialized social workers who serve as field instructors, disrupt white supremacy, and move the social work field forward in regard to anti-racist practice.*

Keywords: *Field education, microaggressions, racism, field instructors, students of color*

While the field of social work has long held social justice, diversity, and valuing individual differences as central tenets of the profession, given the history of social work and its current manifestations, racism and white supremacy are still woven into the fabric of the field. As social work educators committed to racial, social, and economic justice, attention to the ways that racism operates within social work education is paramount. White supremacy holds whiteness as the default standard to which all other groups are compared. Through this lens, racism is explicitly and implicitly imposed upon communities of color. Sue (2006) notes that whiteness is the color standard that “racial/ethnic minorities are evaluated, judged, and often found to be lacking, inferior, deviant or abnormal” (p. 15). Sue (2006) goes on to say that in order to minimize racist forces, whiteness must be made visible. Taking the position that whiteness, white supremacy, and racism must be made visible and disrupted within social work education, in the discussion that follows, we specifically explore experiences of racial microaggressions in field education. Given that field is a core component and signature pedagogy of social work education, understanding race in field placement settings is critical to addressing issues of race and equity in the curriculum, and is needed to realign our anti-racist practices as a field.

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In the discussion that follows, we use the term Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) to reference groups who have faced historical marginalization due to race, and to acknowledge the particular ways Black and Indigenous communities have been affected by white supremacy, which has then shaped how other racialized groups have been treated in the United States (BIPOC project, n.d., para. 2). This project upholds and is informed by the tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) which asserts that racism is a well-established part of society and given its deep entrenchment within customs, experiences, and structures of society, racism should be viewed as central to human experience (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Solórzano & Bernal, 2001). In addition, society racializes different groups differently depending on labor market needs and to establish political dominance (Taylor, 2009). Processes of racialization serve to ascribe a racial identity to particular groups for the purpose of continued exclusion, oppression, and marginalization. Due to differential racialization, groups that are considered “outsiders” have decreased access to resources and opportunities (Constance-Huggins, 2012). Therefore, in addition to BIPOC we also use the term “racialized” to refer to individuals who have been categorized/racialized as non-White by society-at-large.

Critical Race Theory explains that racist forces must be resisted by rejecting standards and institutions which uphold white power (Bell, 1995); thus, resisting white supremacy in social work education requires a close look at microaggressions which operate as a site of racism and white supremacy. Attention to these issues is necessary to further our understanding of race and equity in social work curriculum and to truly center anti-racist education and practice.

Microaggressions

Chester Pierce, one of the first practicing Black psychiatrists at Harvard University Medical School, is credited with coining the term “microaggressions” based on his experiences treating Black patients (Pierce, 1970). Decades later, particularly over the past 15 years, a proliferation of research on racial microaggressions has taken place across disciplines. Today the most commonly used definition of microaggressions is based on the work of Sue et al. (2007): “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group” (p. 273). While Pierce and Sue et al.’s work initially focused on racial microaggressions, over time the discourse and research has expanded to include microaggressions related to sexual orientation, religious identity, mixed race identity, gender, and ability (see Nadal et al., 2016; Sue, 2010; Sterzing et al., 2017). This body of work has provided an important intervention into racial justice discourse by validating and providing language for every day, interpersonal, and nuanced forms of racism and oppression that are experienced on a regular basis by marginalized groups. Smith (2008) states that racially stigmatized groups often deal with racial battle fatigue as a result of pervasive microaggressive insults. These repeated acts of microaggression cause psychosocial, physiological, and behavioral stress reactions for people of color across contexts. Microaggressions are now widely understood as causing psychological, physical, and social harm (Wong et al., 2014).

Although it is often assumed or implicit, it is important to name that microaggressions are linked to and reflective of the larger socio-political context and structural conditions of racism. Though they can be small everyday acts, microaggressions have significant causes and impacts, and serve to maintain racism and inequity. In recent years, the social work literature has been attentive to the experiences of microaggressions on marginalized populations (including recent special issues of *The Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Diversity in Social Work* in 2017-2018).

This work embodies social work values and takes an ecological approach as it demonstrates keen appreciation of microaggressions as embedded within social context and macro-level structural racism. While some of this literature has focused on microaggressions in the social work classroom (see Hollingsworth et al., 2018; Pérez Huber & Solorzano, 2018; Spencer, 2018; Wong & Jones, 2018) to date there is no research that specifically examines the experiences of, and interventions for, racial microaggressions in field education settings.

Race and Field Education

While there is a paucity of literature on race and field education generally, we do know that BIPOC students often encounter race-related barriers in field placement interviews, during supervision, and while building relationships with agency staff (Razack, 2001). In addition, BIPOC social work students have shared that they struggle to have cross-cultural conversations with their field instructors around race-related issues, and experience racial tensions at their placements (Daniel, 2007). Social work practitioners in the field are also witnessing and experiencing microaggressions. In a recent qualitative study, Weng and Gray (2020) interviewed 30 practicing service providers regarding their perceptions of microaggressions in social service settings. Participants shared that racial microaggressions were pervasive in practice and evident in the ways BIPOC clients were treated, especially when their cultural preferences and knowledges were disregarded. Additional microaggressions reported by service providers included ways service users were stereotyped and blamed for their circumstances. It is clear that race-related issues and microaggressions exist in practice contexts, and thus have an impact on the experiences of both students and field instructors.

White Supremacy and Professionalism

White supremacy holds whiteness as the default standard to which all other groups are compared, including in a professional context. In the workplace, white supremacy culture explicitly and implicitly privileges whiteness and may discriminate against non-white professionalism standards (Gray, 2019). As social work's signature pedagogy (Council on Social Work Education, 2008), field education offers a unique site to view how white supremacy operates within both social work education and in agency settings, because it is the site where students are socialized into their professional identities and roles as practitioners.

While today the concept of professionalism is often taken for granted in social work, over 100 years ago, Abraham Flexner claimed social work did not meet the criteria necessary for professions: intellectual with high individual responsibilities, material collected through science and learning, practical techniques taught through education, self-organized, and increasingly altruistic (Flexner, 1915). Flexner's impact created the development of social work associations, standardized curricula (which now include courses on research), and the creation of a specific social work method (Austin, 1978). During this time, mainstream social work centered on settlement houses and supports for White immigrants and migrants (Berman-Rossi & Miller, 1994). However, racialized immigrants had to develop their own agencies to address social service needs; especially since racism and cultural barriers impeded any chance of assimilation into mainstream American culture. Mexican immigrants created informal kinship groups, or *mutualistas*, to enhance cultural identity and political strength (Reisch, 2008). These groups were not about assimilation but offered cultural activities alongside legal and economic assistance. For Chinese immigrants, most of whom were men, associations focused on housing and small business loans. Reisch (2008) notes, "Isolated and seemingly self-sufficient, these developments in Asian and Latino communities were virtually ignored by White social workers for decades" (p. 793). Meanwhile, reformers in the Black community advocated for funding from White benefactors. Using the terms "racial uplift instead of equal rights" (Hounmenou, 2012, p. 653), Black female reformers created Black settlement houses. These houses offered space for Black activism, training, education, recreation, and more (Hounmenou, 2012).

Social work has since progressed to be more inclusive, yet implicit discourses about who is considered a professional social worker and who is not continues today; -these ideas are grounded in a color blind approach which assume race does not impact practice. Badwall (2015) contends that the social work discipline has struggled to accept race and racism as central to the practice experience of BIPOC social workers because it assumes that an acknowledgement of race will detract from an objective and "professional" social work practice. Badwall (2015) posits:

Racialized workers cannot be seen as liberal, moral subjects when racism is named, as the very naming of racism disrupts both the ideals of the profession and the neoliberal underpinnings of the state. Being seen as moral subjects requires an erasure of race, which is impossible for racialized people. (p. 19)

In other words, Badwall highlights the unspoken tension between being a racialized person and the stated ideals of the social work profession, which does not always acknowledge the ways race, racism and white supremacy affect the social work practice landscape or how professional identity is viewed and experienced.

Drawing from qualitative research conducted with BIPOC students and field instructors, we use participant narratives to illustrate some of the dimensions of microaggressions experienced in field settings and their unique impacts. We then follow with recommendations for addressing microaggressions in order to improve field education experiences for BIPOC students and field instructors, and to promote racial equity within this critical part of social work education.

Overview of the Study

The discussion presented here is emergent from a larger project exploring experiences of social workers of color. This two-pronged study was focused on how BIPOC students (MSW and BSW) and field instructors make meaning about their experiences in field education. While a fuller discussion of our design and methods is detailed elsewhere (Mehrotra & Gooding, in press), we offer a brief overview here to provide context for the discussion regarding microaggressions that follows.

Research Design

In this study, we conducted semi-structured interviews with BSW and MSW BIPOC students who had completed at least two quarters (20 weeks) in their internships, and held both focus groups and interviews with field instructors who provide supervision to social work students in community settings. In order to be eligible to participate, students and field instructors had to identify as Black, Indigenous, and/or People of Color, including: Black/African American, Native American/Indigenous/American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian/Asian American; Arab/Middle Eastern, Hispanic/Latinx/Chicanx, or mixed race/multiracial.

Study Sample

The sample consisted of 42 BIPOC students—27 MSW, 15 BSW—and 24 BIPOC field instructors. The sample reflected demographics of communities of color in the region and in the west coast public university where the research took place, particularly in regard to gender, racial/ethnic background, and age. Of the sample, 24 students self-identified as Latinx (including self-identification as: Latino/a, Mexican, Mexican-American, Hispanic, “brown”), 10 as mixed race/multiracial (including: African American/Native American, Vietnamese/White, Multiracial/African American, Latino/Mixed Race), five as Asian/Asian American (including Chinese American, South Asian, Filipino, Asian American), two as African American, and one as Native American. Thirty-three participants identified as women, eight identified as men, and one participant identified as non-binary.

For the 24 field instructors, data were collected from three focus groups (with 12 participants total) and 12 individual interviews. Within the sample, 11 field instructors identified as African American/Black, four as Latinx (including Latino, Mexican American, “brown”), five Asian/Asian American (Asian/Korean, Asian Indian, Vietnamese) and five multi-racial/mixed race (Native American/White, Biracial, Multiracial, Native Hawaiian/Japanese, Asian/White, Black/White). Seventeen field instructors identified as women and seven identified as men. As a whole, field instructors had a significant amount of practice experience (ranging from eight to 37 years). Across both students and field instructors, a range of field settings were represented, including: healthcare, schools, mental health, culturally-specific agencies, state agencies and community-based organizations.

Data Analysis

Interview and focus group questions focused on motivations for becoming a social worker (and/or field instructor), experiences in field placements (including within agency settings, with the University, and with clients), and experiences with supervision. Given the exploratory nature of the study, thematic analysis was used to make meaning of student and field instructor narratives. The data were analyzed by the authors who engaged in consistent peer debriefing about emergent themes and meanings. As two BIPOC researchers who have a personal and professional relationship to field education, the authors engaged in a consistent reflexive appraisal process to account for bias or gaps. This process included memo-writing and peer debriefing throughout the analysis process (Padgett, 2008).

Microaggressions in Field Settings

Across interviews, two types of microaggressions were consistently shared by participants: a feeling of being tokenized (i.e., being included or singled out as a person of color to promote the illusion of inclusion and/or to represent one's racial/ethnic group, but not for one's individual qualities; hired to appear that the organization supports diversity but not to actually change the culture or promote equity within the organization, etc.), and invisibility or "not being seen" in the placement context. Students shared their experiences with direct microaggressions from clients as well as colleagues, and also noted the indirect experience of witnessing microaggressions within their agencies; particularly seeing microaggressions directed toward clients.

In their narratives, many participants discussed the salience of context in understanding racialized dynamics and harm that they experienced in placement settings. For example, several students highlighted that even if they did not directly experience racial microaggressions, the perception of white privilege and lack of consciousness about race and racism in their field site impacted their sense of safety and their ability to speak openly about racialized experiences. One student shared specifically about hearing her field supervisor and other staff explicitly minimize and ridicule the concept of white fragility, which the student felt set the tone for what she could and could not talk about in her placement with regard to race. These contextual experiences shaped BIPOC students' experiences, regardless of whether or not students experienced microaggressions explicitly. In the discussion that follows, pseudonyms have been used to maintain participants' anonymity.

Being Tokenized

Both students and field instructors voiced that they sometimes felt tokenized as a person of color in different ways in the field education process. This was also complicated as participants understood the importance of their presence as racialized social workers to make change in the field or agency, but also felt the negative impact of feeling like the token person of color.

One MSW student talked about being expected to speak for all Latinos or being asked to work with Latinx clients even when they were not the most skilled social worker for the clients' needs:

I get kind of tokenized....like if they have a question about anything about Latino population it comes to me and I kind of feel like I speak for that [...] so I think sometimes they assign me cases based on the culture, but they're not giving the client the best treatment possible. – MSW, Latinx, female

Another MSW student reflected on being specifically held up in his placement setting as an “exception” – a particular form of tokenization: “I’ve been told twice that I’m one of the good Mexicans or I’m one of the Mexicans that is making this country better not worse.” – MSW, Latinx, male

Field instructors (FI) also discussed being tokenized, both by the social work program and by students. One Asian American field instructor who has served in this role for many years spoke to this: “One of the challenges that I have faced is sometimes I feel like I'm being asked to be a field instructor because they want to have someone of color to be a field instructor...” – FI, Asian, female. In her narrative, this field instructor emphasized that despite this experience of tokenization, she was committed to supporting BIPOC students by serving as a field instructor.

Another field instructor working in a healthcare setting, spoke to some of the unique dynamics of being tokenized as an African American woman (in a specific geographic and political context) by White students when they first meet her:

Now on the other hand, supervising students who are not people of color, that brings into who I am, what I represent to them as a Black woman. And this whole ... liberalism area thing then kicks into play with initial idolizing. But idolize in a very different way from how POC would idolize me. It's idolizing me without any context really of anything about me or who I am. What you see is a skin color, and something within you tells you that you should, because it's West Coast City or whatever, that you should think a certain way about me. – FI, Black, female

Invisibility/Not being Seen

Another type of microaggressions that students discussed was numerous ways that they felt invisibilized, not seen, or not respected as a professional within their agency context. While some of these experiences were linked to their institutional role/position as an intern, there were also ways that racial microaggressions played out specifically to invisibilize racialized students. In particular, students discussed being confused with other people of color in the agency, people in the organization not remembering or acknowledging them, and not being viewed as the social worker.

Several students talked about being confused with other BIPOC individuals in the organization. For example, one BSW student in a school-based setting shared, “There’s been like others of just people calling me Belinda instead of Susana, because Belinda is the only other Latina in the school. And it’s just like seriously guys? We don’t even look alike.

Come on.” – BSW, Latinx, female

Another microaggression related to invisibility that several students talked about was the feeling that others in the agency (both clients and other staff) did not remember or acknowledge them. One student recounted an experience of being part of an interdisciplinary team and not feeling seen by the other staff:

And like having people, the counselor and psychologist like ask me, ‘so who are you, what do you do?’ [...] and having that happen multiple times...it was hard to not walk out of that meeting and feel some type of way. And I think that’s happened a lot this year. Like, meeting people who I’ve already met, or teachers who I’ve already met and being like, ‘so who are you again?’ [...] I feel like, there’s some dynamic of power happening there. – BSW, Latinx, male

Another MSW student talked about not being acknowledged in the lunchroom while seeing White people having a different experience:

...Just going into the lunchroom with older White folks. The way they just stand there. They don’t even say hello. They don’t even acknowledge you. And then when someone else walks in the room and you notice that, I mean it might be because I’m a minority, but I notice that they’re White and they’re like ‘hey, how it’s going?’. But yet, I wasn’t...I didn’t get that kind of greeting. And so, for me, that’s just uncomfortable. – MSW, Latinx, female

Another dimension of invisibility that participants recounted was not being seen as the social worker or professional in their placement setting. One Black male MSW student whose practicum was in a medical setting shared about his experience of being viewed as a service user:

Simply my presence in the emergency department is in many cases this anomaly, where people kind of like stare at me and watch me walk through the hallway. People, for a while, assumed that I was the spouse or the partner of patients or the brother of patients. And people, doctors walked up to me and shook my hand, told me they were sorry for my loss, right or they’re sorry that I had to be in the hospital to that effect.

This student continued on to share how he attempted to address this microaggression over time as a way to make himself and his role as the social worker visible:

And so, what I realized was it was important for me to start and keep in mind I’m wearing a name tag, a name tag that’s attached to my chest. So, if they just look beyond my skin they will see the name tag. And so, I began to kind of step back and whenever they approached me, I would kind of just hold my hands to my side and look at them and then look directly at the patient or the client that I was working with. And after a while I would notice doctors walk toward me to kind of give me this sorry you’re here and they would look at me. And I would kind of look at my name tag. They would look at my name tag and then they would either just walk away or they would talk to the person that I was standing next to who was actually the patient. Or the patient’s family member. – MSW, Black, male

Experiencing Microaggressions from Service Users or Students

In addition to racial microaggressions that were experienced in the larger agency context (i.e., from staff or colleagues), students also shared about experiencing racial microaggressions directly from clients. For example, one MSW student recalled:

...most recently there was a client who was like kind of agitated and he called me a gook. And I haven't even grown up like hearing that term a lot. So, I don't even know if I'm pronouncing it right. But I just heard it and I was like wait a second. Like remembering, you know, that is not a nice word to say. [...] I've had a couple of clients who asked me like...this is like after a couple of minute conversation in English, they ask me like 'can you speak English?' – MSW, Asian, male

Another student remembered racial microaggressions she experienced from a client when on a home visit:

...I went to a client's house with a case manager and they just kind of singled me out in the room. And we were just there to assess him [...] And he's like, 'well what is this Mexican doing in the room?' I was like, like I didn't react at the moment or you know, not acknowledging it kind of and then I was like, 'oh I'm in an intern. I'm in school, I'm doing this...' And then like throughout the whole assessment, he just kept making like microaggressions and like 'oh yeah, I used to work with like Mexicans and then I gave up my job...' – BSW, Latinx, female

BIPOC field instructors also recounted experiences of being questioned by White students which felt like a racialized microaggression. One Black male field instructor working for the state talked about the challenge of working with one White student who he felt did not respect his experience and knowledge: "...when I'm providing information they would do like a second fact check with a White person as if maybe I am not quote unquote an expert in that area of work. [...]" – FI, Black, male

Another field instructor also shared an experience where she felt that a White student was patronizing her and questioning her knowledge:

I have had a couple of students that are from dominant culture and one in particular...she was always bringing me journal articles and telling me about books about people of color and different things [...] it felt really condescending and I didn't like it...But it was a good, we had a really good discussion about that because finally I said, 'hey, you know, you don't have to bring me stuff, I said, first of all I don't have time to read it I said, and secondly I already have a lot of lived experience'" – FI, Asian, female

Witnessing Microaggressions

In addition to being direct recipients of microaggressions in field settings, students also reported that they witnessed microaggressions happening to others, most often service users, and were negatively impacted by seeing this. As one participant stated:

There was one time a clinician, who identifies as White, I was shadowing and they... The orientation was over, the client was ready to leave and they made a comment as in, 'I will follow you out.' And I don't hear them say that that often to that many clients but it just kinda stuck with me because that person identified as African-American and it just reminded me of my experience and people I know experiences of being followed or watched in spaces by people of the dominant culture. – MSW, Mixed race, male

Another student talked about feeling indirectly impacted by microaggressions that they heard in their field agency:

I've witnessed like some strange comments that were definitely like microaggression, racial things. They weren't necessarily directed towards me, but definitely still like minimized me as like a person, because it was things about like, you know, nationality and things like that. And what being American in cause in the moment it was being portrayed that being American is being White. If you're White, you're American. So, it othered everyone else as being non-American. So, things like that. – MSW, Mixed race, female

Impacts of Microaggressions

BIPOC students and field instructors who experienced and/or witnessed microaggressions in field placement settings were impacted by these experiences. While existing research on microaggressions has captured how people are affected by and cope with microaggressions in various settings, (see Wong et al., 2014 for a comprehensive review), one unique impact of microaggressions in the field education context is that it affects one's professional sense of self and meaning-making about identity. Managing microaggressions also had emotional effects on participants and meant doing additional labor – most often invisible and/or emotional labor that is not required in the same way from White counterparts.

Professional Identity and Inability to Bring One's Whole Self

It is well-established that one of the primary functions of field education is professional socialization and, specifically, helping students to grow into their professional identities. Throughout their narratives, many BIPOC students named the ways that they navigated their personal identities and field experiences in relationship to their professional identity. This included code-switching (adjusting one's style of speech, appearance, behavior, and expression in order to fit in to the dominant culture), feeling like they had to minimize their racial/cultural identities, and feeling insecure or inadequate in their roles. While students articulated this differently, across participants who experienced microaggressions, many discussed how racism and microaggressions had impacted their professional sense of self and/or their professional confidence. One BSW student specifically recalled how she felt pressure to present as "professional", but she still felt inferior based on her racial identity:

I experienced a lot of microaggressions [...] I've been trying to make them aware of it. And it's just not going anywhere. And so, like as much as I try to present

myself as professional or educated, I feel like there's still that barrier because of the way I look. And it's just like no matter how much I try to put my best foot forward, there's always gonna be a look of 'okay like your opinion was good, but it wasn't great'... – BSW, Latinx, female

Some students also felt that in order to be a professional social worker, they had to quiet expressions of their cultural and racial identities in order to avoid being stereotyped. As one Latinx student shared:

It is also just hard feeling like I can't be my boisterous self, because I have to be my professional self. [...] I have to like quiet myself because I don't want them to think like, 'oh she's just the angry Mexican girl'. And so, that's been really tough, because you don't get to feel like you can be who you are... – BSW, Latinx, female

As noted by this student, many participants directly and indirectly spoke to the feeling that they could not bring their whole selves to practice, and the divide they felt between their personal identities and professional selves. One field instructor who has been in the field for many years also reflected on how this played out for her when she was a student:

...I dealt with discrimination within my placement settings. Both my undergrad and my grad placements, my field instructors were White women, and I just had a difficult time. I struggled with that relationship and never felt like I could truly be myself. It was just all kind of like pretending and felt like I was always being judged differently [...] you had to kind of walk that line of not saying too much, not exposing yourself and some of your areas of weaknesses versus strengths. And I just think it was just very difficult. – FI, Black, female

One student witnessed her BIPOC field instructor grapple with not being able to bring her whole self to her practice, and the pressure to assimilate to the dominant culture's ideas of professionalism:

...my field supervisor cried a lot, because she felt like she can't bring her whole self to the work. [...] You can't bring, as a person of color you have, in order to fit into the mainstream, you know, you have to kind of fit into the mainstream, White mainstream, in order to be accepted, because you know we're already looked at as different. We're already looked at as deviant or not conformed, poor. You know, there's all this perception and biases against people of color. – MSW, Mixed race, female

Overwhelmingly, participants felt that they had to adhere to certain standards of professionalism (as defined by the dominant culture) in order to be a successful social worker but that doing so meant they were not able to bring their full authentic self as people of color without feeling critiqued or judged.

Emotional Labor and Toll

Both students and field instructors also noted the emotional toll and additional emotional labor that they had to do as a result of microaggressions they experienced and/or witnessed. Sometimes this was emotional labor that students had to do to make sense of

their experiences and navigate within dominant culture agencies. For some field instructors and students, this entailed having to call out racism, interrupt microaggressions, and/or having to educate others about their racial/ethnic group or about oppression. One BSW student spoke about the emotional toll of experiencing microaggressions:

Yeah, so going back to the whole microaggressions and the racism I've been experiencing at my agency. I thought I was just going crazy to be honest. And I feel like just that, like even that in itself is a common thing that we experience as people of color. Like feeling like we're going crazy, but in reality we're not. You know what we're experiencing is pretty real and we need to be able to bring that to the surface and be able to talk about that. – BSW, Latinx, female

One field instructor noted the additional labor she had to do with White students in interrupting microaggressions that they perpetrate:

I think with White students it can be another level of labor where there are microaggressions that happen that now I've got to navigate interrupting for a student that feels a little bit different than it does for staff. And some of it is maybe I start to get too careful and not wanting them to feel like they can't be at this internship but also feeling like it's important to point it out. I also sometimes don't have the energy to do that labor anymore. – FI, Mixed race, female

Both BIPOC students and field instructors were impacted by microaggressions in terms of their personal and professional sense of self and the emotional toll and labor they incurred. These impacts are important to the specific context of field education given the role of field placements in nurturing professional identity of social work students, and the importance of attending to student and field instructor labor and well-being.

Discussion and Recommendations for Addressing Microaggressions in Field Education

BIPOC student and field instructors' narratives illustrate the pervasive and complex experiences of microaggressions that impact field education for both BIPOC students and field instructors. Students experience direct microaggressions from both service users and agency staff while they also witness microaggressions happening to others, including clients. In addition, for racialized students, navigating microaggressions also connects to how they make meaning of their personal and professional selves. BIPOC field instructors also experience microaggressions in unique ways given their role; for instance, BIPOC field instructors in this study noted the ways that their knowledge and/or authority was questioned by dominant culture students. Across both students and field instructors, some of the common negative impacts of these experiences were: emotional toll (and often invisible) labor and effects on professional identity and confidence. Findings from this research suggests that in order to understand and address racial microaggressions in a meaningful way in field education, we must attend to varied dimensions of these experiences in our agencies as well as in our curricula.

Based on the learnings from this research, in the section that follows, we make recommendations to the social work field on ways to address microaggressions in the

context of field education. These include understanding microaggressions in their ecological context and unpacking the construct of professionalism. There are also concrete steps field education programs can take immediately to address microaggressions, including: expand notions of self-care to incorporate community care and attention to impacts of racism and oppression; train field instructors and agency staff; use the supervisory space to increase students' critical consciousness; integrate conversations about microaggressions into field seminar and site visits and; support more research on BIPOC field experiences.

Ground Understandings of Microaggressions in an Ecological Approach

The ecological approach centers the reciprocal relationships which exist between the individual and their environment across micro, mezzo and macro levels (Abramovitz & Sherraden, 2016). A significant finding in this study was that microaggressions were experienced and witnessed by students, their fellow interns, field instructors, and service users. When organizational culture, policies, and practices are factored in, it is clear that microaggressions are ecological – they occur at the individual level with students and field instructors, the mezzo level at staff and community meetings, as well as within organizational structure and society at large. Also, though it is beyond the scope of the discussion presented here, students also shared experiences of structural racism that they witnessed in their agencies—thus, again, highlighting the importance of understanding racism in field in a broader context.

An ecological approach to microaggressions also understands that microaggressions are linked to larger structural conditions (i.e., structural and systemic racism), and if these structural links are not clearly delineated, then microaggressions have the potential to get reduced to individual/interpersonal behaviors— which could further an individualistic, neoliberal perspective that places blame on individual and interpersonal behaviors as opposed to a focus on dismantling oppressive structural conditions. In situating microaggressions within an ecological context, social work education is charged to acknowledge microaggressions as insidious and endemic, place microaggressions within a larger understanding of institutionalized racism, and tangibly consider the ways it affects all levels of practice for racialized social workers.

Unpack the Concept of Professionalism

BIPOC students and field instructors in the present study shared the myriad ways they were made invisible and/or othered within their agencies, such as when they were confused with another BIPOC person at the agency, were not viewed as the social worker, or were assumed to be service users. Issues around professionalism also arose when participants sensed that they could not bring their whole selves into the work due to feeling a disconnect between their personal and racialized identities and professional identities.

Given that field education is a site for professional socialization and identity development and the impacts of microaggressions on these processes for students of color, attention to how we think about professionalism is necessary in determining how to best

nurture the growth of racialized social workers. As Badwall (2015) shared, there remains an implicit tension between being a racialized person and the stated ideals of the social work profession. Further, professional standards can often reinforce dominant culture values and ideologies (Gray, 2019). Central to addressing microaggressions in social work field education is the unpacking of the discourse of professionalism. Namely, that professionalism is a dominant culture construct that has historically marginalized racial minority groups (i.e., discussion on Flexner in literature review; Badwall, 2015; Mehrotra et al, 2019), and that continues to be reinforced in placement settings where BIPOC students and practitioners are implicitly and explicitly told that they do not belong in those settings, and must assimilate in order to validate their credentials. To address microaggressions in practice, social work educators and practitioners must discuss the complex construct of professionalism in classes, in field seminars, and during supervision. We must ask, what would it look like to socialize BIPOC social workers into a field that acknowledges the impact of race on the practice experience, and defends their right to practice in ways that validate theirs and their community's histories and lived experiences?

Expand Notions of Self-Care

Students and field instructors in the present study spoke of the emotional toll of experiencing and witnessing microaggressions. It is therefore woefully apparent that the harm caused by racial battle fatigue (Smith, 2008) cannot be undone without an expanded discourse around self-care for communities of color within the field of social work. Acknowledging the reality and impact of microaggressions makes room to address an issue which can make practice emotionally, physically, and psychologically exhausting in unique ways for BIPOC social workers. We must expand the discourse of self-care to explicitly include rest from the emotional labor of navigating microaggressions and discuss community care as a tool to challenge individualist notions of care.

Community care is the idea that a group's needs are best met when members come together and share responsibility in ways that facilitate trust and reciprocity (Sambile, 2018). In her now viral 2019 post, community organizer Nakita Valerio exclaimed, "shouting 'self-care' at people who actually need 'community care' is how we fail people" (Valerio, 2019, para. 4). Her quote highlights something many historically marginalized groups already know – a simple bubble bath may feel pleasant but does not interrupt the systemic oppression marginalized groups face on a daily basis.

As such, we recommend that social work programs offer community care options for BIPOC students and field instructors. These could include spaces in field seminars where BIPOC students can have conversations with each other about the realities of their field experience and process about microaggressions. Schools can also offer CEU events, donate their space to community organizations doing racial justice work, and host mentoring and networking events specific to BIPOC social workers to support community care efforts.

Training for Field Instructors and Agency Staff

The current study illustrates the pervasiveness of microaggressions in agency contexts – it is experienced by students, field instructors and service users. Both students and field instructors navigated how to call out racism, interrupt microaggressions, and educate others on top of their work responsibilities. For students in particular, microaggressions affected their learning in field and their professional growth. Since racism is deeply entrenched in society (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Solórzano & Bernal, 2001) and in our field, it is vital that field instructors and agency staff are trained to expect, and react to racial microaggressions and incidents in field placements, especially since we know that the broader agency context matters when crafting meaningful field experiences for students of color (Mehrotra & Gooding, in press). Therefore, another way social work education can address microaggressions in field is to offer racial justice and skills-based trainings on racism-related topics, including interrupting microaggressions, to all agency staff who interact with students.

Since not all practitioners are ready or willing to engage in conversations about race and practice, trainings are key to the development of their critical consciousness. Fortunately, there are already systems in place to make trainings accessible to field instructors and agency staff. Many social work programs offer year-long seminars in field instruction for supervisors, alongside CEU events. These are perfect spaces for staff who work with students to engage in racial dialogue, process its effects on their own and their students' practice, and gain relevant training on interrupting oppressive language and acts. It is important to note that trainings are one piece of the puzzle. As Finn and Jacobson (2008) highlight, "the everyday struggle for social justice demands ongoing vigilance, resistance and courage" (p. 15). Therefore, addressing structural racism is a continuous process and should be approached as such, but training can be an important step in supporting racialized students and field instructors in placement settings.

Integrate Discussions about Microaggressions Into Supervision, Field Seminar, and Site Visits

Findings in this study showed that students experienced and were affected by various microaggressions in placement settings. Therefore, supervisors must have conversations with BIPOC students about microaggressions they may be experiencing and/or witnessing and how to navigate their professional identity as a racialized person. In fact, the ability for field instructors to discuss issues of race and racism is critical to meaningful field experiences for students of color (Mehrotra & Gooding, in press). Therefore, students and field instructors must be able to speak frankly about how structural issues – particularly around race – may be at play within the supervisory relationship, within the agency, and in the profession. In doing so, supervisors model how to engage in conversations about race and practice, and help facilitate feelings of trust and safety in the supervisory relationship.

Field seminar is another important site for social work educators to attend to microaggressions in field. Seminar instructors and field liaisons are often the first point of contact for students experiencing issues during their placements; especially if they are

unable to discuss any issues they are having with their field instructor. Therefore, curricula for field classes must incorporate content and discussions about microaggressions, such as how to interrupt them, its impacts on the practice experience, as well as the emotional labor that takes place when practicing with a client or colleague who holds biased opinions about your racial community. In doing so, all students – BIPOC or otherwise – have a chance to think about what microaggressions mean for their field placement experiences, and are better equipped to interrupt them when they arise.

In order to address racial incidents in field and to support BIPOC students, social work educators must engage in meaningful conversations about race in field placements. Site visits provide another way for instructors and liaisons to take the lead on creating a safer field environment for their students. At these visits, it is useful to ask questions such as: How do you engage in conversations about race and racism in placement and during supervision? How does agency policy address racial incidents when they occur? What supports and resources do you as the field instructor need in order to interrupt oppression at your agency? These questions help to normalize discussions of race and racism and illustrate that the social work program is serious about the emotional, psychological, and physical safety of its BIPOC students, and is committed promoting anti-racist practice in field.

More Research on BIPOC Experiences in Field

The final way social work can challenge microaggressions is to learn more about how they operate in field education as well as how they impact students' learning and field instructors' experiences with students. To date, the research on BIPOC students and social workers is very limited, and even more so in regard to field education. This project was conducted as part of a larger exploratory study broadly looking at field placement experiences of BIPOC students and field instructors. We did not ask questions specific to microaggressions, yet these incidents emerged from participants discussing their experiences of field education more broadly. Future research should ask questions specific to racism and microaggressions in field so that social work can better understand race and the practice landscape from the perspectives of BIPOC social workers. In addition to race, students and field instructors are likely experiencing microaggressions due to gender, sexuality, immigrant status, disability (etc.), all of which require future exploration. Furthermore, microaggressions present differently across racial groups and more research is needed on how structural oppression informs the microaggressive experiences for specific racial groups. Per our findings, it is also necessary to explore the ways power dynamics are complicated when a BIPOC social worker experiences microaggressions from a service user they are working to support, or when BIPOC field instructors experience racism from White students. Finally, more research is needed to learn the myriad of ways BIPOC social workers respond when they encounter microaggressions in their practice. For instance, in our study, some participants spoke to their supervisors, some deflected, and some directly addressed the issue with the perpetrator. Learning more about BIPOC experiences of experiencing and witnessing microaggressions will help other racialized social workers consider how best to address microaggressions in their own practice.

Limitations

While this study's sample reflects the demographics of the study location, it is not representative of the BIPOC community as a whole. For example, there was limited representation of indigenous social workers, participants who identified as immigrants and refugees, or African-Americans. Given the realities of colonization and anti-Blackness, these perspectives are necessary to the conversation. In addition, this project took place in a predominantly White city within a predominantly White state. Microaggressions may present differently in a more ethnically, racially and culturally diverse geographic location. Finally, we mentioned earlier that this project emerged from a larger exploratory study on BIPOC field experiences. Therefore, we have only captured some of the ways microaggressions affect the practice experiences of BIPOC students and field instructors.

Conclusion

Microaggressions are pervasive, complex, inherently harmful, and negatively impact the experiences of BIPOC students and field instructors in field education settings. Microaggressions are not isolated incidents but are sites for white supremacy and racism that must be addressed in order to promote racial equity in social work education, and to embrace anti-racist praxis. Toward this end, we must do the following within field education: ground microaggressions within an ecological approach, unpack the concept of professionalism, expand notions of self-care to include community care and attention to the emotional toll of racism, train field instructors and agency staff, use the supervisory space to increase students' critical consciousness, integrate discussions about microaggressions into field seminar and site visits, and conduct more research on BIPOC experiences in field.

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