

Uniting Macro and Micro Practice Enhances Diversity Training

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Abstract: Social workers with two different practice orientations developed a diversity training format that draws upon the major components of each approach. Using cultural-relational critical thinking theory as a foundation, the team engaged participants at two different types of settings to learn about racial and class microaggressions and micro-inequities. The goal of the training and workshop was to have participants assume responsibility in identifying and advocating against such oppressive behaviors.

Keywords: microaggressions, micro-inequities, cultural-relational, critical thinking, shame, cognitive dissonance, White privilege, equality and equity, diversity and inclusion

The year 2015 marked the coming together of two African American social work practitioners with different perspectives on the field. Dr. XYZ is a macro-practitioner, with years of experience as a trained mediator and organizational analyst. Dr. ABC is a micro-practitioner with family therapy systems training and years of clinical practice. We combined forces to enhance professional development for social workers to address race and class inequities in work and social environments with special attention to microaggressions. Our collaboration is a combination of systems assessment and individual experiences. The result is an approach that makes the discussion of such potent and uncomfortable topics as race and class possible for small and large groups.

Our goal is simply to facilitate respect and appreciation for diversity and to build multicultural competency. We aim to increase the desire for cross-cultural connections by providing safe opportunities for participants to reflect upon their own cross-cultural experiences, while valuing different perspectives and differing points of view. Disconnections in interpersonal and group relations fuel oppression. Positive connections over time push up against racism and oppressive ideology, thereby supporting the building and sustaining of diverse and inclusive communities.

By implementing interactive diversity training, as part of professional development, we can expose hierarchical and lateral microaggressions and offer a dialogic response for transforming diversity conflict. Thus, we facilitate not only diversity at all levels, but also bring all perspectives into the discussion while identifying a plan of healing and reconciliation. We want participants to commit to identifying what they can do to make a difference. Our purpose in working with groups is not to engage the individuals in a cathartic experience from which they leave feeling vindicated and having done the necessary work. Ours is a transformational work that requires each person to take on the role of a leader responsible for addressing microaggressions.

Aim of Diversity Training

Aim #1: Increase awareness and recognition of microaggressions in social work practice situations of one's own unconscious biases, and of the impact of those on practitioners and service to client populations

Aim # 2: Enhance appreciation of the difference between equality and equity and the impact on opportunity and access

Aim # 3: Manage shame and cognitive dissonance that result when new information conflicts with existing beliefs or values by increasing critical thinking skills

Aim # 4: Manage expectations and negative experiences with past training that may discourage participants from fully engaging

Defining Microaggressions

Why is raising consciousness of racial and class microaggressions training important in social work? As we consider the question of microaggressions, we must appreciate that they are the tool of oppression and they limit opportunity for equity and fairness by portraying and relating to another person as “less than.” Microaggression is a term first identified by psychiatrist Charles M. Pierce, a former Harvard University professor and researcher in the 1970s. Microaggressions are everyday occurrences. They are defined as brief, subtle, and often not entirely understood behaviors, slights and indignities that convey that an individual or group is lacking or unworthy. Microaggressions can also be expressed as bias and stereotypes enacted both consciously and unconsciously by a group with perceived higher status over a group with perceived lower status, known as hierarchical microaggressions (Young, Anderson, & Stewart, 2015).

We tend to think of microaggressions in the context of a hierarchical and power differential, where one group (the in group) has greater power, authority, and privileges over another group (the outgroup). In the United States this gets expressed as Whites with privilege over Blacks, who are oppressed. Ross (2014, p. 24) explains, “we usually see people in the context of the ideas we have developed about 'those kinds of people.'” That kind of bias can lead to paranoia and the need to be on guard for an attack on one's character and abilities. This is the problem that many Blacks confront daily. Dr. ABC shares the following from when she was a graduate student:

When I was a master's-level social work student, I was one of ten African American students, the largest number in the history of that program, entering the first semester of study in Fall 1969. As you might imagine, we often found ourselves as the only student of color in a course of 15 to 20 students. As we were studying Montalvo, Guernsey, Rosman, Schumer & Minuchin's (1967) *Families of the Slums: An Exploration of their Structure and Treatment* in our first-year practice class, I was asked by a fellow student what it was like living in the projects. Since that had not been part of my experience, I assured her that I could not speak to it. The subject was dropped without the instructor taking advantage of a teachable moment to explore the assumptions inherent in the question and to challenge all students about prejudging situations. That microaggression caused me, from that point on, to be on guard for the expectation of my white classmates to assume things about my background or their expectation that I should represent my people.

Hierarchical microaggressions can also negatively affect access to opportunities. They can

hinder work relationships that would otherwise provide mentoring and other supportive opportunities. They undermine leadership and can negatively affect worker performance, while chipping away at organizational effectiveness. Young et. al (2015) point out that roles have an impact on why organizations may tolerate microaggression. In higher education, one's status and rank impact privileges and authority. For example, students have less authority than faculty, and staff generally have less authority than faculty, especially tenured faculty. Yet Black faculty and faculty of color often have problems being perceived as authoritative and knowledgeable by White students and White colleagues. When a person is in an adjunct or instructor role, this problem can be even more apparent. This was Dr. XYZ's dilemma as an adjunct instructor teaching a required graduate social work course on multicultural competency to a class of mostly White students.

During the first class after students had an opportunity to introduce themselves, I asked them to briefly share their previous experiences with racism. I was hoping to hear situations they experienced directly or knew from someone they interacted with who was treated negatively because of their skin color or race. Perhaps they had a reaction to one of the readings on racism or a reaction to something they read outside of class or saw on television or social media. To my surprise, students opined that they wanted to give me, their Black instructor, an opportunity to share. They wanted to show me compassion and give me time to share my story. However, it felt like subtle disrespect. I remember thinking: How did I become the subject of their experiences with racism? Were they expecting this class to be about me and my experience with racism? Not feeling particularly oppressed that day, I turned the situation around and asked them to share their experiences with white privilege. That didn't go over very well.

In the scenario described above, students expected to examine racism from a “white privilege” perspective of compassion, notwithstanding the instructor could not share in white privilege as an African-American woman. White privilege permitted well-intentioned students to challenge the authority of the instructor and, at the same, de-value the instructor's knowledge while relating to the instructor as an oppressed person. Asking students to examine their experiences of being white could have opened the door to a wonderful learning opportunity, which highlights their own concerns, assumptions, and misconceptions about their own experiences. Unfortunately, individuals often attack when they feel uncomfortable.

I used the situation to engage students in a dialogic process to better understand what just happened—to be transparent about the emotions behind their reactions and my response.

Suspending judgment opens the door to critically thinking about different points of view, assumptions, biases, worldviews, and the decisions we make. A lesson learned is to first recognize and acknowledge the multiple identities that students and the instructor may have. Some social identities may be visible, while others may be hidden. An open discussion that acknowledges the experiences of individual students helps to keep everyone engaged. Students learn how we may have different experiences, yet share similar concerns about racism and oppression. This not only effectively manages students' expectations, but lays the groundwork for making positive connections.

Takeaway: A discussion of racism should appreciate, respect and value the experiences of individuals who have experienced discrimination because of sexual identity, gender, ethnicity, nationality, age, or ability. However, participants should be guided to recognize their own personal bias and broaden their understanding of racism and discrimination from different perspectives.

A final consideration in identifying microaggressions is connected to professional status and client advocacy. Social workers should be trained to be keenly aware of how racial and class microaggressions may be experienced by the communities we serve and members of our profession on at least two levels. A dilemma faced by social workers that results in a type of double whammy is the fact that they must often confront oppression in their professional roles while also looking out for negative factors confronting the communities served. In child welfare, frontline practice, for example, social workers generally have less authority to mandate outcomes than attorney advocates, judges, psychologists, and physicians.

An example of the resulting oppression is how social workers are increasingly expected to cope with the cross pressures of advocating for children and their families, while navigating organizational microaggressions that significantly limit their effectiveness. For racial minorities and women, especially, these microaggressions can escalate into racial and gender micro-inequalities, which over time have a cumulative effect. Rowe (1990) posits that micro-inequities limit opportunities for professional development and advancement, and can lead workers to lose confidence and focus. Unfortunately, micro-inequities are often overlooked because they operate below the compliance radar of organizational Equal Employment Opportunity mandates.

Considering that reality, we offer a safe space for social work professionals to focus solely on taking care of themselves. Our training exposes these hierarchical and lateral microaggressions and micro-inequities by employing a relational-cultural framework and critical thinking to guide participants in a process of self-reflection, assessment, and reevaluation. This process facilitates an awareness of one's own experiences and perspectives in response to microaggressions.

Beginning Where Participants Are

Social workers come to the training experience with their own worldviews (e.g., beliefs, values, and experiences) and different ways of knowing. High engagement creates a learning environment where participants are open to information that challenges their held beliefs and assumptions in ways that promote learning. Engagement supports connections. Whereas Miller and Stiver (1998) argued that the desire for more connections is not only how relationships are formed but offers the opportunity for healing connections, especially for women.

Sue (2015) argues that people shut down, withdraw, avoid, and deflect to draw attention from their own implicit acts of subtle oppression. In diversity training situations, deflective actions often take the form of blaming the instructor to avoid engaging and confronting racism and classism. Some diversity training, to encourage inclusion, tries to make everyone comfortable by avoiding hot topics, with little attention to building connections among participants.

Unfortunately, such accommodations often result in placing those who experience disparate treatment in the uncomfortable position of having to convince members of the “privileged” group of the importance of identifying racial and class microaggressions and micro-inequities that are the “norm.” In those instances, culture and identity are held onto at the expense of another person.

What can facilitators/trainers do to engage participants in discovery about their own assumptions and interpretations, as they experience diversity training? Our approach is to engage participants within the first fifteen minutes of training to develop connections among participants and us. In addition, we facilitate a shared emotion with which everyone can relate before beginning training to lay the foundation for our learning community's connecting with each other. We model and nurture the necessity to stay connected throughout the training. Making connections is what allows us as diversity trainers to take a deep dive with participants into complex and difficult discussions on race and microaggressions with ease.

We have found, also, that too often in discussions about racial and class microaggressions and micro-inequities, the terms equality and equity are used interchangeably. However, the terms are quite different in meaning and application. Clarification of the differences is necessary, since such usage does not fit the experience of those who confront disparate treatment. Equality is defined as freedom from discrimination according to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (<https://www.eeoc.gov>). Historically, gains in equality have not resulted in access to opportunities and full inclusion. Clarification of the difference is needed since “equality” does not always reflect the experiences of African Americans. Structural barriers can remain intact when equality is the goal, whereas equity requires an assessment of the barriers and action to remove them.

Regarding an experience she had at the age of eleven, Dr. ABC stated:

*I was exposed to the most horrific experience of my life. I was told that the school I attended would be closed because the county in which I was living at the time refused to integrate. The “separate but equal” legal orientation of our country was being challenged because the schools for Black students in Prince Edward County, Virginia, while separate were nowhere near equal to those attended by Whites. The county became part of the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case; however, the public schools remained closed for five years while public monies were directed to private schools for White students. The purpose of that lawsuit was for equity and not just equality.*

We made the decision as trainers to incorporate the African American experience because much of the anti-racism work in North American society is to get Whites to listen to African-American voices to effect social change. However, White participants often have difficulty participating in discussions that confront bias, bigotry, and racism. Fear and shame can limit candid sharing of experiences. Roy (2002) explains the problem this way: These discussions are “surrounded by thick institutional forces that, often unintentionally, define the universe as white and discourage diverse participation” (p. 1). As trainers, we offer a safe space for all participants, where individuals can focus on taking care of themselves, e.g., share their experiences with oppression respectfully, without the pressure or need to counsel others.

The training that we have developed exposes the microaggressions that African Americans confront from racism, which is not to negate similar experiences of others. Because skin color is the most immediate differentiator of inclusion/exclusion globally, hierarchical, and lateral microaggressions and micro-inequities experienced by the African American can shed light on experiences shared by other groups. Managing affective, cognitive, and behavioral reactions is an important part of facilitating diversity training and should not be overlooked. Rowe (1990) warns that people of color are perceived differently, and subtle discrimination and subtle negative messages that people of color receive can have a cumulative negative effect. Left unchecked, these problems can cause disconnection and make the training environment caustic and potentially dangerous.

We believe that all participants have their own unique story to tell, and it is the telling of the story that creates the connections that are necessary for the work to occur. The challenge is to maintain that connection during the training. Employing a relational-cultural framework (Miller et al., 1998) supports a process of self-reflection and reevaluation that, as we have found, facilitates an awareness of each participant's own experiences and perspectives in response to microaggression, and lays the foundation for participants to effect change outside of the training. Every training is different; however, it is necessary to facilitate the feeling of connectedness among participants and between the participants and trainer(s) within the first 15 minutes of the training.

What Participants Gain

Participants tell us that they value the opportunity to share their experiences without having to defend or justify their perspective. They learned the value of sharing their truth and building the courage needed to stand up for that which they care. They wanted to detect personal bias and incivility and challenge assumptions. There was evidence of some change in approaching the identification of microaggressions, while holding onto a non-confrontational mode. Finding their voices encouraged them to speak out and risk participating in difficult conversations about racism and classism. Participants shared:

“I need to challenge my assumptions, conduct research, and lean into discomfort.”

“Be honest about feelings and acknowledge my power to change.”

“When I realize I made a mistake [microaggressions], I will apologize to the other person and listen to others' experiences and what I could do differently.”

“I am going to ignore the ignorant,’ as my grandmother said. I want to keep doing my best to be my best.”

Our Work

During a college presentation titled “Killing Me Softly: Raising Campus Consciousness of

Racial and Class Microaggressions,” we engaged diverse members of the campus community in a 6-hour diversity training and dialogue. We began by introducing them to a relational-cultural framework for building community that integrates race, socioeconomic diversity and inclusion with critical thinking, equity, and civility perspectives. The purpose was to facilitate a deeper understanding of that diverse community's need for awareness, appreciation, and connections (nurturing relationships). Since culture impacts relationships, we employed Paul and Elder's (2012) critical thinking model to enhance critical thinking about diversity and promote positive connections and equity (fairness) within the campus community. We aimed to promote change by detecting and reducing microaggressions that lead to chronic disconnection within the campus. A relational-cultural approach to diversity and inclusion involves a four-step process:

- Step #1 Checking implicit personal bias and incivility
- Step #2 Thinking critically about difference
- Step #3 Understanding the diversity culture
- Step #4 Repairing relationships damaged by diversity tension

In the second half of the training, we facilitated a diversity dialogic process for actively listening, especially when diversity tensions are high. Participants were divided into small groups with dialogue facilitators. Through guided discussion and the application of the ethic of discourse (e.g., sincerity, openness, respect), we guided and modeled non-judgmental listening—without giving advice or attempting to question the motive behind the perspectives shared.

We also worked with a group of African American social workers where we conducted a two-hour workshop titled “Microaggressions and Micro-inequities in Social Work Practice.” This training exposed the types of hierarchical and lateral microaggressions (devaluing) and micro-inequities that African American social workers often confront within their professional roles. Participants freely shared about the tension between advocating for consumers in systems of service that consistently deny them fair treatment while needing to protect themselves from the same system that can deny them equitable treatment and professional advancement. The workshop afforded participants the opportunity to experience a powerful dialogic tool for addressing microaggressions when equity is sought. Take-aways included the importance of self-care and finding mentors to support and nurture their professional development. They learned strategies for navigating hierarchical microaggressions, so as not to expend energy unnecessarily convincing others of the legitimacy of their experiences with oppression. Considering recent events covered in the media regarding race and the criminal justice system, we offered participants a critical analysis of what happened, while engaging participants in a collective sharing and understanding of oppression, power, and culture.

Conclusion and Recommendations

We affirmed the value of combining micro and macro social work practice in our approach to diversity training. Together we addressed both structural oppression and personal implicit bias. The joining of our micro-macro perspectives was needed to guide participants through a very challenging process. Without diminishing the significance of experience with racial and class

microaggressions and micro-inequities, we effectively helped participants to stay in the moment to encourage growth as opposed to revisiting old wounds. Diversity trainers have an obligation to limit the potential for harm to participants, especially when training is a requirement for continued employment or professional development. Diversity work necessitates a good degree of transparency on the part of participants. Trainers must establish trust at all levels, that is, trust in the trainer's ability to facilitate difficult conversations and trust in the dialogue process. Our collective experience ensured that we could successfully meet the participants at their point of need and leave them with a desire for more.

Diversity education and training must be more than an academic pursuit. A necessary component is one that builds capacity to learn new information, especially when it challenges held beliefs and values. Engaging students and professionals in a process that starts them on an ongoing learning track will be most beneficial. Our approach seeks to sustain interest on the part of participants in confronting microaggressions and micro-inequities relative to race and class. This approach should be included in new-worker orientation as well as ongoing professional development. Our hope is to have macro and micro practitioners recognize and value that each perspective lends to interventions that holistically and strategically address the problems of exclusion and inequities.

The next level of training must not only expose participants to the reality of microaggressions, especially, but also to strategies for managing them. The perpetrators must be held accountable for their thinking that allows them to voice and act out oppressively, while the targets learn how to address the microaggressions head on, thereby not absorbing the pain and shame. Further work is needed to make sure the result is equitable treatment by all parties.

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