

“Black People Are Not My Thing”: Microaggressions Experienced by Black Graduate Students in Social Work Programs

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Abstract: Black students do not receive an equitable education to that of White students despite attending the same schools and receiving the same instruction (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009). An inequitable education is primarily due to White supremacy, ongoing racism, microaggressions, and anti-Black sentiments that Black students experience in institutions of higher learning, which impacts their educational experiences, overall health, and well-being (Nakaoka & Ortiz, 2018; Smith et al., 2020). The social work profession should lead efforts to dismantle racism, given the profession’s code of ethics. However, the profession must look inward and address its racism and white supremacist attitudes and beliefs. The purpose of our paper is to explore microaggressions Black graduate students in social work programs have endured in institutions of higher learning and to issue a call to action for the social work profession to strengthen its commitment to the profession’s core values and ethical code.

Keywords: Black students, graduate students, microaggressions, schools of social work

In 1896, the Supreme Court decided in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that racial segregation of public resources was legal as long as what Black people received was equal to Whites (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1895). Although this Supreme Court decision was reversed in 1954 by *Brown v. the Board of Education*, integrating schools has not addressed the fact that Black students do not receive an equitable education to that of White students despite attending the same schools and receiving the same instruction (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009). An inequitable education is primarily due to White supremacy, ongoing racism, microaggressions, and anti-Black sentiments that Black students experience in institutions of higher learning, which impacts their educational experiences, overall health, and well-being (Nakaoka & Ortiz, 2018; Smith et al., 2020).

White supremacy, racism, microaggressions, and macroaggressions are harming Black graduate students in social work programs nationwide (Nakaoka & Ortiz, 2018). What makes the injury worse is students do not expect to be harmed in programs that purport to believe in social justice, critical self-reflection, dignity and human worth, and antiracist and anti-oppressive practices (Gregory, 2021). Many Black graduate students seek out social work programs because they are believed to be safe havens from a racist world to provide them with the knowledge, skills, and tools needed to fight systemic racism and oppression. Additionally, Black graduate students also encounter curricula that perpetuate the same White supremacist ideologies as other professions by failing to offer complex, critical understandings of race, Whiteness, and privilege (Jeyasingham, 2012; Nylund, 2006). Taken together, these experiences leave Black graduate social work students disillusioned, angry, and feeling betrayed by the profession, causing them to question their choice of life work.

White supremacy and racism need to be dismantled in the United States. Social work educators and professionals should lead the effort given the profession’s code of ethics and beliefs in social justice (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2021) and antiracist and anti-oppressive practices (Brown et al., 2019; Nakaoka & Ortiz, 2018; NASW, 2021). Instead of leading the charge to become antiracist and anti-oppressive, the social work profession has, at best, drifted further away from this charge and, at worst, is complicit with and benefits from the harmful effects of racism (Aldana & Vazquez, 2020). However, before social work can dismantle and abolish racism, social work educators and professionals must look inward and first do the work of addressing their racism and white supremacist attitudes and beliefs (Gregory, 2021; NASW, 2020). Only then is there hope that microaggressions and other forms of oppression will no longer exist (Aldana & Vazquez, 2020). The purpose of this paper is to explore the various kinds of microaggressions Black graduate students in social work programs have endured in institutions of higher learning and to issue a call to action for the social work profession to strengthen its commitment to the profession’s core values and ethical code. Despite a great deal of literature on microaggression in higher education, microaggressions in social work programs need to be explored, particularly given a focus on antiracist social work practice.

Definition of Microaggression and Types of Microaggressions

Microaggression has been defined in various ways. Pierce (1970) proposed the term *microaggressions* in the 1970s to highlight the ongoing “subtle, stunning, often automatic, verbal and non-verbal exchanges towards minorities” (p. 266). Scholars have built on and extended Pierce’s work. According to Pinderhughes (1989),

Microaggressions are small acts, often subtle and out of the awareness of both people of color and Whites, that exploit, degrade, put down, and express aggression against people of color. These acts require people of color to monitor their helplessness and rage constantly—a necessity that takes a toll in terms of stress and health problems. (p. 84)

Miller and Garran (2007) equate microaggressions to “1,000 papercuts instead of one deep wound” (p. 97). Finally, Ogunyemi et al. (2020) defined microaggressions as

Brief commonplace, daily, verbal, nonverbal, behavioral, and environmental slights, insults, invalidations, and indignities, intentional or unintentional, directed toward a marginalized group, which are categorized as microassaults, microinsults, microinvalidations, and institutional microaggressions. (p. 97)

Scholars have identified six types of microaggressions:

- *Microinsults* often are subtle or unconscious to the perpetrator as they verbally and behaviorally make insulting, insensitive, rude, or demeaning comments or gestures toward another person racially different or otherwise (Ogunyemi et al., 2020; Sue et al., 2007).

- *Microinvalidations* are verbal or behavioral acts—intentional or unintentional—that exclude, deny, negate, invalidate, or nullify people of color’s ideas, beliefs, feelings, presence, or lived or experiential reality (Ogunyemi et al., 2020; Sue et al., 2007).
- *Microassaults* are verbal and behavioral derogatory or demeaning acts intended to physically, psychologically, or emotionally hurt individuals of color, which can range from name calling to willfully discriminatory actions to assault (Ogunyemi et al., 2020; Sue et al., 2007).
- *Institutional microaggressions* are institutional strategies used by individuals that intentionally or unintentionally create a hostile environment, use institutional avenues to harm or shut down another person, or engage in practices that privilege one group at the expense of another. Institutional microaggressions affect individuals’ success, satisfaction, or ability to benefit from and gain access to institutional services and resources (Ogunyemi et al., 2020; Sue et al., 2007).
- *Macroaggressions* are the cumulative effect of a life of microaggressions, which many would consider is a macro issue. Forrest-Bank and Jenson (2015) focused on longitudinal effects of the “type and nature of microaggression over time and find ways to account for the cumulative effect of microaggressions over the life course as well as intergenerationally” (p. 158). Druery et al. (2018) defined macroaggressions as “large scale or overt aggression toward those of another race, culture, gender, etc.” (p. 75). They believe this distinction is necessary, as in recent years, nothing has been minor or unintentional in the attacks on people and communities of color.
- *Mega-aggressions* is a term coined by Compton-Lilly (2020) that “describes particularly insidious and devastating enactments of micro/macroaggressions” (p. 1319).

Prevalence of Microaggressions

Studies report 90 percent of Black students experience microaggressions and racial discrimination daily compared to 20 percent of White students (Nakaoka & Ortiz, 2018; Ogunyemi et al., 2020). Overwhelmingly, Black students reported more negative, hostile, and racially charged campus environments. Ogunyemi et al. (2020) stated, “the prevalence of racial microaggressions in higher education is not decreasing, and all studies seem to suggest that it is highest for Black students” (p. 114). College campuses have become increasingly diversified, yet these environments have not changed their practices or curricula to reflect this shift. In many cases, colleges and universities are the first-time students confront cross-racial interactions, which provide ongoing opportunities for individuals to realize the world is multicultural and become comfortable with cross-racial interactions (Ogunyemi et al., 2020).

Various Incidents of Microaggressions

Microaggressions can range from being subtle to blatant, overt acts of racism. Studies have identified various types of microaggressions Black graduate students experience:

- Black students often endure speculation about their legitimacy in graduate programs, whereas White students are automatically assumed to be there because of merit (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009; Nakaoka & Ortiz, 2018; Williams et al., 2020).
- Black students received rude stares from non-Black people (Gomez et al., 2011; Shoge, 2019).
- Non-Black people avoid interactions with Black students (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2020; Ogunyemi et al., 2020).
- Black students are excluded from study groups and other campus spaces (Karkouti, 2016; Mirza, 2018; Soloranzo et al., 2000).
- Non-Black students had and expressed doubts about Black students’ academic ability (Nakaoka & Ortiz, 2018; Ogunyemi et al., 2020; Soloranzo et al., 2000; Williams et al., 2020).
- White students often have been afforded the right to comfort at the expense of other non-White students’ discomfort (Ogunyemi et al., 2020).
- If and when White students cry or express any negative emotions or feedback, people often come to the aid of the White student, even if the person harmed was a Black student (Wilson, 2012).
- Black students indicated their talents and abilities were often called into question, considered irrelevant, not valued, or considered unimportant because of the color of their skin (Espitia, 2016; Shoge, 2019).
- Black students were assumed to be less competent in some cases, so professors lowered expectations of those students, believing they could not excel in the same way as White students (Nakaoka & Ortiz, 2018).
- Black students often have not been given access to scholarships and financial help White students have been given (Walkington, 2017).
- Black students have been reported to administrators or university-level officials for expressing their opinions or perspectives (St. Amour, 2020).
- Black students have been excluded from events, clubs, and activities, which would make their overall graduate experience more meaningful (Williams et al., 2020).
- Black students must act in ways beyond reproach to be seen positively by White peers (Smith et al., 2020).

Scholars have noted microaggressions Black graduate students experience are innocuous and could be done by well-meaning individuals (Brown et al., 2019; Sue, 2010; Sue et al., 2007). Nonetheless, they have long-lasting psychological, emotional, behavioral, and physical effects on Black students’ wellbeing (Blume et al., 2012; Espitia, 2016; Sue et al., 2011).

Effects of Microaggressions on Black Students

Widespread research has documented the effects of persistent racism and microaggressions on Black students who attend predominantly White institutions (PWIs; Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009; Walkington, 2017). Microaggressions are often subtle, making them difficult to detect, particularly when the insult or invalidation is delivered with a smile or nonthreatening gesture or gaze (Ogunyemi et al., 2020; Sue et al., 2008). Identifying and calling attention to microaggressions is challenging for Black students because it may be embarrassing, particularly if their ability or mental state is called into question. Admitting someone’s verbal or nonverbal actions may have hurt them exposes Black students’ innermost vulnerabilities. Moreover, Black students often are afraid they may be accused of being in denial, blamed, or considered responsible for racial incidents (Espitia, 2016), all of which can make it challenging to identify a particular incident as racism or a microaggression.

The effects of repeated exposure to racist and discriminatory microaggressions tend to be cumulative and harmful to Black students (Ogunyemi et al., 2020). Microaggressions often contribute to Black students feeling *psychologically homeless* (i.e., Black people find it difficult to fit in, which leaves them without safe places to be themselves), invisible, silenced, and voiceless (Espitia, 2016; Hardy, 2017; Nakaoka & Ortiz, 2018). Torres-Harding et al. (2012) defined invisibility as “being treated as if one is not visible and being dismissed, devalued, ignored, and delegitimized by others because of one’s race” (pp. 155–156). Because White people’s experiences are considered normative, experiences or ideas different from “the norm” tend to render individuals invisible (Nakaoka & Ortiz, 2018). Consequently, invisibility resulted in Black students feeling a lack of trust and suspiciousness of other non-Black students (Kim et al., 2017).

Additionally, microaggressions result in Black students feeling silenced or voiceless. Microaggression constantly diminishes individuals’ self-esteem, fosters self-doubt, and promotes persistent feelings of incompetence (Espitia, 2016; Hardy, 2013). Finally, microaggressions also lead to Black students feeling psychologically homeless, which results from a lack of belonging, a lack of acceptance, always having their thoughts, ideas, and perspectives scrutinized, and feeling emotionally and personally unsafe (Espitia, 2016; Hardy, 1997). According to Espitia (2016), microaggressions are real encounters with a cumulative impact, increasing and eroding individuals’ psychological, emotional, and physical health and wellbeing.

Psychological and Emotional Effects

According to Morales (2014), Black students are tasked with negotiating racial microaggressions at PWIs, including feeling overburdened with the responsibility to educate

others. This task can lead to mental and physical exhaustion (Sue et al., 2008). Mental exhaustion is also associated with Black students having to prove themselves or work harder than their White counterparts (Ogunyemi et al., 2020). Though some faculty argue they treat all students the same—which is a form of colorblindness—denying there is an anti-Black sentiment even in social work programs is an extra burden Black students face. Blume et al. (2012) found an increased risk of anxiety, underage binge drinking, and adverse consequences of alcohol use among students of color experiencing high numbers of microaggressions. Black students also reported crying, leaving class, anger, hostility, needing to protect themselves, helplessness, and sadness (Ogunyemi et al., 2020). Microaggressions affect Black students’ overall quality of life (Sue et al., 2008).

Black students often experience stress and isolation connected to being one of a few Black students on campus. They are frequently subjected to hostile racial climates, often leading to depression, anxiety, and other types of mental health challenges (Hope et al., 2018). Microaggressions also exacerbate the stigma associated with seeking help for psychological and emotional health and well-being, compromising Black students’ mental health (Cheng et al., 2014). This situation is particularly challenging given the existing stigma in the Black community around mental health. According to Chatmon (2020), Black people who experience mental health challenges often are considered “weak, broken or not strong enough” (p. 1), which is problematic for cultures already inundated with negative stereotypes. Stigma—whether internally or externally imposed—leaves vulnerable people to shy away from seeking help, so they suffer in silence. As a profession, social work has been committed to eliminating barriers that limit access to services; understanding the role stigma plays in the Black community, particularly related to mental health, is critical.

Microaggressions also exacerbate the stigma associated with Black students’ experiences in programs of social work. Because stigma represents a stereotypical view of groups that are not a part of the dominant culture, disadvantage is assumed to have a stigmatizing effect (Burke, 2007). Within programs of social work, the curricula that is taught is often grounded in white supremacy and white cultural norms that serve as gatekeeping and stigmatizing among those who are different, such as Black students (Yearwood et al., 2021). Additionally, white supremacy within programs of social work holds whiteness as the default to which all groups, including Black students, are compared (Gooding & Mehrotra, 2021). Thus, the theories that are learned and practices engaged in, such as practicum educational experiences, perpetuate stigma.

Gooding and Mehrotra (2021) conducted a qualitative study with racially diverse students. Their findings revealed two types of microaggressions shared by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) student participants: They felt tokenized and invisible. Additional findings from this study highlight how attitudes from clients and other students (White students) impacted their psychological wellbeing. In fact, participants recalled racial microaggressions that minimized their identities and were disrespectful, patronizing, and dismissive of their experiences and knowledge. What these findings illustrate are the ways in which the attitudes of non-Black students are grounded in stigma about those who are different and that they affect Black students’ professional sense of self, as well as their psychological and emotional wellbeing. “If social work would ... take an honest look at our practices, our theories, our

policies, and our underlying worldview, we must admit that social work is guilty of perpetuating white supremacy” (Yearwood et al., 2021, p. ii).

Behavioral and Physical Effects

In addition to psychological and emotional effects, microaggressions can affect people behaviorally and physically. Fuller-Rowell et al. (2021) found subsequent sleep problems increased on days when participants experienced more discrimination. Among those who also experienced higher scores of internalized racism, the daily impact of discrimination on sleep problems was strongest. Microaggressions also left Black students exhausted and physically depleted (Ogunyemi et al., 2020).

Additionally, Smith et al. (2016) found microaggressions often make Black students susceptible to sickness and compromised immune systems, headaches, uneasiness, irritation, chronic pain, and elevated blood pressure. Microaggressions, racism, and racial battle fatigue among Black students caused anxiety, ulcers, cardiovascular disease, obesity, increased risk of heart disease, nightmares, erratic mood swings, and emotional and social withdrawal (Goosby et al., 2018; Soto et al., 2011). Black bodies can break down due to prolonged, ongoing exposure to microaggressions (Brondolo et al., 2009). These long-term health consequences can lead to premature death (Smith et al., 2016, 2020).

Gaps in Literature

Countless studies have documented the microaggressions Black students face in institutions of higher learning (Nakaoka & Ortiz, 2018; Ogunyemi et al., 2020). However, there is a dearth of studies which have looked at microaggressions in social work programs and other helping professions, as the harm caused to Black students could impact service delivery and the ability to help individuals and families (Ogunyemi et al., 2020).

Incidents of Microaggressions

The incidents presented in the next two sections are a combination of experiences drawn from the authors and other social work professionals affiliated with different institutions. These incidents are current, ongoing, constant, and have a cumulative effect. All of them have occurred at PWIs in social work programs located in the Midwest, West Coast, and Southern regions of the United States. To illustrate our point, the examples provided focus on the microaggressions that Black students and professors experienced primarily by White professors and colleagues. However, some incidents involved Black students who microaggressed against other Black students.

Consistently, Black students are being harmed in social work programs across the nation. The harm takes many forms, including microinsults, microinvalidations, microassaults, institutional microaggressions, macroaggressions, and mega-aggressions. Additionally, Black students have identified ways to react to microaggressions to mitigate and navigate the harm, stress, and anxiety related to these experiences.

Microinsults

Examples of microinsults in social work programs are:

- A White professor told Black students “Black people are not my thing” when the student asked how a theory applied to people of color.
- A White classmate indicated that a Black student was “hostile” and “aggressive” when they disagreed with the classmate.
- Several Black students were told by their White peers that they were “not like other Black people.” They are “different,” as if that was a compliment.
- Black students were called “Oreos”: Black on the outside but White on the inside by other Black students.
- Non-Black students and faculty put the onus and responsibility on Black students to teach them about Black people. They said to Black students, “How are we supposed to learn about Black issues if the Black students do not teach us?”
- White classmates asked Black students if they could use the “N” word. A student said, “Many of the songs I like, say it. I am just singing the song. It is not targeted at anyone. I do not mean anything by it.”
- White students dressed up in Blackface as a “ghetto” Black girl for Halloween.
- Black students faced challenges in their field placements or internships, not because they could not do the work, but because of differences in how Black students see the world from their White colleagues and supervisors. Thus, Black students have been penalized (e.g., lower grades, labeled as combative students) and deemed incompetent.

Microinvalidations

Examples of microinvalidations in social work programs are:

- Black students were excluded from social gatherings because they did not want the event to become “ghetto.”
- A White professor stated she understood Black people’s plight because she is vegetarian, and she “often is in spaces that do not offer nonmeat food options.”
- A Black student had a White classmate state in class that she “could relate to a wounded animal more than a Black person.”

- A White professor told Black students she “understands what it is like to be Black” because some of her aunts were considered witches.
- Black students told students or professors they were offended by a racist or offensive comment. They accused Black students of overreacting and being hypersensitive to the point of paranoia. In other instances, the offenders told Black students it did not happen the way they were portraying it, which Black students felt was a form of gaslighting.

Microassaults

Examples of microassaults in social work programs are:

- A White classmate touched the braids of a Black classmate and stated her hair “looked like cat hair.” When the Black student told the White student it was rude to touch her and say that, the White student started crying as if she was victimized.
- Black students talked about being verbally ganged up on in class and ostracized by White students and this carried over outside the classroom. For example, Black students passed White students in the hall, and they laughed or whispered about the Black students.
- Black students were called the “N” word and harassed by White classmates.
- White students with opposing opinions verbally and emotionally assaulted Black students during class discussions.

Institutional Microaggressions

Examples of institutional microaggressions in social work programs are:

- White students falsely reported Title IX violations to bring Black students up on charges, which ultimately were dismissed, but not before damage was done to students. One student was so distraught over the charges and potentially getting kicked out of school that they attempted suicide.
- Campus leaders did not want to enforce race and inequity training because they did not want to make White people feel uncomfortable or wronged in any way.
- Social work programs only provided resources (i.e., scholarships, class choices) to traditional students (i.e., on campus, full time, main campus), which happened to serve predominantly White students in those venues, leaving out nontraditional students (i.e., online, part time, and satellite campuses) who are predominantly Black students.
- Several White students intentionally tried to get a Black student dismissed from the program by submitting false reports and publicly “smearing the student’s name” and reputation. As a result, the Black student attempted suicide.

- White students told other White students to meet with their Black professor and cry at their meeting to get a better grade after failing a test.
- White students intentionally tried to get a Black female professor fired because she graded too rigorously and pushed White students beyond their comfort zone.

Strategies Students Used to Deal with Microaggressions

Black students have used various strategies to minimize the ongoing, daily microaggressions experienced in social work programs. Many students reported being resilient in the face of these microaggressions. Though resilience is noble, Black students should not have to be resilient to cope with hostile and indifferent campus climates.

Self-Blame and Self-Depreciation

Self-blame and self-depreciation are strategies Black students used to deal with microaggressions. Black students felt shame and guilt. They often blamed themselves for the treatment, believing the microaggression would not have happened if they were somehow different. These experiences often left Black students to feel unworthy and like imposters who only accidentally got into the program.

Emotional Breakdown and Suicidal Attempts

Black students were crying and breathing heavily in class. One student experienced such extreme harassment and bullying from White students they attempted suicide and were committed to a psychiatric unit.

Created Safe Space for Black Students

Black students were not welcomed or allowed in White spaces, so they created their own spaces for Black students. They created separate networks and took care of one another.

Tried Even Harder to Gain Acceptance

Black students worked hard to gain the respect and acceptance of White peers and faculty. Some went beyond what was expected to prove to other students and faculty they belonged, which often resulted in perfectionism and anxiety to prove themselves worthy.

Searched for Resources

Black students sought out resources to help them deal with stress connected to a hostile racial climate. Often, these resources were other Black faculty and staff. They sought out Black faculty and staff for support, solace, information, and help to navigate White spaces.

Disengaged

Black students disengaged and gave up trying to get the School of Social Work to change. Black students were frustrated professors did not interject and protect Black students in the same ways they interjected and protected White students. Disengagement often led to students biding their time and focusing on graduating from the program, which often resulted in not caring about changing the program for students who came after them. It was too painful for many Black students to remain engaged.

Left the Program

Black students left the program, which is significant because many students left with student loan debt and no degree in exchange for the debt. Nonetheless, their experiences were so difficult and challenging they could not remain in the program.

Left the Profession and Changed Their Major

Some Black students decided to leave the social work profession. They changed their major to STEM careers and, in other instances, to education or other kinds of helping professions that did not profess to have social justice as a core value.

No Longer Want to be Associated with the Social Work Profession

Some Black students finished the requirements and graduated from the program but decided not to pursue licensure or any social work-related job. These students felt they had given enough to the social work profession and refused to give any more. They want nothing to do with the social work profession or their social work degree. Though some students have displaced anger and rage at the social work profession, many Black students are indifferent. They no longer desire to be associated with the social work profession in any way.

Summary

Students reported these strategies as those used most often to deal with microaggressions. These strategies should not be classified as healthy or unhealthy because these strategies were in direct response to microaggressions and racism. According to Smith et al. (2020), “although higher education institutions tout their welcoming environment for students of color ... their predominantly White culture are settings that still enable racial microaggressions and discrimination toward African Americans” (p. 83).

Discussion

Many studies have found Black students experience microaggressions in PWIs (e.g., DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby Jr., 2016; Franklin, 2019; Ogunyemi et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2016, 2020). Black graduate students’ most commonly experienced microaggressions have been microinsults,

microinvalidations, microassaults, and institutional microaggressions (Ogunyemi et al., 2020; Sue et al., 2007).

This study makes two contributions. This study offers a slightly different definition of institutional microaggressions. The second contribution of the study is the focus on social work programs. The addition of institutional microaggression as a form of microaggressions is an important contribution. Ogunyemi et al. (2020) did not define institutional microaggressions, but they indicated institutional microaggressions resulted in “cultural starvation of minorities” and “institutional maintenance of an apartheid of knowledge, which tends to marginalize, discredit, and devalue the scholarship, of other cultures” (p. 107). In this study, institutional microaggressions referred to how non-Black students and those in leadership roles used institutions or hid behind institutions to mistreat or disregard Black students and faculty. On the surface, these acts may seem harmless or well within the rights of individuals; however, the intent behind the actions was to harm, exclude, or punish Black students and faculty who misbehaved or were deemed unworthy.

Social justice is a core value of the social work profession. Many students come to social work programs hoping these spaces would be a safe haven from racial harm because of the programs’ mission and core values (Nakaoka & Ortiz, 2018). When students are injured in places they believed safe, they often leave social work programs deeply wounded and disillusioned about the profession. In some cases, Black students left social work programs and changed their majors or career goals.

Though many people believe social workers should be leading and advocating for antiracist practices, the social work profession must first deal with its reluctance to embrace antiracist practices. There have been multiple calls to action: a NASW (2007) report titled “Institutional Racism and the Social Work Profession: A Call to Action” and a report from the Social Work Policy Institute (2014) titled “Achieving Racial Equity: Calling the Social Work Profession to Act.” According to NASW (2020), social work “cannot maximize its mission and fully actualize its core values without advocating to reform, dismantle, or even abolish the racist and oppressive systems we may work within and beside” (para. 2).

Many strategies Black students used to deal with microaggressions have been identified by other studies. Yosso et al. (2009) found Latino students created counter spaces in response to microaggressions they experienced in educational environments. Several studies identified emotional and psychological reactions to microaggressions. Ogunyemi et al. (2020) reported African American students experienced “self-doubt, discouragement, frustration, and exhaustion, which further negatively affected academic performance and goals” (p. 100). Ogunyemi et al. (2020) also found students searched for resources to help alleviate any problems associated with microaggressions. Sanchez et al. (2018) found Asian and Latinx students disengaged from academic environments to cope with microaggressions. That some students changed their major or refused to be associated with the social work profession is a new contribution to the study of microaggression experienced by students in higher education environments.

Overall, many microaggressions stem from anti-Blackness. The anti-Blackness not only comes from White students but also from other students of color. Despite being considered a student of color, many take solace because at least they are not Black. The fact this anti-Blackness occurs in social work programs is not a new occurrence. According to Haley (2020),

U.S. social workers have played an integral role in anti-Black sentiment as evidenced by (1) Endorsing the logic of Indigenous erasure in the U.S. and Canada by upholding the mythology that White people came first and were the developers of the land; (2) Endorsing the logic of anti-Blackness in the U.S. by upholding Black segregation policy required by organized White philanthropy; and (3) Endorsing the paradox of inclusion in respectability politics by being complicit with equal but separate treatment of Black women. (p. 217)

Black students encounter microaggressions and unsafe classroom spaces, which interfere with Black students’ learning and opportunities to receive an equitable education. Often, when a microaggression occurs in the classroom, Black students begin thinking about correcting the offender or letting it go. The stress and anxiety from these incidents often leave Black students wondering if they are too sensitive or whether their complaint is legitimate. If they decide to speak up, they are constantly worried about addressing the harm without crying, appearing angry or aggressive, or giving people more reasons to discredit them (Robinson, 2013). While Black students are processing this situation, instruction is still happening. Microaggressions can cause Black students to miss valuable education as they tend to the constantly reopened wounds throughout their time in graduate school (Nakaoka & Ortiz, 2018).

Though Black students can access the same educational environments as White students, they are not receiving an equitable education because microaggressions often cumulatively inflict “trauma, stress and emotional exhaustion” (Dennis, 2020, p. 10). The extra energy and internal resources students need to navigate microaggressions often cause hostile environments that can negatively impact and interfere with Black students’ educational experiences (Ogunyemi et al., 2020).

Implications for Social Work Education

According to Aldana and Vazquez (2020), “the attention social work education has given to racism has been sporadic and inconsistent throughout its history” (p. 137). Given the social, political, and cultural contexts in which they live, Black students’ experiences with racism and microaggressions in social work programs are often the antithesis of what they expect to experience in graduate programs grounded in social justice. Social work programs cannot ignore the amount of energy Black students exert, given their constant and cumulative experiences with racism and microaggressions. If social work programs fail to address racism and microaggressions Black students face, schools may begin to see decreases in the recruitment and retention of Black students.

Further, Black students suffer for remaining silent, ignoring, reporting, or taking any action to address the injustices they have experienced because of racism and microaggressions. In taking

action, Black students find themselves taxed and unable to remain committed to the field of social work because the fight to earn their degree was wrought with frequent and harmful exchanges. Various examples of microaggressions described by the authors are not unlike narratives from other Black students. For example, other studies described the psychological harm Black students experienced with microaggressions on campuses and how they undermine their sense of worth and belongingness (Minikel-Lacocque, 2013; Soloranzo et al., 2000; Williams et al., 2020).

Historically, limited attention has been given to the experiences of racism and microaggression in social work education (Aldana & Vazquez, 2020). Social work programs have an overwhelming responsibility to educate a diverse student body. However, social work programs can no longer miss critical opportunities to improve their understanding of Black students’ lived experiences with racism and microaggressions that occur in their buildings. Suggestions for students to submit complaints to offices of institutional equity or file a grievance are passive. Additionally, this redirection can cause further harm to Black students through isolation, intimidation, and even more severe psychological and physical health outcomes. By understanding the impact racism and microaggressions have on Black students inside and outside of the classroom, social work programs will be better positioned to address Black students’ complaints regarding such challenges. To address institutional microaggressions and create a positive racial climate on campuses for Black students, social work programs need a critical mass of Black students, faculty, and administrators that recognize the importance of their role to effectively alleviate the problem (Ogunyemi et al., 2020). Furthermore, social work programs need curricula that include the historical and contemporary experiences of Black people; offer programs institutionalized and support the recruitment and retention of Black students; and have an institutional mission that enforces a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (Ogunyemi et al., 2020).

According to the NASW (2020), “social workers have an ethical duty to dismantle racism, both personally and professionally, and to demonstrate what it means to be anti-racist” (para. 1). Now is an ideal time for schools to define what it means to no longer engage in racist practices in their programs. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021) declared racism a serious public health crisis. Surely social work programs can declare racism a serious social justice issue and begin to address this massive problem. We hope social work programs can actively work toward eradicating its complicity in racism and microaggressions by enhancing social workers’ ability to perceive, scrutinize, and challenge racial oppression (Aldana & Vazquez, 2020).

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