

# Melanated and Educated: A Scholarly Personal Narrative

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**Abstract:** I apply Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) in this paper as the research method to reflect on my academic experiences as a Latino within social work education. The four major components of SPN—pre-search, me-search, re-search, and we-search—facilitate my discussions on the racist encounters I have survived throughout my academic journey. Grounded in Latina/o Critical Theory (LatCrit) and Intersectionality Theory frameworks, I apply LatCrit’s testimonio (narrative) approach to explain the four major themes that emerged: assimilation and acculturation, barriers to education, microaggressions and racial gaslighting, and cultural taxation. I conclude with recommendations for recruiting and retaining men of color in social work education and discuss the potential benefits of cultural resemblance between instructor and student.

**Keywords:** men of color, social work education, LatCrit theory, intersectionality, racism

National data on graduation rates of students of color compared to their White counterparts reveal palpable disparities (Banks & Dohy, 2019). The national discourse has firmly focused on standardized test scores to justify these inequities, blaming the individual while simultaneously absolving academic institutions of their responsibility to abolish barriers to admission and retention that uniquely impact students of color (Au, 2016). Students of color attending predominantly White institutions are often subjected to racist assaults by their White peers and professors, impacting their academic performance and retention rates (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Harwood et al., 2018). The National Center for Education Statistics (2020) identified an overwhelming number of White faculty in higher education (40 percent White males; 35 percent White females) compared to Black (3 percent male; 3 percent female) and Latinx faculty (3 percent male; 3 percent female).

A renewed commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion proclaimed by academic institutions comes on the heels of the Black Lives Matter movement. Despite these claims, faculty of color, especially women, persistently and disproportionately face barriers navigating the academic pipeline to achieve tenure and promotion (Beeman, 2021). Students identified as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) seeking social work doctoral education in the US face multiple barriers to success (Tijerina & Deepak, 2014). Primary factors identified as challenges generally fall into two categories: admission barriers and retention challenges. Studies examining diversity in social work doctoral programs recognize a lack of academic support and mentorship, a need for financial aid, and racist experiences as factors that negatively impact both the admission and retention of BIPOC students (Creedy et al., 1979; Davis & Livingstone, 2016; Ghose et al., 2018; Tijerina & Deepak, 2014). To mitigate this issue, some scholars propose increasing faculty of color, establishing mentorship networks, and expanding academic and financial support to students of color (Ghose et al., 2018). However, the relationship between social work practice and higher education is steeped in the discrimination and exclusion of BIPOC students and faculty. Ignoring these historical patterns of racial exclusion within social work education perpetuates them into the present and ensures their existence in the future.

Recent findings from a survey of over 50 Master of Social Work (MSW) programs showed a majority of MSW graduates as White (57 percent), heterosexual (86 percent), and female (90 percent; Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2020). Changing demographics in social work over the past 30 years show a decline of men in the field and an increase in women in social work doctoral programs (Reisch, 2013). This demographic information suggests that the future of social work education and its engagement with interpersonal and systemic racism issues rests in the hands of a heterosexual, White, female majority. These findings support the need for more research to understand how having a disproportionate number of White postsecondary faculty impacts BIPOC students pursuing higher education. In conducting this Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN; Nash & Bradley, 2011), I shed light on my experience as a Latino in social work education in my role as a student and as a professor of the discipline.

Research integrated with personal identity investigation using SPN methodology is applied throughout this paper. SPN writing originates from early slave narratives and places the researcher front and center, legitimizing the first-person's singular perspective (Nash & Viray, 2013). This methodology involves a creative process of selecting relevant themes, sharing personal stories about those themes, and connecting the stories to scholarly works (Nash & Bradley, 2011). SPN applies to studies examining large institutions or analyzing classroom-specific dynamics and the wider academic community (Ng & Carney, 2017). The four major components of SPN—pre-search, me-search, re-search, and we-search—guide my self-reflection to discuss the institutional racism I have endured within academic settings. Within this article, the conceptual frameworks grounded on Latina/o Critical Theory (LatCrit; Valdes, 2005) and Intersectionality (Carbado et al., 2013) are applied as complementary methods to interpret and analyze the overarching themes of ethnicity, race, and gender diversity within academic institutions and social work education.

My intersectional identities and personally lived experiences are inherently intertwined and consequently influence my social work practice. Personal history informs my current role as a social work educator and inevitably shaped my academic work as a student. Similarly, social work's checkered history as a discipline reverberates in present-day practices. My experiences confronting racism within social work education explain how I arrived at this current personal and professional juncture. Currently, the visibility and rise of activist groups like the Black Lives Matter movement have heightened self-awareness among people of color, influencing Black and Brown people to use terms like “‘melanated’ to describe their love for their dark-colored skin” (Orey & Zhang, 2019, p. 2460). As a melanated and educated man persisting and resisting within the ivory tower, I offer my testimonio (narrative) to add to the few voices of Latinx men in social work education.

### **Theoretical Framework**

A theory is a set of ideas whose primary purpose is to explain the nature of a given phenomenon and the factors contributing to a phenomenon's manifestation (Johnson-Ahorlu, 2017). I apply the LatCrit methodology of testimonio (narratives) to describe my social work education experiences. Perez-Huber (2009) explains this methodology in the following way: “testimonio – [is] a verbal [or written] journey of a witness who speaks to reveal the racial, classed, gendered,

and nativist injustices they have suffered as a means of healing, empowerment, and advocacy for a more humane present and future” (p. 644).

### **Latina/o Critical Theory**

LatCrit theory is a contemporary of Critical Legal Studies and evolved from Critical Race Theory (CRT) to address concerns of Latina/o in legal discourses and social policy (Valdes, 2005). Closely interrelated to CRT, LatCrit analyzes issues raised in CRT and expands on language, immigration, ethnicity, culture, identity, phenotype, gender, and sexuality (Gonzalez et al., 2021). LatCrit scholars recognize the socio-legal inequalities institutionalized through generations of conquest and colonization that disadvantage Latinx communities (Valdes, 2005). LatCrit researchers aim to expose and confront the prevalence of discrimination and subjugation that produces disparate social and economic outcomes for Latinx people in the United States. With a primary goal of promoting social justice and equality, the theoretical method of LatCrit aligns with social work values and provides a valuable perspective to analyze social work practice and education (Kiehne, 2016).

### **Intersectionality Theory**

Intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, is rooted in Black feminism and CRT to address discrimination based on race and gender (Carbado et al., 2013). Intersectionality is multifaceted and is regarded as a framework, a theory, a paradigm, a method, a perspective, or a lens to analyze phenomena (Bubar et al., 2016). Intersectionality is critical for deconstructing institutional violence, power, and privileges, such as the disparate treatment and disproportionate rates of policing BIPOC communities by law enforcement (Carastathis, 2014). It simultaneously situates social identities and social locations regarding race, class, gender, and sexuality, drawing connections to the roles of the oppressed and oppressor (Bubar et al., 2016).

## **Literature Review (Re-Search)**

### **History**

In the US, the social work profession’s foundation was cross-cultural work with European immigrants. Assimilation methods in social work practice demanded immigrants renounce their culture, language, and ethnic institutions, generating a new “American” cultural group (Potocky, 1997). Some social workers in the Settlement House movement, like Jane Addams, focused on improving neighborhoods and changing social conditions and encouraged White European immigrants to maintain their cultural practices instead of reforming the individual (Reisch & Andrews, 2014). However, early social work services were directed exclusively toward White European settlers and deliberately excluded African Americans (Hounmenou, 2012). As social work strived to gain legitimacy as a profession, it aligned with a “scientific” approach in their practice. Adopting a pro-eugenics stance was sanctioned by the American Social Hygiene Association and endorsed by esteemed social work founders, including Jane Addams, Mary Richmond, Sophonisba Breckinridge, and Edith Abbott (Bromfield, 2016). In alignment with

eugenics, social workers targeted poor, non-White girls and women, supporting, in some cases, their forced sterilization and the deportation of non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants (Kennedy, 2008).

Additionally, the federal Indian boarding school program supported by social work reformers believed that they were rescuing Indigenous children from unfit families and providing them the opportunity for a successful future—aligning with the eugenics project (Kennedy, 2008). Between 1958 to 1968, the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) and the US Bureau of Indian Affairs initiated efforts to adopt Native American children into White families (Crofoot & Harris, 2012). During this period of family separation and forced assimilation, the CWLA required that a qualified social worker remain on staff. However, there were no requirements for cultural competency or title protection for social workers at the time. Regardless, the trauma and cultural genocide inflicted upon Indigenous people by social workers through the boarding school and Indian adoption eras left an indelible mark that persists in contemporary times (Thibeault & Spencer, 2019).

Since the Indian boarding school era and following the Civil Rights Movement, concerted efforts have increased ethnically/racially diverse social workers at MSW and doctoral levels (Anastas & Kuerbis, 2009). Yet, students and faculty of color remain woefully underrepresented in schools of social work, especially men (CSWE, 2020). During the 60s and 70s, social workers who earned doctorates were likelier to be male (Anastas & Kuerbis, 2009). However, more recently, compared to women, men in social work decreased in North America, the United Kingdom, and Australia (Giesler & Beadlescomb, 2015). Additionally, most social work students are women across the social work education continuum (CSWE, 2020). A barrier that deters men from considering social work as a career option is its framing as a caring profession and the association of caring with women (Pullen & Simpson, 2009). Men are perceived to have a different relationship with caring than women due to the social construction of masculinity (Pease, 2011). Men in social work programs may struggle with identity due to feeling pressured to perform masculinity while engaging in a traditionally female role of caring and compassion (Christie, 2001).

A content analysis of men's portrayal in introduction to social work textbooks positions women (i.e., Jane Addams and Mary Richmond) as pioneers of the profession while simultaneously erasing male social workers (Pease, 2011). Although some White men receive credit for contributing to the profession's evolution from the 1930s and beyond, these men presidents and legislators (i.e., Franklin D. Roosevelt and William J. Clinton) were not social workers (Giesler & Beadlescomb, 2015). Textbook depictions of social work uphold societal regards that it is a female-identified profession and suggest that male students pursuing social work education assume positions of power—perpetuating patriarchal norms (Christie, 2001). As men in social work, we are responsible for being critical of hegemonic masculinity and conscious of gendered injustices associated with male privilege (Pease, 2011).

### **Latinx Male College Students**

A deficit of information exists regarding the motivation to succeed and achieve academic and career goals among Latino college students. Educators may erroneously perceive Latinos as

unmotivated, lacking educational goals, and unlikely to succeed in college—contributing to our lack of representation in higher education (Salinas et al., 2020). Compared to other racial/ethnic groups, Latinos are more likely to drop out of high school to pursue employment, forego academic opportunities due to financial need, and not achieve college graduation due to poverty. Additionally, Latinos are more likely to attend impoverished schools and less likely to receive the necessary academic support to prepare us for higher education (Pérez, 2017).

The cultural value of familismo (familism) impacts Latinos' educational attainment as it may deter us from enrolling in college to contribute financially to support our family (Gloria & Castellanos, 2006). However, other important values such as respect, chivalry, and humility instilled by Latinx parents in their children foster social goals instead of academic pursuits. These values motivate one to succeed and sustain a desire to serve others (Pérez, 2017). To succeed academically, Latinos turn to peers to sustain familial and social capital relying on peer networks rather than college faculty and administrators for support (Flores & Patrón, 2021). Therefore, Latinos' academic success depends on cultural wealth rather than institutional conditions (Olcoñ et al., 2018).

### **Latinx Faculty**

Despite comprising the largest ethnic group in the US (Orozco-Figueroa, 2021), few Latinx people become faculty in university settings. Often, those who become faculty concentrate in Hispanic Serving Institutions and two-year colleges occupying low-status, non-tenure-track positions. Even though becoming a professor was ranked as the top choice for Latinx college seniors' occupations, few successfully navigate the academic pipeline to the professoriate—only 0.2 percent complete a doctorate (Delgado-Romero et al., 2007; Sólorzano et al., 2005). Barriers Latinx faculty encounter include feeling isolated, marginalized, and tokenized due to our low representation—precluding us from being more positive role models for Latinx students (Gloria & Castellanos, 2006; Salinas et al., 2020).

Additionally, BIPOC faculty who often teach coursework on multiculturalism and diversity are routinely evaluated harshly by students, reflecting negatively on teaching evaluations and tenure (Morehouse-Mendez & Perez-Mendez, 2018). Furthermore, Latinx faculty barriers are related to the vast diversity within our broadly defined ethnic group, including differences in skin color (colorism), degree of acculturation, country of origin, and accent (Delgado-Romero et al., 2007). These attributes may contribute to differential treatment from colleagues and students (Delgado-Romero et al., 2007; Morehouse-Mendez & Perez-Mendez, 2018).

### **Latinx in Social Work Education**

The dual pandemic of COVID-19 and racism has shed light on many changes needed within the academy to address the disparities experienced by BIPOC faculty (McCoy & Lee, 2021). Although “Social Work’s Call to Action Against Pandemic Othering and Anti-Asian Racism” (CSWE, 2021) is a recent effort toward the fight against racism, it does not and cannot capture the breadth of the needs of all BIPOC communities. For instance, there is a high demand for Spanish-speaking and culturally aware social workers throughout the US to serve the growing

number of Latinx communities (Calvo et al., 2018). Approximately 11 percent of active social workers identify as Latinx, restricting our capacity to effectively address the Latinx population's needs. Despite this deficiency, limited attention exists to recruiting and retaining Latinx professionals in social work (Olcoñ et al., 2018).

The racial and ethnic representation of social work professionals does not reflect the diversity in the US population (Calvo et al., 2018; Orozco-Figueroa, 2021). This gap is alarming, given that Black and Brown people are disproportionately affected by poverty and oppression, which social work aims to address (Fong et al., 2014). Growing the number of future social workers to meet Latinx clients' and communities' needs requires more significant efforts to recruit and retain Latinx students in social work education (Furman et al., 2013). BIPOC students face multiple barriers to accessing and achieving education, including full-time employment and family responsibilities (Gloria & Castellanos, 2006; Olcoñ et al., 2018; Salinas et al., 2020). Therefore, social work programs must modify the existing academic paradigm to promote a sense of belonging, offer an inclusive curriculum, and provide financial assistance (Furman et al., 2013; Ghose et al., 2018; Olcoñ et al., 2018).

Personal narratives shared by Latinx scholars shed light on multiple barriers encountered in the academy and serve to validate and give voice to unaddressed structural and sociopolitical issues in higher education (Chandler et al., 2014; Delgado-Romero et al., 2007; Garcia, 2014; Martinez & Toutkoushian, 2014; Reddick & Sáenz, 2012). However, the drawbacks to sharing one's narrative include being rendered vulnerable and exposed, and personal stories are often not regarded as legitimate academic scholarly work by the academy (Delgado-Romero et al., 2007). The concept of distance in research is valued as it implies neutrality and objectivity on the researcher's part—legitimizing what and who counts as research(er) (Tuhivai Smith, 2012). Nevertheless, personal narratives tell a story that statistics alone cannot. Also, having close personal relationships is a core cultural value for Latinx people; sharing one's lived experiences as Latinx faculty is imperative (Flores & Patrón, 2021; Gloria & Castellanos, 2006).

## **Findings**

Personal history is a fleeting element unless it is recorded. One concern is that one's personal experiences are of no value to anyone else and, therefore, do not need to be recorded in any way. The problem with this kind of thinking is that the individual determines the value of such information, rather than allowing other interested parties to participate in that assessment. (Garcia, 2014, p. 80)

## **Pre-Search**

When I read the assigned materials in my doctoral course on the history of social work education, I did not see myself reflected within the pages of social work history. Understanding the context of the time offered some answers to this erasure. However, this is not merely an issue that impacted BIPOC students in the past, as it persists. Social work textbooks often proclaim inclusion; however, they marginalize BIPOC, leaving us on the periphery (Bernard et al., 2014; Chandler et al., 2014; Garcia, 2014). In the literature written through a dominant

perspective, words such as “we,” “us,” “our,” and “I” exclude the BIPOC students I teach and myself. History is told from the perspective of the colonizers. Decolonizing education calls for reclaiming history as a critical and essential aspect of assuring racial justice (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). Recognizing this exclusionary history, the need for BIPOC students in social work education, particularly at the doctoral level, is evident.

## **Me-Search**

The academic knowledge acquired through formal education provides a foundational baseline for how and what we teach. In academia, conditioning in a classroom setting colonizes our minds with our chosen discipline’s doctrine. As educators, we perpetuate this colonization within the courses we teach. We subject our students without consent to the ideology imposed upon us as pupils of the discipline and punish them when they deviate from the standard. As an academic institution, research serves as a tool to perpetuate colonization by rewarding researchers for distorting truths about people, granting academic research, authority, and expertise over entire communities, primarily Black and Brown (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012).

The colonization of our minds is not limited to the classroom setting. Intellectual colonization occurs throughout our existence via socialization, which, in turn, influences our identities. As individuals, we risk becoming who and what is dictated to us by the professoriate. As social work stewards, our lives become the curriculum from which we teach. To Palmer’s (1997) dictum that “we teach who we are” (p. 15), I would also add that we teach what we know or believe to know. Our social-historical locatedness is summoned during the transmission of our institutional knowledge and structures of feeling as we indoctrinate future colleagues into the profession (Wilson, 2017).

The following themes emerged through self-reflecting on my academic trajectory leading up to social work education: assimilation and acculturation, barriers to education, microaggressions and racial gaslighting, and cultural taxation. The themes are explained in the following:

### **Theme 1: Assimilation & Acculturation**

The introduction to my elementary education occurred under a false identity. My first-grade teacher introduced me to peers as “Louis”—a name that persisted for years. As a monolingual Spanish-speaking child, I deduced that “Louis” was the equivalent English translation of my given name, “Luis.” I embraced the name as I looked forward to mastering English to navigate peer relations better. Later, I would understand that misidentifying me as “Louis” was the beginning of the colonization process enacted by benevolent White women to erase my Indigenous-Mexican identity. Jacobs (2005, as cited in Crofoot & Harris, 2012) describes the maternal colonialism enacted by White women, including teachers and administrators, who perceived themselves as saviors of Indigenous children from their deficient Indian mothers. Middle and high school were social experiment projects designed by the public school district to manufacture diversity and inclusion. The school district placed ethnic youth on buses allowing White suburban kids to interact with urban BIPOC youth. The early morning wake-up call, the long walk to the bus stop, and the hour-long bus ride to school served as a daily reminder that

we were foreign visitors on a campus intended to keep kids like us out. The sea of brace-mouthed White gazes transfixed with curiosity at the caravan of yellow buses was reminiscent of zoo-like conditions; only we were the exotic creatures deserving of gawking. It occurred to me that the school district would never consider placing White students on buses and shipping them to schools in poor urban communities.

In my efforts to engage in extracurricular high school activities and resist being wholly assimilated into the predominantly White school culture, I joined the campus MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán [Chicano Student Movement of Aztlán]) club. For BIPOC youth, ethnicity can positively influence identity development and serve as a protective factor, generating a sense of belonging and improving academic performance (Holcomb-McCoy, 2005; Reddick & Sáenz, 2012). This student-led club created an enclave for my peers and me to be Brown and Indigenous-Mexican (or a Latinx diaspora member) in a predominantly White school. My experience in our theatre club and ensuing extracurricular activities afforded me the right to self-expression and visibility. Theatre performances and rehearsals required much dedication and time spent after school. However, the bus ride home was regimented and exercised a zero-tolerance policy for late arrivals—“The bus is leaving!” became a familiar cry for many of us when the school bell rang. I spent a month parked in neighborhoods surrounding my high school campus, sleeping in my father’s truck to ensure I was on time to participate in afterschool activities.

## **Theme 2: Barriers to Education—Poverty, Limited Options, Need for Mentorship**

The period leading up to high school graduation was an uncertain time, thinking about what direction to take academically—the only way out of poverty was to invest in my education. At the time, I did not have access to college-educated professionals in my immediate family or a social circle that would provide me with career or academic guidance. Academic advisors offered two options at my public high school: join the military or enroll in trade school. A common theme among Latinos is to join the military or workforce, surrendering educational aspirations (Pérez, 2017; Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2009). After some research, I enrolled in general education coursework at the community college level.

As a first-generation college student, it was not within my reach to experience the “traditional” student life. I worked full-time to pay for tuition and books and contributed financially to help support my family. Time restrictions on my studying ultimately impacted my grades. It also contributed to my delay in transferring from community college to the university and graduating on time. Among ethnically/racially minoritized groups, particularly Latinos, this is a common factor contributing to college student attrition rates (Pérez, 2017; Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2009). School, work, and family obligations became barriers to academic and professional achievement; however, dropping out of school was not viable.

College coursework offered many directions for learning with little guidance, bolstering uncertainty about the focus of my academic degree and subsequent career options. A high school psychology course piqued my interest enough to sustain my curiosity about human behavior, becoming an introduction to my future academic pursuits. Academic coursework

granted me internships in various mental health, substance abuse, and hospice service settings working directly with ethnically/racially diverse individuals and families in urban environments. Exposure to these settings became the catalyst for the justice objects (Wilson, 2017) I value.

Social-political-economic justice, community activism, equity, and equality for BIPOC continue to drive my passion for change. My direct practice work with individuals and families fueled my desire to eventually earn a bachelor's degree in psychology. With an undergraduate degree secured, I worked in a non-profit organization with medically fragile/terminally ill children. The social workers I encountered at the agency encouraged me to pursue graduate school and social work as a career.

### **Theme 3: Microaggressions and Racial Gaslighting**

History repeats itself. Like an echo from the past, as a student in my MSW program, efforts to colonize my mind and identity within the academy were again perpetrated against me. There were three of us Latinos in the class. Although we shared similar identities, we were born in different parts of the world, where our parents gave us distinct names. Like a Border Patrol Agent demands identification when one enters a foreign land, we were forced to relinquish our identities when crossing the imaginary border created within the classroom space. "José" would become the only name our White female professor used to identify the three of us, forcing us to share one identity as melanated men. We attributed this occurrence initially to the newness of our relationship with our professor, but it persisted throughout the course despite protests. Stripped of our individual identities, our collective invisibility was conspicuous. Everyday acts of racist aggression aimed at BIPOC, known as microaggressions, are ordinary at the university level and are relevant to faculty and students of color and our presence in the academy (Louis et al., 2016; Reddick & Sáenz, 2012).

As an MSW student, I was indoctrinated with mostly White female instructors' social work profession ideologies. The structures of feelings inculcated in me through classroom theory were practiced and reinforced in practicum (Wilson, 2017). There was no choice but to learn to care about evidence-based practice interventions, even when the evidence excluded the clients I served. Any attempts to refute them were futile as scientific proof is the gold standard in the academy, and a letter grade serves as a reward and punishment for upholding the status quo. Evidence-based practice and protocols are privileged as "scientific" over other epistemologies and cultural practice wisdom within communities of color. An assumption of the universal applicability of treatment interventions for BIPOC based on White evidence may serve to exclude further researchers of color and our voices (Aisenberg, 2008).

At the doctoral level of social work education, I had hoped for a reparative experience from my MSW program. I was one of few BIPOC students and the only melanated male in my cohort of primarily White and female doctoral peers. As it was my first experience in social work education within a predominantly White institution, I was disheartened by the microaggressions and racial gaslighting at this education level. The microaggressions commenced at the onset of my doctoral journey. During the initial course in the program, I shared my testimonio (narrative) as a melanated man confronting racism within the context of class discussion. Before I could

complete my narrative, a White peer interjected and co-opted my story by sharing the challenges of being White—without ever acknowledging her Whiteness and the power and privilege she wielded. Compared to BIPOC individuals, White women are privileged to evoke a virtuous victim role. Therefore, it is common for people with privileged identities to deny, rationalize, and experience false envy and benevolence during difficult discussions surrounding social identities (Accapadi, 2007). Similar experiences were replicated differently with White peers and faculty, and the White silence enveloped the classroom. This experience is commonplace in the academy, as stated in Amos' (2010) study that identifies feelings of despair, fear, and frustration experienced by BIPOC students because of Whiteness' power to silence students of color in the class.

There were no acknowledgments or discussions related to the widely publicized racist public executions of Black people (e.g., George Floyd) or protests over police brutality that ensued (Hughes, 2020). Although in vogue for schools of social work to issue statements of solidarity supporting anti-racism, public statements repudiating White terrorism were notably absent following the US Capitol's siege by White supremacists (Barrett et al., 2021). I experienced the White silence and lack of critical examination of racism within social work education as racial gaslighting. Racial gaslighting normalizes White supremacy by obfuscating racist acts that occur at an individual micro-level that are part of a macro-level system structure. Concurrently, racial gaslighting pathologizes those resisting a color-blind agenda (Davis & Ernst, 2019). On a structural level, racial gaslighting denies BIPOC groups' and communities' lived experiences and upholds power imbalances and racial inequities (Fleming, 2018). However, this degree of concerted denial of racism is endemic within social work education and the ivory tower—begging the question, to what extent is our value of social justice merely performative?

#### **Theme 4: Cultural Taxation**

As Latinx faculty members, we are chiefly dedicated to enhancing the Latinx community's living conditions via service (Martinez & Toutkoushian, 2014). Within the Hispanic Serving Institution where I teach, I have focused on working with first-generation students of color, some living with mental health diagnoses. In academia, this sub-population appears to go largely unnoticed, and is often attracted to the human services field, including social work. An academic setting is not equipped to address the mental health needs of students. Therefore, this can become an obstacle for some students grappling with mental health and achieving their academic goals. Thus, I offer students coaching, mentoring, and support through a bridge program and Latinx student affinity group. I work within the educational institution to provide BIPOC students a chance at achieving their academic goals—help I could have significantly benefitted from receiving as a student.

Steered by a strong sense of responsibility to serve the Latinx community, Latinx faculty may devote much time to activities not rewarded by the academy. Time expended by Latinx faculty on teaching could overwhelmingly be spent on classes dealing with racial/ethnic issues. Similarly, our time teaching and mentoring may be overwhelmingly consumed serving BIPOC students (Martinez & Toutkoushian, 2014). As such, Latinx faculty may experience a penalty or "cultural taxation" for participating in such programs or mentoring activities (Padilla, 1994;

Reddick & Sáenz, 2012). Higher teaching, advising, and service loads can significantly reduce Latinx faculty members' research output and prospects for tenure and promotion (Martinez & Toutkoushian, 2014).

## **Discussion**

### **We-Search**

The 2007 Task Force on Latinos/as in Social Work Education identified a paucity of representing Latinx students and faculty in social work education (CSWE Task Force, 2007, as cited in Chandler et al., 2014). The scarcity of men of color in academia draws attention to the issue that Black and Latinx faculty are highly underrepresented—mostly Black and Brown men (in terms of numbers and an equity perspective; Reddick & Sáenz, 2012). As the academy's racial and ethnic demographics change, its values must reflect the ideals of diverse voices involved in the system, not only those who have historically maintained power (Martinez & Toutkoushian, 2014). To expect students and faculty of color to challenge and transform a system in which we have historically been marginalized seems hypocritical at best (Delgado-Romero et al., 2007).

In a review of my findings, assimilation and acculturation were one theme that emerged, highlighting the importance of cultural and social capital among Latinos pursuing higher education, as well as the protective factor ethnic identity has on academic success (Holcomb-McCoy, 2005; Olcoñ et al., 2018; Pérez, 2017; Reddick & Sáenz, 2012). A second theme identified in this article and underscored by scholars examining challenges encountered by BIPOC students in academia included barriers to education related to poverty, limited options, and a need for mentorship (Ghose et al., 2018; Pérez, 2017; Reddick & Sáenz, 2012). I addressed the microaggressions and racial gaslighting I have encountered in my social work education by White faculty and peers in yet a third theme. Similarly, experiences of microaggressions in academic settings were found in the scholarly work written by other males of color (Louis et al., 2016; Padilla, 1994; Reddick & Sáenz, 2012). Cultural taxation was a fourth and final theme in my experience as a professor in social work education. This phenomenon involves having to endure an excessive amount of time and emotional energy allocated to dealing with racial/ethnic issues as an instructor of color—an experience shared and recognized in similar research conducted by faculty of color (Martinez & Toutkoushian, 2014; Padilla, 1994; Reddick & Sáenz, 2012).

### **Implications for Social Work Education & Practice**

To increase student retention and engagement among Black males, research on Black Male Initiative Programs (e.g., The Brothers and Scholars Program and the Minority Men Mentoring Program) have demonstrated positive social and academic outcomes among participants (Brooms, 2018). Establishing close relationships among peers through BIPOC affinity groups can mediate against encounters with explicit racism (Strayhorn, 2017). Banks and Dohy (2019) identify homogenous peer groups as an approach to intervene against opportunity gaps between BIPOC students and their White counterparts within academic settings. Also, Fleming et al.

(2004) found that a culturally relevant curriculum can enhance reading skills among Black students.

The benefits for BIPOC students in social work education to see themselves reflected among faculty of color may hold implications for teaching and practice that have yet to be thoroughly examined. Some BIPOC students engaging with faculty of color report feeling heard and validated in their lived experiences and valued for the insights and perspectives they contribute to the classroom (Bernard et al., 2014). Whereas some students of color report feeling devalued by White faculty—who expect them to assume the role of a “race expert” and to disproportionately challenge racism—students then keep silent in the classroom for fear of retaliation, further isolation, and being viewed as troublemakers (Davis & Mirick, 2021). The racial composition of social work faculty may significantly affect the overall learning environment and learning experience (Bernard et al., 2014).

These factors may also influence the teaching and preparation of social workers in mental health service settings. An inability to engage BIPOC clients in mental health treatment has been identified as a significant public health concern (Aggarwal et al., 2016; Redmond et al., 2009). Some particularly formidable obstacles to seeking treatment include viewing clinicians as intimidating based on historical legacies of racism and patient concerns that ethnically different clinicians will not understand their cultural needs (Schouler-Ocak et al., 2021). Clinician and client ethnic resemblance may encourage treatment engagement among BIPOC groups. However, a deficit of ethnically and racially diverse clinicians cannot provide mental health services to meet this need (Aggarwal et al., 2016). To address the lack of engagement among BIPOC populations in mental health treatment, efforts to recruit and retain students and faculty of color in social work education need prioritizing. Additionally, further attention to improving the training and education of White social workers who do not share ethnic resemblance and engage with BIPOC communities is a matter of significant importance and ethical practice.

### **Conclusion**

An increase in Latinx faculty representation who can serve as role models and mentors for Latinx students may significantly grow Latinx students’ graduation rates (Martinez & Toutkoushian, 2014). Enhancing the representation of BIPOC faculty in social work programs is recommended to help mitigate the issues experienced by faculty of color related to microaggressions, racial gaslighting, and cultural taxation identified in this narrative. Academic institutions must strengthen their efforts to recruit and retain BIPOC males in social work education and include strategies to eliminate barriers to their education, namely racism. To assist in melanating the ivory tower, academic institutions require hiring more BIPOC faculty, establishing mentorship programs, and expanding educational and financial support to BIPOC students (Ghose et al., 2018). Instituting affinity groups for BIPOC students to fortify peer relationships can also mediate against academic opportunity gaps (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Strayhorn, 2017).

Additional research highlighting social work education experiences among Latinos is necessary to understand our needs better and improve ways to recruit and retain this decreasing workforce

segment. Featuring men of color's narrative experiences in academia may help other men of color visualize themselves as successful pupils and professionals in their fields of endeavor (Reddick & Sáenz, 2012). Lastly, future research is warranted to investigate previous findings identifying Latinx faculty working more hours per week without pay at public institutions than their White faculty counterparts (Martinez & Toutkoushian, 2014).

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