Braver Spaces in Social Work: Exploring Student Learning About Privilege and Microaggressions

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Abstract

This study explores students' learning about privileges, oppressions, and intersectional forms of microaggressions in a Canadian undergraduate social work course. Microaggressions are "everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership" (Sue, 2010, p. xvi). Four themes emerged, including: (a) Speaking up at the Intersection of Age and Gender in Social Work Education; (b) Challenging the Invisibility of the Intersection of Class and Race in Social Work; (c) Challenging Heterosexism within the Family Unit and Social Work; and (d) Naming the Intersection of Institutional Racism, Sexism, and Ableism within the Workplace. The paper concludes with implications for social work education and practice.

Keywords: Braver spaces; Social justice education; Critical social work practice; Intersectionality

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In this article, we share our experiences in teaching and learning about how to challenge microaggressions in social work education and practice. We discuss the assignment we used to teach our social work students how to name and challenge microaggressions. This assignment helped students to make connections between course content and social work practice. The goal of this article is to demonstrate that students could move from reflection to action and could use their social work education to develop the strategies to do so

Sasan Issari writes, "I was born in Iran and immigrated to Canada with my family at a young age. Growing up in Canada, I have experienced both privileges and oppression due to my social locations. I was raised in a household where I had two parents who placed high value on education. As a self-identified able-bodied male social worker and educator, I am afforded certain opportunities and privileges. My social locations are entwined within social structures and institutions that place value on masculinity, class, race, education, ableism, and heteronormativity. The complexities that are engrained within my position in Canada have inspired me to pursue doctoral studies in social work and advocate for equity, inclusiveness, and social justice. Wanda Thomas Bernard, PhD, was my master's thesis supervisor. In addition, I had the privilege of being her teaching assistant for the cross-cultural course that I assisted with during my master's program."

Wanda Thomas Bernard, PhD, writes, "I was born and raised in a small Black community in Nova Scotia, Canada. I went to a segregated school from grades primary to seven. Some of my fondest memories from my early education are the relationships with my peers and my teachers that extended beyond the classroom, and into the community. My love for learning began with being encouraged by my elementary school teachers. They set a standard of excellence, expected us to do well, and encouraged me to always do my very best. I received similar messages from my mother early in life. However, when I went into an integrated high school, my reality quickly changed. This was my first awareness of the impact of race in my life, the reality of 'everyday racism' and microaggression. These microaggressions made me realize what it meant to be Black in a White world. However, being born into the civil rights era had its benefits too, because I learned how to resist, challenge, and overcome what were unsurmountable barriers for many of my peers."

Aimee Power writes, "I was born and raised in a rural community in Newfoundland and Labrador. As a middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual, White, cisgendered female, I live a life of immense privilege. Coming from a single-parent household that placed a strong emphasis on education, I have dedicated much of my life to the social work profession and the education of self and others. While studying at X University, I worked alongside my professors as a teaching and research assistant. I recently worked with Wanda Thomas Bernard, PhD, as a teaching assistant for the Cross-Cultural Issues and Social Work Practice course. Being involved in social work education has helped me to maintain and enhance my self-reflexivity and critical analysis skills, consequently strengthening my clinical practice and service delivery to the benefit of those I serve."

Although the three of us come from very different social locations, a common theme in our biographies is the commitment to social justice, social change, and the desire to teach others. We have all had experience with educating social work students about microaggressions through our involvement in the Cross-Cultural Issues and Social Work Practice course. Dr. Bernard designed and teaches the course, while Sasan Issari and Aimee Power have been teaching assistants in the course, in different years. Details of the course and the assignment are discussed next.

Course Name, Description, and Assignment: Cross-Cultural Issues and Social Work Practice

The Cross-Cultural Issues and Social Work Practice course provides an opportunity to critically examine theoretical frameworks for viewing marginalized racial, ethnic, and cultural groups in society, to examine personal values as they relate to the above groups, to develop skills in working effectively with these groups, and to understand related social policies. This is a required course in the undergraduate social work program at X University, taken in year two of the two-year Bachelor of Social Work degree. A prerequisite is Advancing Social Justice, which introduces students to the central concepts of a social justice perspective through a deconstruction and reconstruction of various assumptions, practices, and positionalities that advance and/or impede social justice. In Advancing Social Justice, students complete a journaling assignment, where they develop a beginning awareness about social injustice and microaggressions. As noted in the university calendar, this "course introduces students to the central concepts of a social justice perspective through a deconstruction and reconstruction of various assumptions,

practices, and positionalities that advance and/or impede social justice. Rooted in processes of critically reflective analysis this course attends to cognitive, affective, and spiritual learning processes." Spiritual learning processes "move beyond surface knowledge (cognitive), to the learning processes that help to care for others around us." This is the spiritual element of the course assignment.

Assignment Description: Critical Self-Reflection: Awareness, Analysis, and Action Journal

This journaling assignment builds on the previous assignment students have done in Advancing Social Justice in which they reflected on their own social location, history, and current experiences as a social work student. In those assignments students would have created awareness and a beginning analysis about the privilege they hold because of their social location. Some of them might have addressed intersectionality and would have looked at ways that their privilege impacts their practice. This assignment invites students to further develop analysis of their privilege, and to journal actions they take once they become aware of privilege they hold. Students are to document one event per week, where they either experience, or witness, an act of oppression or privilege. The journal entry should emphasize more complex analysis of privilege and/or oppression that was witnessed or experienced, and the actions taken to address the issue identified. In their analysis of the situation students are expected to focus on those privileges they enjoy, because they are the most difficult to name and challenge, or to have challenged. They are asked to pay attention to the invisible, unspoken, taken-for-granted privileges that are experienced every day, perhaps without

noticing them. Most importantly, students are to identify an action taken to address the issue addressed in each journal entry. The emphasis in these journal entries is on action. It is not enough to describe and analyze the experience, but students are expected to take an action. It is only when we take actions to address oppression and privilege that things will begin to change.

The journals are submitted two times during the term. The first submission is due after the first four weeks and is assessed at 15% of the final grade. There are three entries in this first submission, for weeks two to four. The journals are submitted for final assessment at the end of the term for the final assessment at 25% of the final grade. There is a total of 7 entries in this second submission, for weeks 5 to 11, for a total of 10 entries in all. The final submission of the journal includes a discussion of new insights gained from doing this assignment over the term. The assignment is designed to help guide for future use, as social workers themselves develop strategies to use their privilege to help create the type of change they want to see in the world, in their social work practice and in their social circles.

One of the primary goals and learning outcomes for this assignment is for students to demonstrate an awareness and beginning analysis of their own social locations. In addition to the student's analysis, it is critical that they are aware of their own social locations and how their social identities and privileges impact cross-cultural interactions. Also, students are to demonstrate a critical analysis of contemporary experience of marginalized groups and actions they can take to address current realities or experience.

During the past 20 years or more, faculty throughout North American universities have been expected to integrate diversity into their curriculum. Yet much of the available literature on this topic identifies many challenges that educators face when they do introduce diversity content into their courses (Bernard & Butler, 2014; Campbell, 2003; Garcia & Van Soest, 2000; Hill, 2009; MacDonald & Bernard, 2014). Despite these challenges, in the field of social work our accrediting body mandates the inclusion of "ethnic, cultural, and racial diversity" (CASWE, 2008) within the curriculum and school composition. However, as Phan et al. (2009) assert, "translating diversity and oppression content into meaningful learning is complicated" (p. 325). It is complicated because there can be discomfort and resistance to recognizing one's own privileges/power and to taking action to challenge oppression in practice.

As social work educators, we have an obligation to prepare students for effective and appropriate practice in diverse societies (MacDonald & Bernard, 2014, p. 231), a practice that must be inclusive and culturally relevant (Hunn, Harley, Elliott, & Canfield, 2015). Essential to this teaching is the need to engage students in learning opportunities that can motivate them to do critical practice that can lead to change. Teaching this content must and does challenge students to move beyond their comfort zones, and having creative assignments built on solid theoretical principles is an important strategy to help with this. The goal of this assignment is to help students uncover things they might not generally observe in their daily lives, and to help them find the courage to apply theory and effective strategies to actions they choose to take. This assignment challenges students to find braver spaces, as they reflect on how privileges and oppressions operate

in everyday social interactions, particularly when microaggressions are evident. Braver spaces are a corrective to safer spaces, because safer spaces are often defined and controlled by individuals with privileges and power. When marginalized voices speak up and speak out, there is no guarantee of safety. The term "braver spaces" is used because we believe that it is critical to be "brave" in our social work practices and to find the courage to speak up and act when confronted with oppression and social injustice.

We use the definition of microaggressions advanced by Sue et al. (2007) that "racial micro-aggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group" (p. 273). We agree with their assertion that microaggressions are typically "subtle, indirect, and unintentional … [and] are most likely to emerge not when a behavior would look prejudicial, but when other rationales can be offered for prejudicial behavior" (p. 278). Building on this concept is the notion of microinvalidation, which Sue et al. (2007) call a type of microaggression that is "characterized by communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color" (p. 274). Taking this analysis beyond race, in this article, we explore the ways in which microaggressions and microinvalidations are visible in other forms of oppression as well, as reported in the students' assignment.

The assignment is organized around three core theoretical principles: awareness, analysis, and action—named the Triple A

Paradigm. Bernard and Hamilton-Hinch (2006) expand on the three principles:

> Awareness of systemic inequities, power and privilege are essential to developing a perspective that challenges oppressive conditions and structures and promotes diversity and inclusion. Analysis moves participants beyond simply being more aware of the issues to an understanding and critique of the impact of systemic discrimination (in all its forms) and oppression on both victims and perpetrators. Finally, action is required if change is to happen. Once participants are more aware and have a more critical analysis, the next step is to plan personal and systemic actions to make the desired changes. (p. 135).

The Triple A Paradigm is rooted in the theories of intersectionality and critical multiculturism.

Intersectionality and Critical Multiculturalism

When discussing intersectionality, Valentine (2007) draws on Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, and Kendall's (1995) analogy of a road junction: the place where race, class, and gender intersect, for example. Valentine (2007) states that "we may think of race, class, and gender as different social structures" that "individual people experience simultaneously" (p. 13). It is a place where race, class, gender, ethnicity, age, religion, nationality, abilities, and sexuality intersect to impact the individual's position within society (Berger & Guidroz, 2010).

The concept of intersectionality used here helps to deconstruct essentialist stories

by introducing the narratives of students and teachers that encompass various social locations. Intersectional theorizing can be a messy process, since it provides the researchers the opportunity to ask complex questions. Davis (2008) explains this process by stating:

> Intersectionality seemed ideally suited to the task of exploring how categories of race, class and gender are intertwined and mutually constitutive, giving centrality to questions like how race is "gendered" and how gender is "racialized," and how both are linked to the continuities and transformations of social class. (pp. 70–71).

The framework of intersectionality is employed in the present research to understand how power operates in the lives of social work students, teachers, and practitioners who are addressing privileges and oppressive social structures in their lives. We extend the intersectional analysis to include age, ability, sexual identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, and indigeneity. This inclusive perspective on intersectionality is taught in this course, as it helps to bring conscious awareness of microaggressions to the forefront (Hunn et al., 2015). It also opens space for the discovery of contradictions in a world filled with unknown complexities.

Intersectionality fits well with critical multiculturalism because it "allows us to move beyond the goal of learning about and appreciating diversity to engage in an exploration of the multiple and complex power relations of difference and the mechanisms of oppression that operate in society" (Sisneros, Stakeman, Joyner, & Schmitz, 2008, p. 3). In addition to identifying power, privileges oppression, and domination in society, a critical

multicultural approach allows for an analysis of the structures, cultural norms, and societal systems that create, develop, and maintain injustice within our society (Nylund, 2006; Sisneros et al., 2008).

A culturally sensitive practitioner will be aware that everyone has similarities but also differences and will be adept at seeing multiple differences simultaneously (Kadushin & Kadushin, 1997). Critical Multiculturalism aligns well with intersectionality, providing theoretical scope and rigor to explore the relationship between power, identities, privileges, social locations, institutions, and society. In these efforts, intersectional and critical multicultural theorists "work to expose the subtle and often hidden processes that undermine the efforts of groups marginalized by class, race, gender and sex, sexual orientation, and ability status" (Sisneros et al., 2008, p. 7). Those using this conceptual framework will work to expose societal structures and processes that benefit privileged members of society and build on the oppression of the disadvantaged. They will work to promote policies, procedures, and structures that facilitate economic and social justice while focusing on the elimination of human suffering.

Critical multiculturalism and intersectional theory guide this research, which is rooted in critical self-reflection. The process of self-reflection within a critical multicultural context "involves the development of an awareness of one's own identity, identity development in multiple dimensions, and increased awareness of economic and social structures of oppression as a foundation for activism" (Sisneros et al., 2008, p. 20). It mobilizes members of the dominant group by inviting them to reflect on and deconstruct what it means to be a member of that group (Nylund, 2006). By

engaging in a deeper level of self-reflection within a critical multicultural context, practitioners can analyze how their actions, language, behaviors, and social interactions contribute to the discrimination of marginalized individuals and groups (Nylund, 2006; Sisneros et al., 2008), and what responsibility they have for change (Hunn et al., 2015). The theoretical framework for this research aligns well with cross-cultural perspectives in social work because it is guided by critical exploration and social change.

Methodology

The purpose of this research was to explore the learning outcomes from students in a social work course that teaches students to develop awareness, critically analyze, and then take actions on everyday microaggressions, oppression, and/or privilege they experience and/or witness. The data collection was a document review of students' journal assignments, with an emphasis on the actions they took to challenge the microaggressions they reported on. This research employs a qualitative phenomenological approach. Creswell (2012) illustrates that qualitative research design is a useful research approach when the purpose of the study is to gain understanding of a specific issue or experience. For this research, we used phenomenology – more specifically, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

Smith and Osborne (2008) highlight that the "aim of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is to explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world,

and the main currency for an IPA study is the meanings particular experiences, events, states hold for participants" (p. 53). IPA is suitable for social justice and social work research, as it provides a useful methodological lens that sheds light on the complexities that shape people's perceptions and lived experiences (Smith & Osborne, 2008). This methodological design is suitable for this research, as the aim of the assignment was to ask students to critically reflect on the complexities of privileges and oppressions that shape relations, and the steps they would take to take action. The students were asked to explain the meaning they made to the unspoken and invisible privileges that impact social relations. From our analysis, several themes emerged, which we present later in this paper.

Student Profiles and Journal Entries Reviewed

The journal entries were from undergraduate social work students enrolled in the Cross- Cultural Issues course during the 2014/15 academic year. Most of the journal entries were one or two pages long, and the data was drawn from several entries by each student. The students were studying either on campus or via distance technology, and most were in the final year of their program. Students in these classes were from diverse backgrounds and geographic locations, and all were Canadian citizens. Students who were enrolled in distance classes lived in different provinces in Canada, and they ranged in age, gender, sexuality, race, and class. However, most of the students enrolled in the campus course were primarily White women in their early twenties. The study occurred following the completion of the course. Dr. Wanda Thomas Bernard contacted the director of ethics at University X to inquire about whether ethical permission was needed to

conduct the study. We were notified from the director that from the information provided below, our study is exempt from research ethics review per TCPS article 2.5 as quality assurance/improvement activity. This is the explanation that the Research Ethics Board at University X gave us. Furthermore, this course, although entitled Cross-Cultural Issues, considers diversity from a comprehensive perspective. It teaches about privilege and oppression based on the following categorizations: gender, race, sexual identity, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, ability, socioeconomic status, family status, and the intersectionality of any of these axes. Students in these classes, and indeed in the school's programs (MacDonald & Bernard 2014), are from each of these communities. As a result, the student body is diverse and there were a range of compelling experiences to choose from.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to encode and analyze data collected from the document review of students' journal entries. Thematic analysis is a process for encoding, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). It involves the ability to recognize, interpret, and conceptualize data that is meaningful (Boyatzis, 1998). Thematic analysis offers flexibility in exploring themes within data in that it is not limited to the exploration of one source of information, nor is it bound by any one method of inquiry (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis allows for the coding and analysis of data in a systematic way, which helps to increase accuracy and sensitivity in interpreting data (Boyatzis, 1998).

Since in IPA meaning is central to data analysis, as the "aim is to try to understand the content and complexity of those meanings rather than measure their frequency" (Smith & Osborne, 2008, p. 66), we used a data triangulation strategy to mitigate against bias and maintain ethical rigor. First, we each independently reviewed the students' journal entries and chose a selection for further analysis. We based our selection on the criteria that we would choose journal entries that addressed various intersectional identities, social locations, and privileges (e.g., age, race, gender, class, etc.). Then we did independent additional analysis on the journal entries on which we agreed to focus. In addition, we peer debriefed frequently after each stage of the data analysis process. This helped to ensure consistency between Sasan Issari, Wanda Thomas Bernard, and Aimee Power in the interpretation of the data collected and to minimize any bias. This research brings together the students' journal entries, and the analysis of the impact on their learning journey, through the lens of their instructor and teaching assistants. From our analysis, many themes emerged, which we present in the next section.

Each student submitted weekly journals, for a total of 10 weeks. There were 80 students in the two sections of the course, and a total of 800 journal entries were initially reviewed. From this master list, the journal entries that underscored specific actions taken were categorized as broad themes defined by type of diversity, privilege, and/or oppression identified. From these broad themes, the authors' analysis of the journal entries led to the creation of subthemes that captured the learning as identified by students. These subthemes are based on the words of the students, and it is important to note that these experiences are based on the perceptions, interpretations,

and meaning that students made in relation to what they witnessed and/or heard. There are many contextual factors (e.g., life experiences, geography, etc.) that impact the students' responses, and therefore an intersectional framework is used to analyze the data and themes. These "learning themes" are presented below.

Student Learning Themes

In this section, we present four case scenarios from the students' action journals and organize them using the themes that emerged from our analysis of the reflections. The themes include: (a) Speaking Up at the Intersection of Age and Gender in Social Work Education; (b) Challenging the Invisibility of the Intersection of Class and Race in Social Work; (c) Challenging Heterosexism within the Family Unit and Social Work; and (d) Naming the Intersection of Institutional Racism, Sexism, and Ableism within the Workplace. Each of these is explored in some detail below.

Speaking Up at the Intersection of Age and Gender in Social Work Education

In this journal entry, the student reflects on the theme that age and gender are socially constructed in social work education. There was a theme in the journal entries that social identities and privileges are created by people in society, and that oppression comes in many forms. One student highlights that:

> *"Two small episodes in the past week have made me think about how my age (50) may sometimes privilege me. This has been interesting to consider because up until now I have only considered my age as a location of oppression."*

The student clarifies that it is not her age that is the source of oppression, but the meaning that is attributed to her age by others. The student reflects on how discrimination impacts individuals of all ages. In addition, the student reflects on how age and gender are intersectional, and how it impacts the process of speaking up and speaking out in class.

Baines (2007) notes that oppressions are intersectional because they "overlap, contest, undermine and/or reinforce one another, depending on a variety of factors in the immediate and global environment" (p. 20). Specifically, within this case example, the intersection of ageism and sexism on social work students is evident in the microaggression she experienced and witnessed. The student states in her journal that:

> *"There seemed to be a power relationship between the professor and the younger student that differed [from the one] between the professor and me. My sense is that much of this has to do with our ages. I was heard when I reiterated the younger woman's words; she was not heard when she spoke them herself."*

Continuing the analysis of this encounter, the student shares:

> *"I see that the reluctance to speak out persists among many young people, particularly young women. I have sometimes asked some of my younger classmates why they don't speak up more often in class. One woman told me she feared being judged by other women who might consider her stepping out of line by "talking too much." This saddens me to hear, and I have said as much to some of the very bright and committed*

women in my class who routinely do not speak in class. I feel this is a loss to the group.”

This student reflected on the marginalization she witnessed in the classroom, and the privileges associated with age and possibly gender. The student took action by essentially repeating the same point that her classmate made. The instructor acknowledged the older student's response, and it was not clear whether he was aware of how he dismissed the younger student's contribution. It was not pointed out to the instructor that older student's words were a repetition of the initial point. This could have been due to the power imbalance between the students and instructor. This case uncovers the complexities of hierarchy within classrooms and institutions. These power imbalances are rooted in various forms of privileges and oppression because of one's social location in society. In this situation, the instructor dismissed the younger student's perspective and placed higher value on the mature student's perspective.

In this case example, the student acted by resisting the oppressive practice by the instructor because she said to the younger student in front of the class, *“When you spoke with me earlier, I understood you to say. . .”* and paraphrased what her classmate said. The older student acted by repeating the younger student's comment in front of the class and instructor and created braver spaces by being an ally. The older student states:

“I took a chance in speaking this way, and hoped the student would recognize that I was trying to support her (she did, which she told me afterwards). The professor seemed to hear the message I spoke, and changed the notation on the

board, although I essentially used the speaker's original words.”

She stood up for her beliefs regarding inclusivity and can apply her new learning to social work practice. This point is evident when it is noted:

In beginning this assignment, I felt much apprehension that I would not recognize opportunities to take actions related to my social work values, and that when I did, I would later reflect upon these actions and regret steps I took or failed to take. ... However, I felt less distressed ... I feel that my entries reflect my personal feelings, beliefs, biases, and attitudes in each situation and I believe that I have reflected upon these in a way that sheds lights on how I practice as a social worker.

As the following journal entry illustrates, intersectional oppression extends beyond gender and age, to include class and race as well.

Challenging the Invisibility of the Intersection of Class and Race in Social Work

In this journal entry, the student reflects on her experience as a social work student in a placement within a community organization. One of the common themes in the journal entries is how racism and classism are interconnected and impact the well-being of people in the community. On the second day of placement, the student heard a comment by a board member that she found troubling. During her lunch break, she decided to eat at a local restaurant in the neighborhood. The restaurant is in a working-class neighborhood, and many of the residents are Black and racialized. Following the student's lunch break, she

returned to her placement and was asked by a board member where she had lunch. As the student answered, the board member responded with, "You ate in this neighborhood? I hope you don't get sick." Because of this incident, the student wrote in her journal that:

> *This was only my second day at placement and I was so surprised by this comment I was speechless. This is a board member [and] this person is making decisions for this agency and in turn this community and that is her opinion of the neighborhood and the people within it. I was even more surprised that no one else said anything to her. I have thought about this a great deal and have decided to bring it up at the weekly meeting with all of the employees on Wednesday.*

It is evident that the student was uncomfortable with the board member's comment. The board member could have made the comment for several reasons (e.g., concern about the health standards of the food, etc.). In addition, it is critical to question whether the board member's comment was explicitly rooted in classism and implicitly rooted in racism. How are class and race interconnected when it comes to the stigmatization of spaces, bodies, and communities? Gupta (1996) asserts that "social power is the ability to affect people's life chances through one's control over social resources, including human resources, and through one's position of privilege within the social hierarchies of racism, gender and class" (p. 3). The student discussed how certain neighborhoods are stigmatized, and it is critical to unpack how this is related to privileges, and intersectional forms of oppression rooted in social power over the spaces, bodies, and resources of the neighborhood.

In this case example, the student questions the assumption that certain neighborhoods are "undesirable" because of the people who occupy the space. The concept of "undesirable spaces" plays a role in the identities, relationships, privileges, power, resources, and perceptions of the neighborhood. The student questioned why the board member would stigmatize the neighborhood and decided to bring it up in a future meeting with all the employees. Due to the date of the journal entry, we do not know if the student followed through with bringing up the incident to her colleagues, and what was said. However, the student had the ability to reflect and consider acting. This is an example of social action in braver spaces. The theme of braver spaces in social work practice is important in this case, because the student did not feel safe enough to raise it with her supervisor on her second day at her placement, yet still acted by bringing it to the attention of the school of social work and within the agency.

This journal entry highlights the issue of culturally appropriate services within social work. If the board member perceives the community members as "undesirable," is the board member implicated in the marginalization of the community? Is this a form of microaggression or microinvalidation? How are power and voice constructed? How might this impact the services that people in the community receive? In these first two stories, we see microaggressions in the social work classroom and the field, but sometimes the problems surface in the family. We explore heterosexism and challenging family values next.

Challenging Heterosexism Within the Family Unit and Social Work

The theme of having personal values change once the students studied social work was taken up by some of the students in their journal entries. A student reflects on how her values have developed differently than some of her family members and writes:

Since entering social work, I have found it somewhat difficult to relate to my family as my values have developed in such a way that they are monumentally different than the values of my parents and younger brother. Most times when I go home my dad asks me if my brother is "over this gay phase yet" and it happened recently which sparked this journal entry itself.

This reflection raises several important points for social work. How are values and perspectives constructed in social work? How does this impact social work education and practice? What happens in families when one's values begin to shift dramatically, especially in the development of a more critical analysis on everyday experiences? The student explains that *"Rather than fighting the losing battle with my dad by trying to explain that homosexuality is not a phase I decided to look at how I will apply this experience to my future practice."* The student action in this situation is the decision to discontinue the conversation with their father, and to use the analysis of the learning through this experience to help inform future practice. In essence, she is positioning herself to create braver spaces in practice that will be informed by people's lived experiences.

The student continues to write in her journal that *"I grew up with the belief that my parents had all the knowledge in the world and that what they know is all I need to know. As a fit, educated, white male who*

appears to have it all, he [the brother] struggles underneath these layers." This student's reflection is critical, as it highlights the intersectional forms of oppression that can go unnoticed by physical observation. Society may automatically assign gender roles to a "fit, educated, white male." The family is a microcosm of society, where the father expects heterosexual behavior/demeanor from his son. As a result, how does outward appearance impact the process of coming out? How do other social locations intersect with sexual orientation; and how are they connected to inclusivity, privileges, power, and belonging? It is critical to address structural and systemic inequities within both family units and social work practice because there is a danger of practicing social work from an oppressive lens that does not consider the intersection of class, race, age, gender, sexual identity, and abilities.

Naming the Intersection of Institutional Racism, Sexism, and Ableism Within the Workplace

Lopes and Thomas (2006) suggest that unlike individual-level racism, institutional racism can be illustrated as the "networks of institutional structures, policies, and practices that create advantages for white people and discriminate and oppress racialized people" (p. 270). We concur with Lopes and Thomas's (2006) assertion that the current power imbalances that exist in Canadian organizations privilege White people and that it is critical to question the construction of "Whiteness" within the workplace. In addition, it is important to take an intersectional approach to oppression, by asking how "race" intersects with other forms of social markers of individuals. In this final case example, the student questions why a Black colleague has not received promotion and why she

perceives some of her behavior to be "aggressive."

The student begins her weekly journaling by mentioning the incident that led to her reflection on her experiences at work. The student highlights:

A required reading within this program has made me think about racism within organizations and it brought to mind a co-worker of mine, who is an African Nova Scotian. "Lilly" (a pseudonym) is very efficient within her job and has been employed for many years within the organization. She knows her job inside out; as well it seems she could transfer to any position within our department or within the hotel and "own it." She is responsible for training many of the new people and has trained most of our supervisors and managers. She doesn't, however, possess much power within the organization. When I first started my job, I felt a close connection to her, she was compassionate and empathic to my needs as a new employee and I had a great deal of respect for her. During that time, I asked her why she wasn't a supervisor or manager. Before she had answered she sighed very deeply.

The student continues that as she grew closer to Lilly at work, she began noticing certain behaviors that left her feeling concerned. The student mentions that Lilly was "aggressive" at times, and that she would "pick on her" on occasions.

As the student reflects on the mixed messages that she was receiving from Lilly, she begins to go deeper in her analysis of antioppressive social work theory and practice. She writes:

I recognize that I was placing blame upon "Lilly" without considering other possibilities for her actions. I began to look at things differently and wonder if the reason for this behavior could possibly be the result of an unhealthy work environment, possible systemic racism, and my failure to recognize my own power and privilege.

The student deepens her analysis and notes:

Although there is a moderate percentage of African Nova Scotians who are employed in the departments of this organization, there seems to be a glass ceiling for individuals entering higher level positions. I asked a close friend to "Lilly" her view of the situation and received the same response; she thought it would be a burden. I told her that "Lilly" would make a great supervisor and she agreed. When I read Este & Bernard (2006) I began to wonder if her decision not to apply for a higher position is a sign that she is afraid of being "rebuffed or rejected." Although she said that she is happy in her position, the aggression I have witnessed tells otherwise. I see the possibility that there is more to this behavior than meets the eye.

This case example illustrates that intersectional forms of oppression impact the health and well-being of workers. Lilly is a Black woman who has experienced discrimination due to the intersection of her race and gender. In addition, she is perceived as *"aggressive"* by coworkers, whereas in reality this may be a protective stance (Este et al., 2012) she has created to cope with the institutional racism, sexism, and stress she experiences at work.

In a study looking at African Canadians' experiences of racism-related stress, James et al. (2010) found that racism in the employment sector was one of the most significant areas of stress faced by the study participants. Of the 900 participants in their survey, "55 percent experienced racial discrimination in hiring, promotion, and job assignment" (p. 102). In addition, Lopes and Thomas (2006) note that racism "not only is a hazard to one's health, it threatens access to basic necessities of life, while continuously doing damage to one's emotional, psychological, spiritual and social well-being" (p. 17). In this case example, the student questions the role of institutional racism in Lilly's experiences at work and how this has impacted her health. Furthermore, it is critical to ask how Lilly's social position as a Black woman impacts her experiences of promotion within the organization. Also, it brings into question how racism intersects with sexism and other social markers to impact the well-being of racialized women. This case example is helpful in teaching critical social work. It illustrates how difficult it is to change large organizations that are hierarchal and rooted in power imbalances. Issues of inclusivity, privileges, diversity, microaggressions, and belonging all play important roles in social work; therefore, teaching students how to work with intersectionality is essential.

In each of the four case scenarios, it is clear that students were able to take their learning about theories of critical multiculturalism and intersectionality and apply it in practice. The students shared their reflections as they relate to the intersectional forms of oppression and microaggressions they witnessed in their daily lives. The assignment created brave spaces for them to either take direct action or reflect on how they would act in the future. The students were developing awareness and insight about themselves and others as it relates to their social work education and practices. The impact on their future careers is critical because the students were able to analyze and become more aware of how privileges and oppressions affect the supports and services they provide in the community.

Impact on Student Learning

The impact on student learning in this course has been insightful. A major theme in the student journal entries is that intersectional forms of oppression and privileges impact social work practice. In addition, a central theme is that social workers need to be aware of how privileges, power, and oppressions impact relationships, and find braver spaces to act and challenge microaggressions. We use excerpts from their journals to highlight examples of the impact in their own words.

I remember remaining insensitive and/or oblivious to the struggles that other minority individuals have endured. I feel that it is imperative that we recognized these privileges as white people ... to be white in this society means to have power and privilege. It means to not have to work at getting the things that give power ... it means having an advantage in employment and education ... but now I know that it also means that I have power to use my white privilege for positive change.

Another student illustrates:

I see why it becomes so hard to differentiate these invisible or more subtle privileges. ... For some reason, it feels hard to "call out" my professor as the propagator of this privilege and it almost feels wrong. This is interesting in itself that I have an easier time pointing

my finger at a cop than at a social work instructor. I suppose this speaks to my own assumptions about who contributes to privilege and oppression.

This student struggled to identify a social work instructor as a propagator of discrimination but through applying intersectionality and critical multicultural theory was able to identify discrimination in the classroom. The student created a brave space to effectively identify and challenge a person of authority in a classroom; a person traditionally viewed as an agent of social justice.

These case scenarios illustrate that students were able to bridge the gap between critical theory and critical social work practice. The assignment transformed the students and educators, enhancing their ability to challenge microaggressions in social work. The learning outcome of this assignment is not something that can be measured by grades alone. The true value of this assignment and our success as educators is the students' ability to use the teachings from this course to be agents of social change. From our analysis, the growth that students have experienced is evident. As one student journals:

The insights that I have gained from completing this assignment include the realization that I can make a difference by speaking up about my opinion. I originally believed that if I spoke up about social justice issues, I would not be received in a positive manner and people would become frustrated with my disagreement with their actions or beliefs. As I have come to be aware of through completing this assignment, however, not everyone is apt to consider disagreement in terms of an invitation for debate. Often, the actions I took were

received in a pleasant way and others were interested in considering why I felt differently than them. In completing these actions, I also became acutely aware of the privilege that I hold and that I cannot and should not simply dismiss situations where utilizing this privilege to advocate for others or to voice my opinion can make a difference. I feel that the benefits in taking actions, whether these are large or small, had a positive effect on my life and has the potential to positively impact others.

Similar to lessons from MacDonald and Bernard (2014, p. 234) "some [students] found the journaling to be cathartic, as they were able to share actions they took on issues which otherwise might have been immobilizing. Others found their voice, as they had the courage to take action on issues they might not have noticed before they began to study social work."

Audre Lorde once gave a very powerful speech about her own experience where she talked about the need to transform silence into language and action. As we reflect on this assignment and its relevance to students, we are privileged to witness their transformation, as they turn silence and hopelessness into brave action. They created braver spaces through their journaling and the actions they took to deal with the microaggressions they experienced and/or witnessed. This assignment is an excellent example of an experiential learning activity that has the potential to effect change.

Discussion

This assignment was implemented in the Cross-Cultural Issues and Social Work Practice course as a means to give students learning opportunities that would help prepare them to engage in critical practice.

These learning opportunities gave students the resources, confidence, and tools to influence change. It also gave students the courage to step out of their comfort zones and critically analyze the environment around them. Because the assignment asked students to document actions they took, it created braver spaces in their social work education and practice. Each student could take tangible steps to address the injustice they witnessed in their everyday lives.

It is a lifetime journey of growth to be able to become aware of, analyze, and take action against acts of injustice to integrate the Triple A Paradigm into one's daily practice. Typically, injustice and discrimination are covert, many are microaggressions that happen all around us, yet are invisible to those without such skills of analysis. Bernard and Moriah (2007) suggest social workers need to be active agents on this journey if they are to provide socially just and culturally relevant services to the families and communities they work with. As such, the goal of this assignment was to provide students with the theoretical knowledge, tools, and courage to identify acts of discrimination they may not have previously noticed in their everyday lives, and to take action to promote equality and social justice.

The stories and narratives of the journal entries make it clear that intersectional markers of identities (e.g., race, gender, class, age, mental health, disabilities, sexual identity, and sexual orientation) are all politicized within social work and society. It is critical to explore how privileges, power, and our positions as social workers impact the services that individuals receive in social work. Basing their analysis of their experiences in critical multiculturalism, students could identify subtle privileges, microaggressions, and

forms of oppression in their everyday lives, and implemented strategies to challenge social injustice.

Implications for Social Work Education and Practice

From our analysis of student learning, we are confident that students have benefited from our approach and have gained insights and tools they can carry with them into their future practice. As social work educators, our job is to prepare our students for work with diverse populations in social work practice. Although teaching diversity in social work has many challenges, it can be done effectively through creative assignments that are grounded in critical theoretical foundations and lived experiences. Through journaling, students stepped outside their comfort zones, and gained insights into the intersectional forms of oppressions and privileges in their social work education and practice. It helped them to create brave spaces in their lives. This is so essential to their learning journeys and finding ways to act against different forms of injustice. It is not enough to merely create spaces within the classroom where students can feel safe to learn and express themselves. When discussing topics around social justice, safety is not something that we can consistently expect because grades could be at stake for a student who speaks out. Students must be brave in the absence of their guaranteed safety. One element of this could be the use of critical theory that challenges the dominant discourses that dismiss social injustices. This is typically an uncomfortable process for students; however, it is one that has the potential to be personally and professionally transformative.

This assignment is a testimony to the power social work education holds for

critical social work practice. As educators, we provided our students with theoretical foundations grounded in awareness, analysis, and actions towards social justice. Through their understanding of the connection of theory and practice, the students not only identified microaggressions, but they analyzed the discrimination and took action towards correcting the act of injustice. As social work educators, we must provide our students with the theoretical foundation they need to work toward social justice in their practice. This involves, in part, providing students with assignments that allow them the freedom to analyze their own real-world experiences through a critical theoretical lens. When students have the courage to utilize the theoretical foundations we teach them, they create their own brave spaces to help promote change through their social work practice.

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