

Navigating Microaggressions in the Social Work Classroom: A Teaching Note Utilizing a Polyvagal Framework and the Application of Mindfulness Technique

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Abstract

This paper explores microaggressions in the social work classroom and utilizes polyvagal theory (PVT) as a means for instructors to appropriately process, react and engage with these challenging moments. A vignette is offered as an example of how the theory's application can support instructors in maintaining social connection during challenging conversation in the classroom. PVT, in connection to several mindfulness techniques are then reviewed as ways for students and instructors to process feelings during difficult classroom experiences. Application of the theory and practice presented in the paper will empower social work instructors to facilitate microaggressions that occur in their classroom settings, enriching student learning and empathy.

Keywords: Microaggression, Social Work Education, Empathy, Dialogue, Mindfulness, Polyvagal Theory

Introduction

Despite the well-meaning intentions of social work educators and students to promote equality and social justice, many aggress in verbal and nonverbal ways that unconsciously or consciously demonstrate ableism, sexism, racism, transphobia, ageism, cisheterosexism, and homophobia in their interactions with others (Burns, 2014; Spencer, 2017). Social work students encounter microaggressions within the classroom that mirror lived experiences in their field placements and in the world. Microaggressions are best described “as everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership” (Sue, 2010, p. 1). The detrimental impact of microaggressions includes feelings of isolation, anger, and sadness as well as serious adverse health outcomes resulting from the chronic nature of discrimination (Burns, 2014; Sue, 2010). Sources of microaggressions in the classroom range from comments made by instructors, students, and class materials such as videos, case studies, and readings.

While the research on microaggressions in the classroom spans academic disciplines, the social work literature on the academy's role in addressing microaggressions is largely absent (Spencer, 2017). Much of the research focuses on the construction of microaggressions and their prevalence. However, the literature omits pragmatic ways to navigate these rampant and often destructive conversations (Burns, 2014). Shulman (2016) noted that social work faculty members need training and support to implement teaching interventions to create a safe

classroom where students can share about their experiences and be challenged on their pre-existing biases. One framework we are utilizing to understand the inevitable conflict patterns within a classroom is polyvagal theory (PVT; Porges, 2011).

While educational institutions are charged with creating inclusive environments for all students, today's blatantly discriminatory political and social environments have permeated the classroom. Racist, cisheterosexist, and transphobic laws and media messages often play out in the student's environment and are brought into the practice classroom inadvertently or explicitly by students to explore with their classmates and their professors (Sue, Rivera, Watkins, Kim, & Williams, 2011; Hampton, 2015). The classroom represents a microcosm of the world where systemic oppression is present on the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. Educators of all identities, and especially white instructors, should strive to be reflective in this work to not only encourage dialogue and contemplation with their students but continue to do their own critical reflective analysis. It is not enough to only engage in culturally competent work, but we must model and foster anti-racism work in our teaching by actively speaking out against racist policies and actions (Kendi, 2019). It is not enough to know microaggressions are happening, but knowing how to manage them effectively in the classroom is a key first step in addressing the larger systemic oppressions they represent. To support students in their journey as change agents, the classroom needs to be a place where these difficult conversations can be processed and explored in a way that encourages a classroom culture that acknowledges these challenges will arise and also allows for reflection, sharing and feedback (Shulman, 2016). This teaching note utilizes polyvagal theory as means to understand what happens in the body during challenging classroom moments (i.e. explain how the internal processes play a role that impedes effective interactions). Mindfulness techniques are used to address possible non-productive reactions (i.e. shut down, aggressive reactions, avoidance) so that classroom conversations foster mutuality and enrich student knowledge and empathy rather than trigger disconnection or dissociation.

Polyvagal theory addresses many topics that are central to teaching and learning because of how essential social connection is in the educational process. PVT was first introduced in 1994 by Dr. Stephen Porges, when he was the director of the Brain-Body Center at the University of Illinois (Porges, 1995). Porges's polyvagal theory, in part, (2009) describes how the vagal complex, which is part of the autonomic nervous system, mediates the connection between the body and the brain. In PVT, the ventral vagal branch of the parasympathetic nervous system reflects the social engagement system which helps in navigating relationships. When safety and security are perceived, the social engagement system comes "on-line", allowing individuals to flexibly shift between energized and calm states as warranted by the relational dynamics of a situation. Social engagement facilitates being "better able to read social cues...detect friend from foe, and develop a rich capacity for emotional literacy with self and others," as well as have fuller "access to empathy, compassion, playfulness, humor, and tolerance in differences" (Flores & Porges, 2017, p. 213-214). PVT has made strong contributions to the field of trauma theory by positing innovative approaches to healing that create protective ways to regulate stress (van der Kolk, 2015). Dr. Bessel van der Kolk shared that PVT creates a sophisticated way to conceptualize the biology around safety and danger by looking beyond fight and response and placing more importance on social relationships (2015). It explains why eye contact, body language, and hearing a soothing voice from a trusted individual can greatly comfort someone who is upset, and how being ignored or dismissed can cause someone to become enraged (van der Kolk, 2015).

In this teaching note case study, Polyvagal theory frames the reactions that emanate from emotions experienced by both instructors and students in the classroom setting and assists the instructor in formulating a response (Porges, 2009; Tobin, King, Henderson, Bellocchi, & Ritchie, 2016). The application of PVT in reflecting and responding to classroom experiences can be a trauma-informed education practice (TIEP) because it acknowledges that past and current suffering and distress impact the experiences of students and strives to eliminate retraumatization in the classroom (Kawam & Martinez, 2016; Sanders & Hall, 2018). Mindfulness practice is presented in this teaching note as a commonly used trauma-informed technique, as it is shown to increase emotional regulation and a sense of calm, and increase one's ability to reflect and connect with their internal experience and their external supports (Forner, 2017; Kelly & Garland, 2016). Students and instructors who collectively practice mindfulness in the classroom are more prepared to engage in challenging dialogue around microaggressions. Thus, the aim of our paper is to explore how polyvagal theory and mindful practice tools can be applied to assist both social work educators and students to remain present and socially engaged to facilitate constructive conversations about microaggressions.

First, the experience of microaggressions within a social work educational setting is explored, as well as an overview of how polyvagal theory enhances our understanding of how underlying neural platforms link the connectivity between the psychological, physiological, and behavioral attributes in a situation (Sullivan et al., 2018). A case vignette is then offered, based on a social work classroom experience, to explore how the application of polyvagal theory is especially useful in understanding and responding to challenging moments in the classroom. We then propose mindfulness techniques as a teaching intervention that can be utilized to address microaggressions (by both students and instructors), (Mishna & Bogo, 2007). Applying a PVT framework in conjunction with mindfulness techniques creates instructional tools for instructors for increasing empathy and growth in the classroom during difficult conversations, which can then be transferred into social work practice.

Microaggressions in the classroom

Exploring microaggressions in classroom discussions has the potential for transforming an individual's view of self and others (Shorey & Snyder, 2006) and motivating social action (Moradi & Grzanka, 2017). The sensitive and demanding nature of these types of conversations, though, often creates a level of discomfort that could impede the development or enhancement of understanding and empathy (Linder, Harris, Allen, & Hubain, 2015; Yap, 2018). Instructors need to manage their own discomfort if they are to serve as "seasoned and hardy coexplorer[s]" (Kisfalvi & Oliver, 2015, p. 714) capable of engaging students in topics, such as diversity and white privilege, that might feel threatening and evoke strong emotions. Effective, unimpeded conversation can emanate from instructors who demonstrate compassionate leadership and partnership, willingness for depth and vulnerability, and openness to learn and change (Linder et al., 2015; Yap, 2018). These factors contribute to the co-creation of a safe space, which is essential for learning and growth in emotionally charged conversations (Kisfalvi & Oliver, 2015).

Similar to a therapeutic environment, safe classrooms are characterized by the creation of a "holding environment" (Winnicott, 1965), in which individuals can experiment with thoughts and actions without rejection and seek clarification without condemnation. Flenser and Von derLippe (2019) challenge the idea of safety in the classroom, citing an "inherent tension" between student comfort in expression and the need for students in higher education to be challenged by opposing opinions and ideas. Accepting that it is impossible to avoid painful disagreements in complex topics, and acknowledging that safety is experienced differently by all individuals at distinct times, instructors can strive to be transparent with their students. By naming that complete safety is unrealistic in the classroom environment and acknowledging that the group and individuals will likely experience discomfort during discourse. Discomfort does not need to preclude safety if the social engagement system can be maintained by the aforementioned cues of safety. Safe spaces can be elevated to transformative brave spaces when risk and affirmation are actively practiced during discussions of power, privilege, and oppression (Cook-Sather, 2016; Shelton, Kroehle & Andia, 2019). An expectation that conflict and discomfort will arise from authentic conversations is established and supported by confronting and working through issues rather than avoiding or dismissing them (Shelton, Kroehle, & Andia, 2019).

In the context of this paper, we conceptualize a safe classroom as a consistent and intentional process, rather than a finite ending, where the instructor strives to create a classroom environment that is defined by clear expectations about the course assignments and materials, where students are willing to express their opinions, ask questions, and self-reflect with the materials and challenging concepts (Cless & Goff, 2017). Rather than providing comfort and protection from uncomfortable conversations, instead, a safe classroom provides a means to communicate and explore new concepts. Further, mutually agreed upon boundaries and norms exist for everyone's protection. The persistent process of creating a safe space is also facilitated by all participants being fully present and listening deeply, along with flexibility, congruence, empathy, authenticity, compassion, and non-defensiveness (Kisfalvi & Oliver, 2015; Linder et al., 2015). Students of color have also identified appropriate instructor self-disclosure and instructor visibility and accessibility outside of the classroom as safety-promoting activities that allow students to connect with their instructors as real people (Linder et al., 2015; Yap, 2018).

Polyvagal Theory Application

Applying polyvagal theory to classroom settings highlights the necessity for remaining within one's window of tolerance to have access to valuable relational resources to process and respond to information effectively during challenging conversations. Self-regulation and coping skills are important to strengthen when engaging in

communication with others, and help us feel calm when faced with stressors (Porges, 2011). Porges shares that individuals can find themselves in three different social situations: fight or flight, socially communicative, and being immobile (2011). Porges shared how awareness of one's emotions and the physiological reactions can impact social relationships and connectedness (Tobin et al., 2016).

Implicit and explicit cues of safety, such as facial expressions, tone of voice, and verbal messages may be missed or misinterpreted without a functioning social engagement system that supports being within one's window of tolerance. Histories of microaggression and cultural oppression are associated with hypervigilance for potential danger surrounding prejudice and discrimination. A microaggression may trigger an individual's stress responses and bring them outside of their window of tolerance (Sawyer, Major, Casad, Townsend, & Mendes, 2012; Yap, 2018). A stress response can begin prior to actual encounters of racial oppression by anticipating that they will occur. These dynamics of oppression play out in the classroom as one study found a heightened physiological arousal and increased threat-related cognitions and emotions among Latina college students who had been led to believe that they would be giving a speech to a prejudiced white female peer (Sawyer et al., 2012). Yap (2018) presented two intercultural case studies in which a neurobiological approach was used to assess arousal states and target emotions to enhance outcomes. This struggle to manage arousal states, to stay within one's window of tolerance affects most participants during challenging conversations about diversity and difference (Kisfalvi & Oliver, 2015; Linder et al., 2015; Yap, 2018).

Effectively engaging in reflective practices requires on-going attention and effort by instructors because strong, dysregulated emotions can diminish or impede their manifestation. In-the-moment emotional regulation capacities have been framed in terms of a supporting people to remain within their "window of tolerance", which describes three states or levels of arousal which impact an ability to be engaged and emotionally and cognitively present--optimal, hyperarousal, or hyperarousal. (Siegel, 1999). Within the window of tolerance, individuals can manage being challenged to engage in critical thought. If instructors and students cannot stay within their window of tolerance when dealing with challenging interactions, they will likely struggle to stay productively engaged in meaningful dialogue and mutual support (Kisfalvi & Oliver, 2015; Yap, 2018). Remaining or quickly returning, to one's window of tolerance is essential, because within someone's window of tolerance is the optimal arousal zone where emotions can be tolerated and information can be integrated for effective functioning (Ogden et al., 2006). When an individual is above their window of tolerance, the sympathetic nervous system activates mobilization responses associated with hyper-aroused fight or flight reactions. Alternatively, when an individual is below their window of tolerance, the parasympathetic nervous system, mediated by the dorsal vagal circuit, activates immobilization responses associated with hypo-aroused freeze reactions. States of mind outside one's window of tolerance reflect defensive strategies governed by disorganized cognitive processing, flooded emotions, reactivity, impulsivity, hypervigilance, anger and fear in hyper-aroused states or deactivated cognitive processing, numbing, and dissociation during hypo-aroused states (Corrigan, Fisher, & Nutt, 2011). Milder forms of immobilization are more common in response to stress and appear as low mood, flat affect, passivity, disconnection, and foggy or entrenched negative thinking (Rose, Sheffield, & Harling, 2018). While the window of tolerance is often associated with trauma work (Ogden, Minton, & Pain, 2006), this concept offers a broadly applicable neurobiological description of the functioning of a person's arousal system during stressful situations.

The sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems manage life-threatening situations through fight, flight, or freeze reactions, but within the context of safety another type of parasympathetic nervous system response is possible, mediated by the ventral vagal circuit and termed the social engagement system (Porges & Dana, 2018). The social engagement system helps us navigate relationships using flexibility and coping skills. When an individual is functioning within their social engagement system, i.e. feeling safe, they are curious, open, and present as well as able to relate and connect with others to support emotional regulation and well-being (Porges & Dana, 2018). Activities, such as breathing, eye contact, and tone of voice can signal safety and support social engagement and communication. Here we see a direct link between the window of tolerance, PVT, and mindfulness practice, where PVT explains the challenges and barriers to productive engagement in difficult classroom moments, and mindfulness practice as an intervention that directly addresses, and possibly prevents, those barriers. For example, mindfulness-based stress reduction programs have incorporated the window of tolerance into their teaching modules in the form of the workable range model to explore "patterns of reactivity to stress" (Rose, Sheffield, & Harling, 2018, p.432).

Mindfulness Techniques/Mentalization

Utilizing mindfulness techniques to stay present in these challenging moments facilitates reflective functioning, also known as mentalization (Wallin, 2015). Mentalization diminishes when the attachment system is activated by distress and lack of safety. To engage in dialogue and conceptualize these ideas, individuals should attempt to stay in their windows of tolerance to be capable of empathy and to be engaged in their best thinking (Flores & Porges, 2017; Wallin, 2015). Mindfulness enables a person to have a calm enough arousal system to engage in the higher order thinking necessary to answer these questions. Hence, mindfulness makes us better mentalizers (Wallin, 2015).

The concept of mentalization, often discussed in conjunction with attachment theory, was initially developed as a treatment for borderline personality disorder but now has broad applicability to understanding relational dynamics (Allen, 2013; Fonagy & Luyten, 2009; Fonagy, Bateman, & Bateman, 2011; Wallin, 2015). Mentalization is a form of social cognition involving the ability to consider the thoughts, feelings, intentions, motivations, goals, and wishes underlying behaviors in oneself and others. Mentalization has been described as the “psychological glue” of secure attachment relationships (Allen, 2013) and is considered a first step in communicating feelings, needs, and thoughts to others. Mentalization is the foundation of empathy because a sense of mutual connection can evolve through feeling known and understood. While mentalization nourishes relationships, it also emerges from having secure relational attachments. The requirements and outgrowths of effective mentalization and safe relational spaces are the same in that both can only thrive within a manageable state of arousal in the presence of secure attachments and both support the emergence of empathy and insight. Secure attachments extend beyond dyadic relationships to encompass a person’s significant group memberships (Marmarosh, Markin, & Spiegel, 2013; Smith, Murphy, & Coats, 1999). These attachments can similarly serve as a secure base from which challenges can be mentalized and explored (Marmarosh, Markin, & Spiegel, 2013; Smith, Murphy, & Coats, 1999). It should be noted, however, that like the functioning of the social engagement system, as emotional arousal increases, mentalization skills decrease which impedes the capacity to empathize with others. If mentalizing abilities are diminished or deactivated, constructive conversation may be fractured by false assumptions, inaccurate interpretations, close-mindedness, and judgments.

Mindfulness activities in the classroom include reflective tools to become more aware of one’s feelings in the moment. Mindfulness for the instructor is enhanced by a regular mindfulness practice such as meditation, yoga, deep breathing, body scans and other similar tools (Kabat-Zinn, 2019). In academic settings in which mentalization skills are needed to engage in constructive conversations about diversity such as facilitating and listening deeply to the responses to the five mindfulness questions posed by Kisfalvi and Oliver (2015). Kisfalvi and Oliver (2015) suggest five questions for instructors and students to ask themselves about their feelings to be reflexive and to create space for talking about difficult topics.

1. What am I feeling, in the here and now?
2. What is my body telling me?
3. Why is this situation or this person causing such feelings in me?
4. What does it remind me of?
5. What story can I construct out of these feelings, and what can I learn from it in order to develop my capacities even further? (p. 721).

These questions can be shared in the beginning of the semester in class as a useful mindfulness tool for students to journal about or to use in share/pairs. They can then be utilized throughout the semester as needed for self-reflection and self-regulation, for example the instructor can plan to use questions before debriefing after sharing a video case study or when teaching with and about trauma. While these five questions are intrapsychic; they can be used in conjunction with transformational learning from a systems perspective where a student or an instructor engages in new ways of knowing and viewing a situation (Carroll, 2010). In the social work classroom, mindfulness can be synonymous for reflective or reflexive practices such as the five questions so that the instructor may respond effectively to emotions expressed when discussing diversity content to enhance the classroom experience, not hinder it (Mishna & Bogo, 2007). For example, to engage in reflexive practice in a social work classroom an instructor must both exhibit professional containment while listening deeply and acknowledge feelings being experienced (Mishna & Bogo, 2007). Mindfulness in the classroom entails being

aware of the moment to moment experience of the students while also remaining non-judgmental to the dialogue and interactions so that one may respond effectively with skill and creativity (Mishna & Bogo, 2007).

Case Vignette

One relevant example took place in an MSW program when two of the three authors co-taught a year-long foundation social work practice class. The two instructors, one who identifies as a white cisgender heterosexual female and the other as white cisgender Queer female, had a combined social work practice experience of 40 years. The class included approximately 18 students, with the average age of a student being approximately 24 years of age, and with less than a quarter of the students identifying as BIPOC (Black Indigenous Person of Color). The class met for approximately two and a half hours on a weekly basis. The class had established trust and cohesion in the Fall semester as attested to by very high student satisfaction scores and informal meetings with their instructors. The students as a cohort shared that this course was one of their favorite courses because they felt comfortable sharing anything and many students wrote in extra comments about how supported they felt in the classroom and in their field experiences. When the class returned for the Spring semester after a brief break from both field and class there was an overall change in the school's tension regarding race and ethnicity. The cause of this new tension is unknown, but possibly was due to some staffing changes in the leadership of the institution. This case example occurred during the first few weeks into the second semester when there was an unidentified heaviness and anxiety in the classroom.

During a conversation about their field practicums, one white student, who was taking her turn as a discussion leader, asked the class how they should dialogue about intersectional differences (race, class, disability, gender etc.) with their clients. This sparked a query from a white upper middle-class student asking for feedback from the class about a challenging interaction that they had with a client. The student identified the client as a young black mother who was requesting resources from the social work student. The social work student reported that the client complained about an item that was donated because they felt it was not good quality. The social work student felt frustrated that this client seemed ungrateful for the donation and the student seemed to be getting more exasperated as they repeated aspects of the story. The student knew that she needed guidance in managing this situation, so she directly asked the class how they could respond effectively to the client. The instructor responded by gently attempting to initiate mentalizing by asking the student if this situation was in fact solely linked to the donation and what might the conversation symbolize. Instead of sparking self-reflection or responses from classmates, the instructor's prompt did not gain any traction and the conversation moved on to another topic. The conversation transitioned to whether white social workers can be of benefit to BIPOC identified clients. The student social worker said that they do not talk about race with clients and often connect with them on another topic that they have in common. During these conversations, two BIPOC students left the classroom and others looked uncomfortable. When the class ended the instructors reached out to some of the students who had left the room and/or looked uncomfortable during the class and found out that a handful of students had felt wounded during the conversation and others felt either unsafe because the instructors did not step in earlier or did not explain to them the meta-conversation of what was happening in the classroom. Other students (mainly white students but some students of color), however, felt that class had gone well and were shocked and confused as to what could have occurred that was hurtful. While the debriefing conversations, both as a full class and individually, took place over the subsequent two classes, there was visible distrust and withdrawal displayed from some students especially as white fragility was triggered. These formerly engaged students no longer wanted to talk about intersectionality topics, particularly race and class for the remainder of the semester despite continued efforts to rebuild a space for dialogue. We tried to rebuild communication safety by dedicating a significant amount of time during the next few classes to process the situations with incorporating both individual, small group, and larger class discussion. During these conversations, we tried to model being vulnerable during the process and providing parallel examples to the students in the classroom to field and work experiences in our culture, but we felt like we were unsuccessful in these attempts to repair and rebuild creating intersectional dialogue in the classroom.

Discussion

PVT as a Means of Understanding the Case Vignette

This case encapsulates an emotional teaching experience where the instructors were not prepared with a strategy to assist students in processing difficult feelings to enhance and add to the educational experience. In hindsight, as their instructors, we neglected to adequately address the implicit dialogue regarding the level of tension related to microaggressions around race, poverty, gender, and the power dynamics apparent in the paternalistic client and helper (social work student) relationship. We also did not directly address white fragility or white privilege and socioeconomic privilege and the power and oppression dynamics that were present in the dialogue. The question, which we raised to the student who was unaware of her own white privilege, likely did not gain traction because it was too subtle of an invitation to discuss race/ethnicity or oppression and was asked at a time when emotions, of both students and instructors, were likely dysregulated. We acknowledge that as experienced clinicians, but newer social work instructors, that we were concerned that we would make some students feel worse by talking about it more directly. We also worried that by dialoguing about these issues so honestly and openly, we would harm our student evaluations and related tenure and promotion. Upon further reflection both instructors were experiencing major life transitions outside of the classroom that contributed to their own resistance and avoidance as members of the group.

The materials social work instructors teach are at times complex and triggering, and our students are often experiencing their own self-exploration while in the social work classroom. The social work classroom is a microcosm of the systemic forces of oppression in the larger world that we encourage students to critically examine. This can make for exceptionally challenging teaching moments. Utilizing PVT to understand the situation, our students were first demonstrating fight/flight/freeze type responses in that two students left the classroom, many other students seemed hypo-aroused with blank expressions, and the student who was sharing her experience displayed hyperarousal through her repetitive details and frustration (Porges, 2011). If individuals were not within their windows of tolerance (a state of being open to discussion and engagement), they could not stay involved for mutual aid (Siegel, 1999). A crucial element of this critical dialogue with PVT is to recognize the strengths of the social relationships within our classroom and the trust between the instructor and the students could have been utilized to support the class with this situation and support students to return to their window of tolerance (Porges, 2011). Polyvagal theory may also be of use in these situations to understand our behavioral and physiological reactions to microaggressions and difficult conversations before we explore the breach in trust or communication (Asakura & Maurer, 2018). If instructors and future social workers model personal reflection on power relations and privilege when one is at an impasse with reflective practice, advocacy, and examination of power relations to students it can move the dialogue forward (Asakura & Maurer, 2018).

DiAngelo (2018) speaks of this struggle in terms of “white fragility” and comments that discussing racial/ethnic identities is highly stressful and often intolerable for white people. During these encounters, white individuals have tendencies to become defensive or argumentative, withdraw physically or emotionally, or minimize, dismiss, and ignore issues due to the cognitive and psychological emotional stress that they feel when facing challenges to their beliefs and perceptions. Hence, these topics are often navigated during moments when the mental states of people across social identities may not be maximally effective. Interspersing difficult conversations with mindful pauses as a standard practice, not just in explosive moments, guards against disintegrative conversations. For example, changing body position, taking deep breaths, or just noticing internal body reactions are quick, accessible ways to support affect tolerance (Yap, 2018). Instructors can model these behaviors along with using soothing tones, guided mindfulness meditation, and authentic sharing of their own internal mental and body states (Rose et al., 2018). The goal is not to dismiss or extinguish feelings but to maintain balance within an emotional range, allowing the feelings to be experienced without losing cognitive capacities so that the feelings can be used as a source of exploration and insight. After an experience like the earlier vignette the instructor can self-disclose while keeping focus on the students, to model somatic experiencing (Porges & Dana, 2018).

Case Vignette: Lessons Learned

When we asked for student feedback about the course, and specifically about this situation, a common theme students' shared was that microaggressions and poorly facilitated dialogues about oppression did not just happen in our social work classroom, but in multiple classes, in the field, and in the world. The difference was that our classroom was one of the only classrooms that attempted to debrief the situation instead of changing topics and avoiding the topic. The students wished we had better prepared them for being able to navigate microaggressions, both when they make one towards a peer and a client or when they feel someone has directed a microaggression towards them. Reflecting on this experience, with the input from our students, provides a unique opportunity to recognize how systemic levels of oppression intersect with an individual's experiences, and how essential it is to acknowledge this process within the classroom from a social justice framework.

In the vignette, a harmful reenactment had played out in the student's description of their field placement. The helper (the social work student) was expecting gratitude and no complaints. The client, a new mother, was likely already feeling powerless with little support while trying to finish high school. The racialized stereotypes of "middle-class white savior" and the "underprivileged black client" were played out in the student's description in class, and the responding class experience blocked our ability to delve into processing how the systems of inequality were at play. In addition, it was important to situate this case and class discussion within the greater systems of inequality and oppression for all students.

Social work is based on both a cultural competency model and a social justice model. Students whose intersectional positionality may be considered a marginalized identity (for example, a person of color, queer, lower socioeconomic status, first generation student, or an immigrant) were activated and triggered by the insensitive comments. This was one opportunity, as white instructors, to practice antiracist teaching and name our role and the social worker's role in white supremacy (Kendi, 2019). One instructor recalls her impulse to rescue and protect BIPOC identified students which again perpetuates the rescuer and victim dynamic. We should have acknowledged how these dynamics and the context of the client interaction, hurt the client and perpetuated racialized and class stereotypes. Initiating a dialogue about the power of privilege and white supremacy directly connects to the social justice tenants of the social work profession (Kendi, 2019). Instructors need to have the skills and tools to engage in challenging dialogues about microaggressions by reminding students in class that during reflection exercises, and our work in the field, that questions and discomfort often emerge. This can be incredibly challenging as social work instructors, there are not many role-models or best practices right now that offer a guide to college instructors navigating microaggressions in the classroom.

Recommendations for Instructors

There are multiple recommendations for instructors to use for situations resembling the case vignette which we will share in this section. First, we will start with how we prepared students in the beginning of the course and how we weave in the material throughout the semester. Next, we will discuss what to do in the moment and finally, we will share some strategies we have used to respond after the situation. In succeeding social work practice classes, we shared the polyvagal theory and the mentalization concept and taught mindfulness techniques to the students in the beginning of the year to better prepare them. We also highlighted the application of attachment theory early in the year to foster an environment of teamwork and demonstrate our own vulnerability as instructors.

One author started to integrate a brief mindful activity into the first five minutes of all classes, even macro courses, to start the session off with a grounding technique that was a common thread throughout the semester. We incorporated the concepts of white privilege, capitalism, and intersectionality within our lectures, activities, site visits, and discussions, in order to intentionally connect the students' experiences in the field and the classroom with the greater systems of oppression at play. We discussed PVT concepts such as the importance of insight about one's own state of being during an interaction and how non-verbal cues of stress and anxiety can be communicated via our body language and intonation (Porges, 2011 van der Kolk, 2015). In addition, we discussed how social connection is foundational in facilitating constructive conversations that create fear versus increase fear, anger, or numbness. These concepts were part of our critical dialogue and an integral part of classroom culture. We encouraged students to practice tuning in to their reactions not only in our classroom, but in the field. We provided case studies of potential situations and talked through the most ethical and culturally sensitive ways to work through them.

The following year in a practice class, one of the authors had a similar situation to the vignette this time about gender identity and racism. This time she was prepared to use PVT and other TIEP techniques in the classroom. She shared verbally that she was giving a grounding pause and encouraged students to do the same with her. This grounding pause was brief (approximately a minute) to be able to re-regulate their emotional states back to within the windows of tolerance. According to PVT, the students, at this point, were better equipped to hear each other, be curious, seek understanding, and have flexibility with relational dynamics. This technique could both refocus and re-engage the students and they were able to acknowledge the misunderstanding and misinformation before moving forward. The instructor addressed her own discomfort while taking a calming breath and could verbally respond with a prompt for everyone. By being grounded, transparent and reflecting aloud her discomfort (Kang & Garran, 2018; Rose, Sheffield, & Harling, 2018) the instructor could engage for the explicit purpose of enhancing the class's ability to re-engage in a challenging conversation. Offering a rationale for taking a grounding pause puts the activities within a context of their value. Otherwise, the activities might seem like a purposeless diversion, possibly offending or discouraging students from participating. Additionally, clearly offering the ideas for grounding as a choice for the whole class does not embarrass any one individual and provides choice and empowerment through retaining the right to refrain (Carello & Butler, 2015). Then the instructor used Kisfalvi and Oliver's (2015) five questions as a classroom journal prompt. These questions had been shared in the beginning of the semester in class as a useful tool for students to journal about or to use in share/pairs. They were utilized throughout the semester as needed for self-reflection and self-regulation. For example, the instructor used the questions before class debriefing after sharing a video case study or when teaching with and about trauma. While these five questions are intrapsychic; they can be used in conjunction with transformational learning from a systems perspective where an individual student or supervisee engages in new ways of knowing and viewing a situation (Carroll, 2010).

As a self-reflective tool, the instructor asked these same questions about their own feelings to model mindfulness and then support the students in doing the same as a prompt to help initiate dialogue. A classroom norm of brief journaling during each class meeting had also been established at the beginning of the course, so familiarity with this activity and discussing the structured questions may have fostered a sense of introspection safety for written self-expression. After taking time to reflect and write, students were prepared to share verbally.

Incorporating a reflective practice that addresses the greater systems of oppression being played out in the classroom would have been a critically important debriefing strategy. Another example is asking students to consider the following questions: 1) What does it mean to be person-centered and relational? 2) What does it mean to uphold the respect and dignity of all individuals as the social work code of ethics states (Barsky, 2019)? Students in this class expected to be taken out of their comfort zone and to challenge themselves about cisheteronormative concepts and racism and did so with less resistance and more openness due to preparation and norms set by the instructor.

Also, it is vital to point out that a combination of strategies and a multitiered approach may be needed to meet the diverse needs of each individual and the collective group. Each student will respond to a technique in their own way, so offering various breathing techniques or somatic poses, as well as ways of engaging each of the senses, increases the likelihood a student will find one or two that suits their needs in the moment. Two of the authors utilize TIEP practices in the classroom and have students create their own safety plan for their own use in the classroom and in the field to provide the student with the connection between coping skills and triggers (Radis & Crocetto, 2020). Techniques that facilitate reflection and tuning in the moment are encouraged. Students often process class content and have different ways of knowing and we should not rush this process (Brown & Strega, 2015). Some students may have limited awareness about difference or past traumas or prior microaggressions and may be encouraged to do additional work outside of the practice course. For example, individual or group therapy, participating in affinity or intergroup dialogues, somatic work, and/or other practices to support healing and awareness. Dr. Annelise Singh's powerful, *The Racial Healing Handbook: Practical Activities to Help You Challenge Privilege, Confront Systemic Racism, and Engage in Collective Healing* (2019) can be used as a resource to support both people of color and white identified individuals to healing and racial liberation.

Finally, we wanted to share ways that we have responded and processed as an instructor outside of the classroom when microaggressions have occurred, often acknowledging that this has occurred and that we need to be the proponents of change. Students are reminded that their classroom is a place to grow and learn for engaging with

clients and systems and that it is our ethical responsibility as social workers to be reparative in our work. The first author has found that individual meetings once a semester about mid-semester instead of a group class has been an impactful way to support students individually to be engaged in the group. Other recommendations for instructors in similar situations is to prioritize sharing about our own anti-racism and intersectional justice work that we engage in during both our teaching and practice, emphasizing that this is integral for any social worker. While our experience occurred in a classroom it is reflective of the shame and fear surrounding talking about areas of difference and how social work programs and departments need to continue this dialogue on a mezzo and macro level. One author is the director of an Anti-Racism Working Group on her campus to encourage race dialogue across disciplines and share ideas to improve the racial climate for BIPOC identified students, staff, and faculty at a predominantly white university. Virtual teach-ins from instructors engaging in scholarship and innovative teaching exercises are highlighted and a program to support anti-racism peer educators is in process to continue the work. Another author incorporates an anti-racism and LGBTQIA+ statement in all of her syllabi and integrates anti-oppression concepts into every class across the curriculum. One author was an integral part of her University's new race and social justice task force. The task force found that across programs instructors needed more tools to dialogue about these difficult conversations and that intersectional content such as articles and case studies needed to be assigned across the curriculum. They engaged in a school-wide book discussion along with continued regular dialogue about these key concerns. Dialoguing about these initiatives provided not only more visibility but constructive ways to continue to work on issues around difference. Overall, we strive to create classrooms that parallel relationships that are being mirrored in the field with the student and their client population.

Conclusion

Social work classrooms provide a powerful opportunity to explore how microaggressions connect to greater systems of systemic oppression. Instructors and future social workers can be prepared for these situations in which microaggressions might arise and to have the tools to address them, and also to have the tools to minimize their accounts of being the aggressor. This article addresses the call to address the layers of systemic oppression that exist in the world today in the classroom. This case study offers a specific example where facilitators make missteps and mistakes in this process. It is during these moments that challenging white privilege or middle-class privilege, even with the presence of white fragility is crucial. It is vital to equip new social workers and social work instructors with tools to become more self-aware and to have a plan for engaging in this important reflective individual and group work. By encouraging connection and reflexivity through mindfulness tools and a polyvagal framework, students have the opportunity to build the foundation to engage and practice anti-oppression and anti-racist social work. It is with consistent self-reflection that students and faculty will be able to engage in this work, along with knowledge about how the individual interfaces with the structural, institutional, and interpersonal levels of oppression. This article adds to the growing social work literature providing teaching tools for social work instructors to utilize in the classroom, to dialogue about microaggressions and to teach their students how to dialogue about difficult topics.

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