

Race Discussion in the Classroom: Factors Affecting Emotional Safety and Comfort for Black Social Work Students

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Abstract

Previous research has shown that Black Americans in higher education must often endure racial battle fatigue on top of the daily requirements of attending college. These studies draw attention to the physical and emotional effects that race-related stressors may cause Black students. Black students must choose between engaging in discussions to educate others and risk social isolation or stepping into the background and waiting for the discussion to end. Students must also anticipate increased chances of racial microaggressions for speaking up or challenging misconceptions. Attempts by instructors to reduce these stressors and provide knowledge on race and how it intersects with other systems could be made by implementing discussions on race-related topics such as Critical Race Theory. Social workers are tasked with promoting social justice. Professors and students must be able to recognize and acknowledge the barriers and negative effects that impact Black social work students from participating in race discussions in an environment where they do not feel safe. This research explores the experiences of Black undergraduate and MSW students in Pennsylvania and their responses and engagement to discussions of race in the classroom.

Background

The 2020 murder of George Floyd by Derek Chauvin re-ignited discussions about structural racism in the United States. As these discussions moved into classrooms, it is likely that some Black students may have experienced what Morales (2021) has documented as race-related stressors, and felt compelled to provide responses which might have included “proving them wrong,” (behaving in a manner that is not related to

Black stereotypes), or “strategic silence,” (not challenging racial microaggressions), as well as having to assume the role of educating others. Students of color can often feel unsafe discussing race in classrooms due to re-traumatization and race-related stressor experiences. The feeling of being unsafe refers to not being protected against microaggressions, stereotypes, and racial tension in the classroom (Walls et.al, 2018).

Methods

Participants for the study were recruited from indirect recruitment emails that were sent to the program directors of 37 accredited social work programs across Pennsylvania. Directors of these programs then shared the study with students in their Social Work BASW and MSW programs. Informed consent was obtained and participants were sent a link to an electronic 20-question survey via Qualtrics. Inclusion criteria included individuals who are students enrolled in accredited social work programs in the state of PA and who identify as Black. At the end of the survey, participants were invited to do an optional interview via Zoom if additional information was needed. Data was coded to identify themes within the survey responses.

Results

Several themes emerged from the survey responses that were received and analyzed. These themes included **isolation, ignorance of peers, emotional safety, and educator's role in influencing reactions** as factors that impacted their experiences while engaging in race related classroom discussions.

Several participants reported feelings of isolation when discussing race in the classroom, which were attributed to the lack of diversity in the classroom. One participant stated, "A lot of times I bite my tongue, only because I don't want to offend anyone. If the topic is really heated, and I have a completely different view, I can be scared to speak up. When you are the only black person in a class, that can be intimidating." A diverse classroom creates a diversity of opinions and experiences that enrich the discussions. It was reported that some students feel ostracized when speaking up in class, fearing that they are the only ones who share the same beliefs about racial issues.

Some responses stated that ignorance of peers played a factor in deciding to speak up or not during these race-related discussions. Some felt that they had to educate other students on racial issues and privilege, and that avoiding participating in racial topics may lead to continued ignorance and biases. Black social work students who do not participate in these discussions attribute that to feeling unsafe emotionally due to insensitive, inappropriate, misinformed, and even racist comments by peers that can minimize racial issues. Other participants feel that some students have not experienced diversity or are not aware of diverse racial experiences. When asked if discussing race is important, a participant responded with, "If it's not addressed or mentioned then the same ignorance will continue for students."

Several students related educators' ability to facilitate as determinants for comfortability and emotional safety in the classroom. Professors are facilitators of discussion and have influence on the direction of a discussion or if it continues. A commonality in the results stated that black students feel emotionally safe and comfortable discussing racial issues in the social work classroom if professors make them feel safe and supported. The feeling of safety and being supported was felt when the professor spoke up when a student made insensitive, inappropriate, or racist comments that minimize racial issues and experiences. Those who do not trust the professor to speak up and support students of color during these discussions report not participating or feeling safe during these discussions.

Conclusion

Responses from the survey shed light on what can be done in the future for Black social work students to feel emotionally safe and comfortable discussing race related

issues. The research identified actions that would improve the environment when discussing race, which includes a diverse student body, professors facilitating inclusive discussions, promoting awareness to cultural humility and competency, and action against racist statements and microaggressions. These changes would benefit not only Black social work students, but all people of color who experience this in their classroom.

References

- Morales, E. (2021). "Beasting" at the battleground: Black students responding to racial microaggressions in higher education. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 14(1), 72–83. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000168>
- Walls, J. K., & Hall, S. S. (2018). A Focus Group Study of African American Students' Experiences with Classroom Discussions about Race at a Predominantly White University. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 23(1), 47–62.