Using Photovoice to Explore Racial Microaggressions Experienced by Doctoral Students of Color

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Abstract

Racial microaggressions are prevalent in academia and negatively impact the engagement and well-being of students of color. Despite this, little is known regarding the experiences of doctoral students with racial microaggressions in counselor education (CE) programs. The purpose of this study was to better understand the impact of racial microaggressions on doctoral students of color in CE programs. The study utilized Photovoice methodology, which incorporated pictures, captured by participants, to highlight the racial microaggressions experienced by six doctoral students of color in CE programs. Themes expressed by participants included Struggle, Racism, Sacrificing Ourselves, and Advocacy as central to their experience of racial microaggressions. Recommendations for counselor educators include validation, mentoring, training, and diversification of counselor education curriculum.

Keywords

counselor education, racial microaggressions, doctoral students of color

Author's Notes

Racial microaggressions are defined as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 271). Racial microaggressions are prevalent in academia and have been observed in classrooms, interactions with faculty and peers, social spaces, and the campus environment (Henfield et al., 2011; Henfield et al., 2013; Solorzano et al., 2000; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2015; Sue et al., 2009). Researchers note that victims of racial microaggressions experience a wide array of negative physical and psychological symptoms that impact their overall well-being (Chakraborty & McKenzie, 2002; Ong et al., 2013; Schoulte et al., 2011). African American and Latinx undergraduates report feeling drained, invisible, frustrated, and alienated, as racial microaggressions reduce their sense of belonging, impact academic performance, and hinder participation in campus life (Solorzano et al., 2000; Yosso et al., 2015). Some other outcomes include discomfort, self-doubt, exhaustion, disconnection, anxiety, depression, and isolation (Clark et al., 2012; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; McCabe, 2009; Solórzano, 1998; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2015; Vaishnav, 2020). However, most research has been focused on the experiences of undergraduate students while experiences of doctoral students with racial microaggressions remains largely unexplored.

The Council for Accreditation for Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) underscores the importance for institutions to take "efforts to attract, enroll, and retain a diverse group of students and to create and support an inclusive learning community" (CACREP, 2016, p. 6). This has led to increased enrollment of diverse group of students over time in Counselor Education programs. In CACREP's 2018 Vital Statistics Report of doctoral students enrolled in CE programs, more than half the sample identified as White (55.55%),

followed by individuals from racial and ethnic minority groups (39.67%), non-resident aliens (3.1%), and the remaining as undisclosed/other (5%). Yet, despite this representation of doctoral students of color (39.67%), little is known about their experiences of racial microaggressions that may impact their overall experience within their CE programs.

Racial Microaggressions and Doctoral Students of Color

Racial microaggressions are one of the most harmful forms of race related discriminatory experiences impacting the well-being of minoritized graduate students in academia, given that racial microaggressions are subtle and can be added stressors during an already demanding time (Clark et al., 2012). Therefore, it is important to examine how racial microaggressions can impact a doctoral student's experience within their academic program and identify ways to mitigate these negative consequences. Although only a few studies have been conducted with doctoral students, the findings are similar to those from research with undergraduate students (Constantine & Sue, 2007; Solorzano, 1998; Torres et al., 2010). For example, Chicana and Chicano doctoral students felt out of place in higher education and noted not having role models who looked like them (Solorzano, 1998). Further, these students felt that their professors had lower expectations of them as a result of their identity and often experienced racist and discriminatory behaviors and comments (Solorzano, 1998). For African American psychology doctoral students, experiencing racial microaggressions in their academic environment resulted in underestimating their own personal ability, which was associated with greater levels of perceived stress, which in turn led to an increase in depressive symptoms (Torres et al., 2010). Racial microaggressions have also been documented in supervision towards Black clinical and counseling psychology graduate students (Constantine & Sue, 2007). Results from these studies align with results from previous studies conducted at an undergraduate level, which relate

experiencing racial microaggressions with lower well-being, isolation, and lower sense of connectedness (Ong et al, 2013; Solorzano et al., 2000; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). While these studies highlight experiences of doctoral students, they do not reflect the experiences of doctoral students within Counselor Education specifically. Given the small and homogeneous sample size, and the qualitative nature of the majority of studies, the generalizability of these findings to other students of color across various disciplines is limited.

Doctoral Students in Counselor Education (CE)

Some researchers have studied general experiences of doctoral students specifically in Counselor Education programs (Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Protivnak & Foss, 2009) and a few have focused on racially and ethnically underrepresented students (Baker & Moore, 2015; Henfield et al., 2011; Michael-Makri, 2010; Robinson, 2012; Vaishnav, 2020). Several factors influence the success and attrition rates of doctoral students in Counselor Education programs. Hoskins and Goldberg (2005) conducted a qualitative investigation of 33 doctoral students in Counselor Education programs to investigate the level of persistence in their respective programs. Authors identified program-match as being an important factor in program completion rates (Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005). Additionally, perceived success impacted the participant's self-efficacy and self-doubt (Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005). Authors also concluded that participant's lack of connection with their faculty and peers led to attrition (Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005). A limitation to this investigation was that participants from this study predominantly identified as Caucasian (84%) and therefore, the results from this study cannot adequately explain experiences of doctoral students of color in Counselor Education programs. Protivnak and Foss (2009) explored themes that influenced doctoral student's experiences in Counselor Education. Participants (n = 141) from CACREP (88.7%) and non-CACREP accredited

programs completed a survey of open-ended questions. Authors found that factors such as advising, mentoring, and department culture had a positive impact on success rates of doctoral students (Protivnak & Foss, 2009). It is important to note that participants from both these studies identified as predominantly White/Caucasian (84% and 70.9%, respectively).

While not specifically examining racial microaggressions, a few researchers have qualitatively explored experiences of doctoral students of color in CE programs. Racial microaggressions were often perpetuated in different interactions that students had with peers and faculty in the academic environment, resulting in doctoral students of color feeling they need to 'play the game' to prove themselves to people in their department (Baker & Moore, 2015; Henfield et al., 2011, 2013). They also felt that their White counterparts were often given priority for opportunities, especially mentoring opportunities (Baker & Moore, 2015). Further, Zeligman and colleagues (2015) explored experiences of first semester doctoral women of color in Counselor Education programs. Racial inequality and racism were a part of these participants' experiences in their respective programs (Zeligman, et al., 2015). Similar to findings from studies of undergraduate students, experiences of racial microaggressions led to isolation, marginalization, and internalization which impacted interactions with peers, the department culture/program climate, and interactions with faculty (Baker & Moore, 2015; Henfield et al., 2011, 2013).

To date, researchers have explored racial microaggressions in CE programs in a few dissertation studies. Robinson (2012), examined experiences of eight African American and Latin American female doctoral students in CE programs. The author collected data through focus groups and noted that microaggressions had an overall impact on emotional, academic/career, interpersonal/social, physical, psychological, personal, and spiritual

components of wellness for these participants. Another researcher explored the experiences of 187 master's and doctoral level graduate students with racial microaggressions, in CE programs (Michael-Makri, 2010). The author found that students of color in CE programs experience moderate level of microaggressions. More recently, Vaishnav (2020) examined the level of microaggressions experienced by doctoral students of color ($n = 101$) in CE programs and its impact on sense of connectedness within their academic program. Vaishnav found that doctoral students of color experienced a moderate level of racial microaggressions. Further, experiencing racial microaggressions negatively correlated with sense of connectedness for doctoral students of color within their CE program (Vaishnav, 2020). The scarcity of research for doctoral students of color in CE programs highlights the gap and need to examine this population in greater depth.

Given the emergent themes of racial microaggressions, and the negative consequences that result, along with the initiative by CACREP (2016) to recruit and retain diverse groups of students, it is important to understand, specifically, the experiences of racial microaggressions of doctoral students of color in CE programs. The purpose of this study was to better understand the impact of racial microaggressions on doctoral students of color in CE programs. The research question for this study was, "What are the experiences of doctoral students of color with racial microaggressions in Counselor Education programs?"

Photovoice

Photovoice has gained recent popularity in CE due to its collaborative approach of involving participants in the data collection process via pictures. Trepal and Cannon (2018) highlight that Photovoice consists of conducting research "with" participants, rather than "for" them. Photovoice challenges traditional notions of research through inclusion of the voices of the participants in data collection and coding of themes (Trepal & Cannon, 2018). Photovoice can

also be a creative tool used to teach, influence, provide voice and action. Photovoice has been incorporated in classroom settings as a pedagogical tool (Zegline et al., 2019) and while promoting race-based dialogue (Paone et al., 2017) as it promotes meaning making and creativity, especially while discussing difficult topics such as race that are generally considered taboo. While Photovoice has been used in CE, to date, researchers have not incorporated Photovoice to examine racial microaggressions within the CE community. Encouraging participants to make meaning of their experiences using pictures can promote reflection and critical dialogue (Trepal & Cannon, 2018). Therefore, Photovoice methodology was used in this study to explore the experiences of doctoral students of color in CE programs.

Method

Photovoice is a qualitative methodology that was implemented to capture the experiences of participants. Photovoice is part of the participatory research paradigm and participants are involved in selecting photographs that describe their experience of the issue or phenomenon being studied. Photovoice has three important components: it provides opportunity to record and reflect a community's voice through photographs, promotes critical dialogue and awareness through small and large group discussions of photos, and, attempts to reach policy makers to elicit change (Wang & Burris, 1997). Photovoice gives participants the power and independence to create their story and find common themes through dialogue with others. Participants are involved in selecting photos that reflect the group's experience, contextualize the story, and code the themes and issues that emerge (Wang & Burris, 1997). Therefore, Photovoice serves as a tool for participatory needs assessment. In this study, participants were asked to use pictures to explore their experiences of racial microaggressions within their doctoral programs.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through a combination of convenience and snowball sampling. The criteria for participating in the study included: identifying as doctoral student of color, being 18 years or older, and having completed at least one semester in their respective Counselor Education programs. The researcher sent recruitment emails containing the link to the consent form and survey to students and professors from CACREP-accredited programs, requesting them to forward it to other eligible participants. Individuals who participated were asked to complete an online survey which consisted of a demographic questionnaire and their availability to meet for interviews. Next, they were provided instructions to take and send up to five pictures that captured their experiences of racial microaggressions in their respective academic programs (with instructions to exclude pictures that identified people and academic institutions). They were also asked to sign up for a focus group or individual interview to discuss and code their pictures. Participants were informed that any identifying information that came up during the focus group would not be a part of the final write up. The focus group (*n=3*) met online once for about two hours and the individual interviews (*n=3*) each lasted approximately an hour. All interviews took place through a secure video conference application. During the interview, each participant talked about the picture(s) they submitted, identified emerging themes, and engaged in data analysis. Participants were responsible for coming up with themes and placing pictures under each theme. All data downloaded were de-identified using pseudonyms and stored in a secured folder in a password protected computer.

Participants

Twelve participants completed the online survey, which included the consent form and the demographics questionnaire. Five participants signed up for the first focus group, but one participant reached out on the day the group was scheduled, to inform of a schedule conflict

while one participant did not respond to email communications. This left three participants who attended the video focus group (*n=3*). Due to the seemingly low interest in signing up for online focus groups, the principle investigator offered the option to sign up for individual interviews in the online survey. Of the eight participants that signed up, three decided to drop out of the study due to busy schedules (travel, dissertation preparation) and one did not respond to email communications. This left 3 participants for individual interviews (*n=3*).

A total of six doctoral students (*n=6*) of color in CACREP-accredited Counselor Education programs across the nation participated (three in focus group and three in individual interviews). One participant identified as a part-time student and five as full-time students. Five participants were female and one male. Participants were at different stages in their doctoral degree, with three students in the third year, two students in the second year, and one in the first year in their respective doctoral programs. Three participants identified their race and ethnicity as Black/African American, two as Latinx/Latinx American, and one as biracial (Latinx/Latinx American and the other identities were not reported).

Data Analysis

The principle investigator was a doctoral student in a CACREP-accredited CE program and identifies as a person of color. Therefore, the PI engaged in critical self-reflexivity throughout the process of data collection and data analysis. Reflexivity is "an ongoing self-awareness during the research process which aids in making visible the practice and construction of knowledge within research in order to produce more accurate analyses of our research", which requires a level of accountability to participants' narratives (Pillow, 2003, p. 178). The PI engaged in this process through self-reflection and journaling of thoughts after interviews and

during the data analysis process. Member checking and an external auditor were used to support this process of self-reflexivity.

In Photovoice, participants are encouraged to identify themes based on their narratives as described through the pictures selected. Each participant played an important role in identifying themes and placing pictures that fit within their selected theme. Participants were asked to select the pictures that represented each theme; while more than one picture represented a theme, only one picture is provided per theme as an example in this manuscript. The themes that were decided by the focus group were then used a-priori to code the three individual interviews. Individual interviews were individually coded to verify if the focus group themes emerged, as well as any additional themes. No new themes emerged in individual interviews, which supported saturation. Three methods were used to ensure trustworthiness of the results. First, as noted, quality of data was established through triangulation using a combination of focus group and individual interviews. Second, the researcher also incorporated member checking to confirm the final themes. Participants were sent an email with a document of the themes and the quotes that went under each theme and were asked to respond back within a week with any recommendations. Three participants responded back and stated that they had no recommendations. Finally, an external auditor reviewed and confirmed the final themes. The external auditor is a full professor at a counselor educator program and had not been a part of the data collection or analysis. The external auditor provided minor edits related to clarification of the themes which were incorporated by the PI.

Findings

The focus group identified four themes: Struggle, Racism, Sacrifice Ourselves, and Self-Advocacy. Of these themes, struggle had three sub-themes: Hiding parts of self, self-doubt, and

professors. Racism had two sub-themes: Counselor Education as a field and oppression. These final four themes are presented in this section in the form of participants' narratives. Pseudonyms have been used to protect participant identities.

Struggle

All six participants identified struggle as salient to their experiences as doctoral students of color in CE programs. Carmen, a third-year doctoral student, described this struggle as "the struggle for justice, acknowledgement, recognition, integrity, to be seen and accepted as you are for who you are." Three sub-themes were identified by the researcher based on the participant narratives: (1) Hiding parts of self, (2) Self-doubt, and (3) Professors.

Hiding parts of self. Five out of six participants expressed having to protect or hide parts of oneself to be accepted by the peers and faculty in their program. Carmen took a picture of a sand tray created to describe this struggle (see Figure 1). Carmen shared,

> Another layer to [the struggle] is behind this figure of Wonder Woman are all of these other parts of me that I have, for various reasons, kept hidden and protected from the majority culture, specifically, white cis gender heterosexual individuals in the program that may make assessments or assumptions about who I am due to my intersecting identity.

Figure 1

Hiding Parts of Self

Seth, a second-year doctoral student, elaborated on Carmen's picture and reflection, relating it to his experience as a doctoral student of color in his CE program.

> I think with [the] picture [figure 1a] the thing I didn't notice initially that was pointed out are all the things behind Wonder Woman that are important. But, that we have to hide. That we don't really get to show….. But, it's mostly they see this big façade that I have to put on being that super hero, taking on so much

As mentioned by Carmen and Seth, participants felt that they were constricted in their expression of self. They also noted that this was an experience as a result of being students of color and felt that their White peers did not seem to have to worry about this. Seth further noted,

> Where, in my experience in my program, some of the other students, the White students, they have more latitude to really explore their identity as new academics. Where, if they're stressed, they can show it on their face and people rally to them. And, 'Are you okay? What can we do to support you?' Where, I was like, 'Man. I don't really have that luxury.'

Other examples included Shirine, a first-year doctoral student, who said she was expected to adapt to the dominant culture in the program. She struggled with the dilemma of expressing her authentic self or putting on a mask to present herself in a way that was expected. She compared this experience to an identity crisis. "It's more like a, okay, who am I? Who am I allowed to be? In what ways will I still be able to advance and still [be] myself? What are barriers of being myself here?" Regina, a second-year doctoral student, stated, "I have to pretend like everything is fine or I'm just like 'deal with it in other ways and keep going on like everything's great' and it's not and that's getting harder to do." And finally, Irene, a third-year doctoral student, explained why she had to change or hide parts of herself. She said it's "Because

I don't want to appear as if I'm being aggressive. Yeah, I definitely don't. Especially when, as a stereotype we get that a lot, that Latinos are, you know, loud and flamboyant and, and I don't, I don't want that. I want to be taken seriously."

Self-doubt. The experience of microaggressions created self-doubt within participants. They questioned their perception of the events and wondered if they were the only ones perceiving it as microaggressions. For example, Irene said,

> Sometimes I question things a lot because I don't know if my reality is other people's reality. I don't want to speak up and say this is going on with me and I'm the only one who experiences it…well is it really going on or am I crazy?

Regina also questioned whether her reaction to racial microaggressions was justified. She shared,

> It's like 'am I being too sensitive? Is this like a part of just being in a doctoral program?' It's hard to tease out what is just typical…And so having to do that by myself, honestly, it makes me feel crazy a lot of times…It's just like a lot of questioning, a lot of doubt, on top of, I'm trying to also just be a doc student and like have enough to challenge my ability and my capability without having to also think about why don't people like me, you know?

Seth noted that he had to check in with himself constantly before speaking because as the only Black doctoral student in his program, he did not feel safe doing so. He shared,

> ..where I'm constantly checking in with myself to make sure that I'm interpreting my experiences correctly. Even the word, 'correctly,' gives that kind of, 'why is the White narrative the correct one?'

Professors. Participants struggled with microaggressions perpetuated by professors in their respective departments. Five participants shared that even though their professors were

aware that they were struggling in their respective programs, they did not reach out or support them through it. Regina shared,

> like I really feel like I'm struggling, I'm doing well, I'm still in the program, is still working out, but feeling like there's some hidden help or like advice or tip faculty have or could provide and they're not. And then I'm just of out here floating.

Figure 2

Struggle with Professors

Referring to the picture [figure 2], Regina explained,

> it just worked out that it's actually a little cloudy, but that was what I was going for, like this vision of more so from faculty perspective, they can look out, they can see what's going on, but they're obviously separated in, in various ways and not, almost like they- they're watching me struggle and not saying anything, not reaching out and trying to help.

Regina recollected a conversation with her professor right after her first year in the doctoral program. Regina indicated that he told her,

> Like we had kind of talked about like you disconnecting or feeling disconnected from the program.... he was like, yeah, that's so good to see that you haven't left yet or that you're still gonna stick it out…. And it kind of like took me off guard because I was like, so you've recognized that I had trouble, but no one said anything. Even after our end of the year evaluation, we get evaluated every year. No one came to me. No one pulled me aside. Nothing. Since then I've had a few other conversations with faculty members

they've said something similar like, 'Oh, glad you're still here.' I'm like, okay, but I didn't know you were glad I was still here and you knew I really was struggling and you still never said anything.

Similarly, Seth's mentor from another program came up to him during a conference and said he had heard that Seth was struggling in the program. Seth was surprised to hear this given he had not received any feedback from his faculty and had recently even been awarded for his work as a doctoral student. Seth said, "I thought that I was doing really well. I think they just don't understand that, for us, we work harder. When we're doing our work, [the] way we go about being students, it looks different."

Irene shared her experience with the faculty in her program and recollected an interaction during her presentation at a regional conference. She noted while she and her cohort presented on their experiences as doctoral students, which included feeling isolated and experiencing lack of support, her program chair who was present during the presentation, made a comment that it was the responsibility of the students to reach out. She shared,

It was very defensive and you could tell like the room kind of got - it was a weird vibe. I remember just feeling like, wow, even, you know, even as a head of this program is still, you know, denying our experience and saying it's our responsibility and kind of denying our experience, which is for me just a really accurate representation of everything that we go through….It's like, okay, unless we're white or unless we have some competitive relationship with this person or if we are buddy-buddy with this person, then we really, we don't really have a voice…it's been hard...it's very discouraging.

Tameka is the only person of color in her cohort of four. She shared that she would be the last to know of opportunities and often, she would hear of these opportunities from her cohort

who were made aware of these by the professors in her program. She shared, "The instruction that I'm often given is incomplete. I'm left wondering, 'Where do I go from here? What do I do next?'" She felt that her professors did not recognize that she had the same needs as everyone else in the program and questioned whether they perceived her to be less capable. She added, "This is demonstration of how difficult our journey is when it doesn't necessarily have to be. Tameka referred to Figure 1 of wonder woman facing a monster and compared that monster to the academic program. She shared, "I think it's a great image to represent that barrier that keeps us, as students in academia, to... sometimes getting access to the things that we need from the professors who are responsible for helping us in this journey."

Racism

Participants expressed that the overt and covert acts of racism were the core of their experiences. Two sub-themes emerged: CE as a field and Oppression.

Counselor Education as a field. Three participants felt that CE as a field perpetuated institutional and systemic racism. They noted that their CE curriculum and assignments often reflected the values and experiences of the dominant groups. Seth shared,

I think, speaking for that political perspective, scientific inquiry and academic writing have as a discipline [been dominated] by White men for White men. It wasn't until recently that we [people of color] became part of that conversation as far as producers of research. The perspective we bring to the academy, many times, isn't seen as being academic because it's new. It's different. It doesn't exactly match with what the scholars ahead of us have said. Not considering those scholars didn't look like us. They didn't have the same ... values, cultural experiences that we have, so our voice has to be taken out. We basically have to pare it back to these White scholars and these White power

structures. Whether it be journals, in class assignments, whatever it may be, to fit in where our experience is devalued.

Carmen noted a lack of respect for the experiences of students of color and what they brought to the table. Carmen said,

…there seems to be a sense of responsibility on us to figure out when to speak and when not to speak. That, most of the time, the message that we're receiving, whether directly or indirectly, is that's for us to keep our mouth shut and to just continue with whatever is happening.

Oppression "When you see me, you have to see all of me." Four out of six participants expressed that individuals in their program, particularly professors, had low expectations of them based on their visible identities. As doctoral students of color, they had to work harder than their peers to exceed the low expectations set to prevent further stereotyping. Regina felt that in her department, certain minoritized identities were preferred over others. She wished that people in her program would appreciate the differences in people rather than "pigeonhole" everyone into one way of performing as a doctoral student. Tameka's colleagues had low expectations from her. She said,

The expectation, for me, is not that high. If I do excel, then the belief is it's because I'm Black. I'm older. I'm this. I'm that. That's just not the case. I think, for me, a theme that really jumps out here is just maybe ... oppression… being Black and being a female in my case. That requires us to do more, and we know that. I think that [Figure 3] just represents that for me…I'm looking to be recognized, but when you see me, you have to see all of me. You have to see my ancestry. You have to see the struggle. You have to see the successes.

Figure 3

When you see me, you have to see all of me

Shirine, a first-year doctoral student, felt constricted in her expression of self. She stated that she was told by her supervisor to lower her voice and speak slower when counseling clients,

So that was a reminder of realizing like where I am, and certain views or expectations that some of us naturally fit in and others, for instance, like me, that I have to find a way to fit in, because I'm not naturally in that group.

Sacrifice Ourselves

Five participants felt that in the process of going through the doctoral program, they had to unwillingly lose parts of self. This was through assimilating to the department culture, staying silent, or pretend everything was fine. Seth shared,

The reason I took this picture [Figure 4] and selected it, it speaks to kind of about a slippery slope, I guess. When you're a Black counselor educator, in particular, in my occupation, being a Black male counselor educator, in a way it seems that we're just on thin ice where just based on perceptions of you, things can really go wrong really quickly. You can end up on the outer parts of the profession. Whereas people don't want to work with you just based on the way they perceive you existing in a space that's more tailored toward White people. Really, just having that [image] in your mind of, "What's

the bottom look like?" It's just ever-present. With this picture in the stairwell, you can see the bottom. You can see how you can pretty quickly get there.

Figure 4

Sacrifice Ourselves

Tameka notes,

> Sometimes, the journey is just so difficult. I think the stairway really represents that. Is there maybe things you want to take with you through this process, but you just can't. You just can't. You can't manage the climb and the burden of carrying so much weight. Whether it's on your own personal issues or the issues that are impacting you from your department, or your cohort, or your professors, or society...I think we lose a good bit of ourselves through this.

Seth and Regina felt that they had to assimilate to their department's culture through silencing themselves or pretend that everything is going well. Seth said,

> …we have to make conscious choices to silence ourselves, or to, for example, change our dissertation topic to something that's more palatable for our colleagues. We're put into circumstances where we have to make a decision to sacrifice parts of ourselves to better fit into the world. Making ourselves a round peg to fit into that round hole.

Regina also expressed similar thoughts about her experience in her doctoral program. She shared that in her program, she did not feel like she was given the space to "get it wrong or to struggle" and figure it out. She added,

> I have to pretend like everything is fine or I'm just like deal with it in other ways and keep going on like everything's great and it's not and that's getting harder to do. It's getting harder to stay present and it's getting harder to stay engaged with the program.

Regina also questioned her use of energy towards pretending everything is fine. She explained that she felt she was on autopilot, trying to get things done. However, Regina felt that if she just tried to survive in the program, she would not have anything left to give.

Advocacy

For all participants, their experiences of racial microaggressions in their respective programs ignited a sense of advocacy. They found strength in advocating for the sake of their communities, their families, and the next generation of students. Tameka explained why advocacy was important to her. Referring to the picture (Figure 5) she said,

> 'If you are silent about your pain, they will ... still kill you and say you enjoyed it.' I think it just speaks to the need, for all of us, to give voice to the struggles that we face as minorities in doc programs. I think that it was a significant amount of self-advocacy that got us into institutions of higher learning. Places where we were never welcome. And still, often times, we're not welcome. We have a responsibility to advocate for ourselves to pave the way for the next generation of PhD students who come behind us. Our silence, it works against us. We have to speak up even if it causes some discomfort for ourselves, discomfort for others. Part of reflection, and growth. Often times, growth is going to be uncomfortable, but it's necessary.

Figure 5

Silence as being Complacent
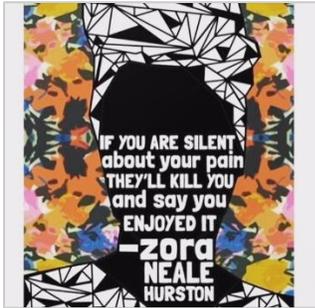
Carmen also agreed with Tameka and felt that, "…the systemic oppression encourages students to remain silent and to remain complacent. That is, to me, unacceptable…I've come to the realization that, for me, silence is being complacent."

Irene and Regina felt that their experiences of microaggressions instilled a sense of advocacy and motivation to keep going. They felt that advocacy is important as it provides other students of color the support to get through the academic program. Irene said,

And so when I experienced microaggression or, you know, backlash from professors or even students who don't think that I should be here, then it's just very much like, well, let's just prove to them that you can. Um, and so that's kind of my motivation for being here as well as I mean struggling through it all. But I just, for me it's the advocacy piece because I know there's another brown girl somewhere out there who doesn't think that she's enough. And so I want to show other people that, you know, you can do this. You can get through it.

Regina felt similar to Irene and noted,

…so if I can somehow use what I have experienced to minimize what someone else's experience or maybe eradicate all together with someone else behind me may experience, then it will. It'll somehow feel worth it. Worth it to have to enter this right now.

Figure 6

Empowerment to Continue Advocacy Efforts

Irene and Shirine both expressed the importance of the role of their families in this process. Irene referred to her picture of a Mexican stole (Figure 6) that represents the empowerment to continue advocacy for people in her community. Irene shared, "But yeah, I dunno, for me it just, it, there's a lot at stake for me, you know, for my family, for, for me, but for other people, for other people of color who do experience this every day." Shirine said,

> So, sometimes I almost don't want to say something. But then I know that that's not helping me at all. And so then I have to think about, okay, I'm not doing this for other people in the room. I'm doing this for myself, and I'm doing this to the respect of my family, and this is why there's not many access to mental health for my family and stuff.

Discussion

Doctoral students of color in CE programs in this study highlight their experience of racial microaggressions in the academic environment. Themes that emerged align with results from previous studies on undergraduate and graduate students of color (Solorzano, 1998, 2000). These results can assist counselor educators in understanding the experiences of doctoral students of color and lend itself to advocacy efforts to attract, enroll, and retain doctoral students of color in CE programs.

Participants in this study struggled in their day to day experiences as doctoral students of color. Whether it was through hiding their identities, through self-doubt, and because of

interactions with professors. Hiding parts of self/identities seems to be a pervasive theme for doctoral students of color in higher education, within, and before, this study. In previous studies, CE students felt they had to pretend or hide their identities to facilitate the perception to faculty that they got along with their peers (Henfield et al., 2013). Baker and Moore (2015) refer to this as 'playing the game.' In this study, participants felt that they needed to pretend to be someone they were not, alter or hide identities, to fit in with their program culture and therefore, ended up sacrificing themselves. For example, Regina felt like she was on autopilot and surviving rather than thriving in her program. By hiding their identities, they also give up a part of who they are by not bringing or being their authentic self, which led to disconnection, isolation, and exhaustion. Researchers in previous studies have noted these as a result of the negative impact of racial microaggressions (Clark et al., 2012; Solórzano, 1998; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2015; Vaishnav, 2020).

Participants in this study also felt they had a responsibility to reach out and actively seek support. They felt that even when faculty recognized that students were struggling but not approaching them, they left the students to struggle on their own. This aligns with previous research, that doctoral students of color often need to take extra steps than their peers to receive equal recognition from faculty (Baker & Moore, 2015). For example, Seth felt he had to work harder than his White peers. Tameka noted that her White peers were often given opportunities by professors while she was left out of it. This has also been documented in previous studies where students of color felt that their White peers were favored for opportunities in times of conflict (Baker & Moore, 2015). As a result of taking additional steps to be recognized, participants felt frustrated, isolated, and mentally exhausted. Further, participants questioned their perception of these microaggressions and wondered if they were overreacting. These

outcomes, along with self-doubt has been commonly documented for doctoral students of color as a result of experiencing racial microaggressions (Sue, 2009; 2010).

All of these experiences resulted in participants feeling like they had to sacrifice themselves, whether by having to assimilate into the department, staying silent, pretending to be fine, or trying to fit the expectations set by the faculty. This aligns with previous researchers noting that doctoral students of color felt a subtle pressure by the faculty to assimilate into the department (Henfield et al., 2013) and had to incorporate self-censorship (Gildersleeve et al., 2011).

Racism is ingrained in the American education system (Henfield et al., 2013). Racial inequalities and microaggressions are often enmeshed in different interactions that students have with peers, faculty, and in the academic environment (Baker & Moore, 2015; Henfield et al., 2011, 2013; Zeligman et al., 2015). As noted by participants, the CE curriculum perpetuates dominant values and perspectives while narratives of marginalized individuals are left out. Seth and Carmen both expressed that the oppressive roots of CE were ingrained in their curriculum and assignments.

It is important to note that while microaggressions had negative consequences for participants, they also felt motivated to continue advocacy efforts to pave way for future generations of doctoral students of color as a result of these experiences. Their cultural history and family values further instilled a sense of commitment towards completing their degree. This highlights the resiliency of doctoral students of color to continue their journey despite the barriers in their path.

Recommendations for Counselor Educators

The results from this study highlight the needs and challenges of doctoral students of color as they navigate racial microaggressions within their CE program. Based on the students' experiences, researcher recommendations include: 1. Validation, 2. Mentoring, 3. Training, and 4. Diversification of CE curriculum.

Validation. Given the existence and implications of racial microaggressions, if a student of color is struggling, it is important to reach out and validate these experiences. This is especially important given that participants in this study and other studies have expressed lack of support from their faculty and peers (Henfield et al., 2013; Vaishnav, 2020). Faculty and peers are encouraged to have conversations about racial microaggressions and validate the struggle that students of color may be experiencing in the program while acknowledging the power and privilege dynamics.

Mentoring. Mentoring plays a key role in supporting doctoral students in academia (Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Protvinak & Foss, 2009; Vaishnav, 2020). CACREP's 2016 standards also requires counselor educators to address the role of mentoring in Counselor Education. Based on the findings from this study, doctoral students of color seem to struggle in their academic programs with little to no direction. They felt their professors favored their peers over them for opportunities. Mentoring and faculty support were highlighted as important factors, especially for doctoral student attrition and success (Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Protvinak & Foss, 2009). In fact, relational mentoring by faculty buffered the negative impact of racial microaggressions for doctoral students of color (Vaishnav, 2020). CE programs must take intentional steps to include mentoring for doctoral students. This will help students feel connected and support their growth as rising professionals in the field.

Training. Students and faculty in CE programs come from different educational experiences. Therefore, individuals have differing levels of awareness and training in multiculturalism. This recommendation is also supported in previous studies exploring the experiences of students of color in CE programs (Robinson, 2012; Vaishnav, 2020). For example, Vaishnav (2020) suggested that CE programs could incorporate brown bag lunches, workshops, and invite scholars from minoritized identities as guest speakers to train faculty and students to be culturally competent. CE programs could also incorporate diversity training during orientation for faculty as well as students which could help promote awareness and inclusivity for students of color.

Diversification of CE curriculum. Previous researchers have called on CE programs to be responsible for promoting inclusivity (Henfield et al., 2013; Hipolito-Delgado, Estrada, & Garcia, 2017; Vaishnav, 2020). However, doctoral students of color still feel excluded from the larger narrative in CE and feel as if they have to alter themselves and their ideas to fit within the dominant narrative or "box" within CE. Counselor educators can take intentional efforts to infuse diverse perspectives in their curriculum.

Future Investigations

Future research could focus on measuring the level of racial microaggressions experienced within CE programs as well as the impact that these experiences can have on individuals' sense of connectedness, well-being, and program satisfaction. This would strengthen the argument for incorporating trainings for CE faculty and students that focus on microaggressions in academia. Researchers could consider expanding this study to masters' level students and explore the similarities and differences in the experiences as compared to doctoral students. Studies could expand beyond race to other marginalized identities to help understand

the experiences of marginalized groups in general within the CE field. Finally, given that racial microaggressions negatively impact doctoral students of color and faculty mentoring buffers this negative impact, researchers could conduct follow up studies on the role of mentoring for students from marginalized identities.

Limitations

There are a few limitations for this study. Since conversations regarding race can be considered a sensitive topic, there could have been a few barriers during the recruitment of participants. While a total of 12 participants signed up via the online survey, only three were able to participate in a focus group and more participants preferred individual interviews. As a result, individual interviews were offered for participants who wished to protect their identities from other participants. In Photovoice, participants collectively select pictures and identify themes for their narratives. Since data was collected from a focus group and multiple individual interviews, not all participant identified themes were used. The themes identified in the focus group were used a-priori to code the individual interviews; however, it is also important to note that no new themes emerged in the individual interviews, which suggests saturation. Given the smaller sample size, the narratives may not reflect the experiences of all doctoral students of color across programs. Further, intersectionality of identities could have also played a role in the experiences of participants, however, due to the focus on race, these were not explored in greater depth during the interviews.

Conclusion

Regardless of these limitations, findings shed light to some of the experiences of racial microaggressions in CE programs. Racial microaggressions are experienced by doctoral students of color in CE programs. Given CACREP's (2016) call for recruiting and retaining doctoral

students and faculty of color, we need to understand the occurrence and impact of racial microaggressions perpetuated by faculty, students, and the larger discipline of CE to decrease the degree of isolation and sacrifice experienced. Researchers must examine ways to diversify the CE curriculum to include voices of marginalized groups as well as to help serve a diverse clientele. Validating, mentoring, and connecting to students could be imperative in minimizing the impact of racial microaggressions within their academic experience.

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