WEBINAR

Sonia ▽ Tevera

Being Black Affects Me Daily: Helping Black Students Navigate the MSW Program and Practicum at Historically White Institutions

JOAN M. BLAKEY, PhD
Director, School of Social Work
University of Minnesota - Twin Cities

HEIDI PRESSLEIN, MSW, LICSW
Director of Practicum Education
University of Minnesota - Twin Cities
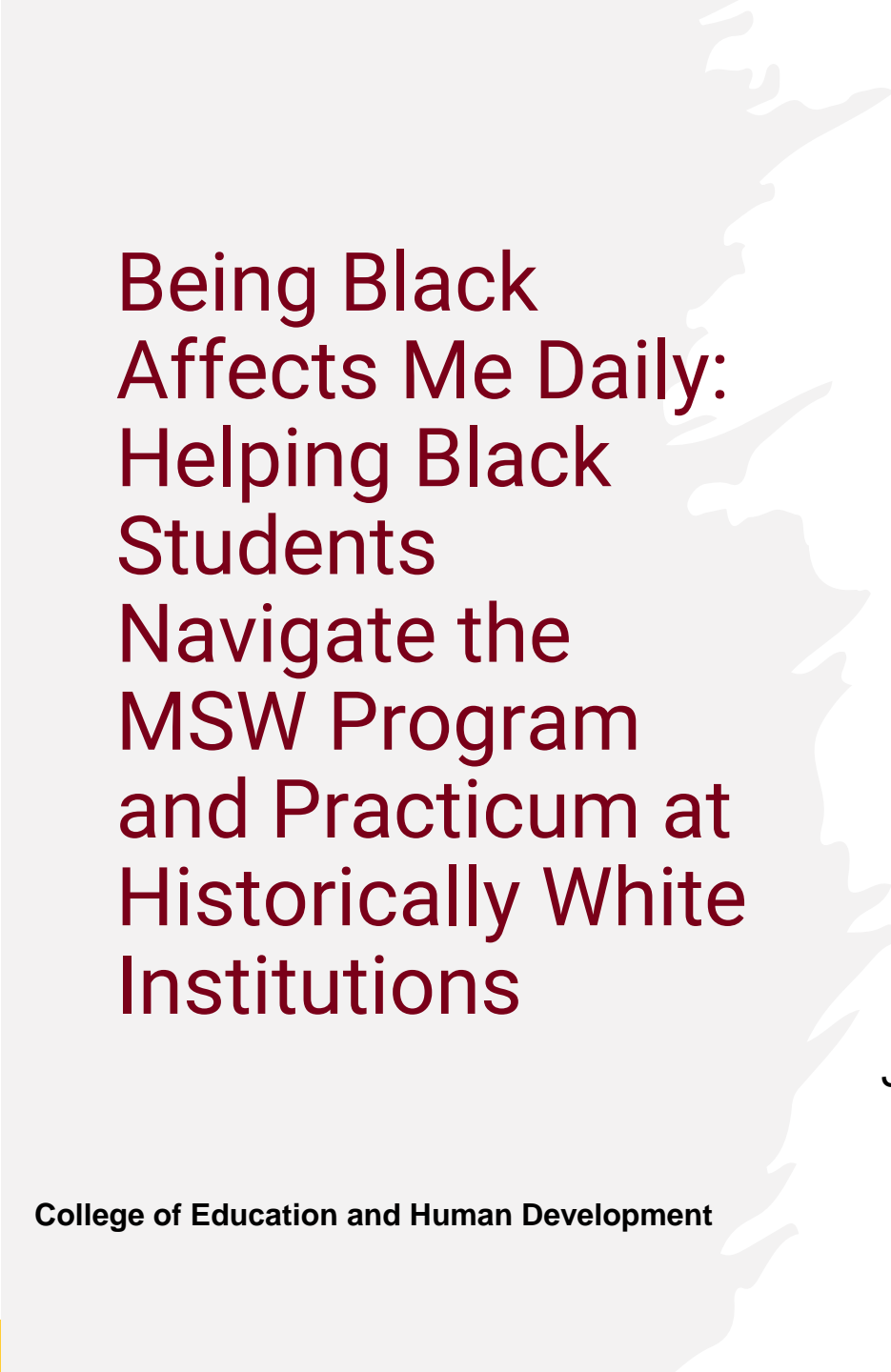
SUZANNE SHATILA, DSW, MSSW, LGSW MSW
Program Director
University of Minnesota - Twin Cities

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Moderator

Kristiana Graves Floss

Marketing Partnerships & Strategy

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kgravesfloss@lumivero.com

Presenters

Joan Blakey is the School of Social Work Director, Gamble Skogmo Endowed, and a tenured Associate Professor at the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities. Her areas of expertise include child advocacy, protection, and welfare; diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI); justice and corrections; substance use and substance use treatment; and trauma and trauma-informed care.

Heidi is the Director of Practicum Education and a Sr. Teaching Specialist. She provides support and training to practicum instructors and students, academic advising to students in our Clinical Mental Health and Families & Children specializations, and also teaches integrative practicum seminars to our Foundation and Specialization level MSW students.

Suzanne Shatila, DSW, MSSW, LGSW, is the MSW Program Director. Dr. Shatila was involved in mezzo and macro-level social work practice with human services, children's services, and community-based nonprofits prior to moving into higher education full-time in 2018.

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School of Social Work

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

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Lumivero Webinar

April 23, 2024

Joan M. Blakey, Heidi Presslein, & Suzanne Shatila

College of Education and Human Development

Purpose of the Webinar

- Highlights some of the challenges that Black students experience navigating graduate school.

- There is extra labor (i.e., psychological, emotional, psychological) associated with being a Black student at a Historically White University (HWU).

- Social work programs, organizations, and practitioners need to be aware that the experiences of Black students are different than White students.

- Black students may need additional or other kinds of support than their white and other BIPOC counterparts to fully participate and thrive.

Disclaimer

- While the data presented is not from the University of Minnesota, the experiences of Black graduate students presented today are common among schools of social work.

- We will explore issues related to practicum and the MSW program in general.

- We will end with a brief discussion about what we are doing at the University of Minnesota to be more responsive to Black graduate students' needs.

Background: Black Graduate Students

- A gradual decline in enrollments among Black graduate students since 2020, with declines of as much as 4.1% (Espinosa et al., 2019; Zhou, 2022).

- Black (6.9 percent) and international students (1.7 percent) are less likely to complete professional degrees than their White counterparts (Espinosa et al., 2020).

- One-third of students at 4-year colleges and universities leave without completing their degree (Shapiro et al., 2017).

- Black students' enrollment and attainment have been accompanied by some of the **lowest persistence rates, highest dropout rates, highest borrowing rates, and largest debt burdens** of any group (Brunsma, Embrick, & Shin, 2017, Espinosa et al., 2019).

Black Graduate Students' Experiences

- Black graduate students significantly experience more discrimination, microaggressions, and racism when attending historically White institutions (Brunsma et al., 2017; Jochman et al., 2019; Karkouti, 2016; Woolston, 2022).

- Twenty-six percent of minoritized students have indicated that bullying happened regularly during their graduate studies (Woolston, 2022)

- Twenty-one percent Black graduate students indicated that they experienced "mistreatment and struggles that go beyond the typical challenges of graduate school – from structural racism in institutions to microaggressions committed by peers" (Woolston, 2022, p. 573).

Black Graduate Students' Experiences

- Black graduate students reported feeling alienated, marginalized, and unsupported (Brunsma et al., 2017).

- Black graduate students indicated that when they reached out for assistance, their advisors made them feel their only options were to leave, change classes or labs, or grin and bear it (Woolston, 2022).

- Black graduate students have indicated experiencing differentials in distributed funding levels, a lack of social integration, fewer opportunities to publish or collaborate with faculty, low levels of collegiality among peers, limited to no professionalization opportunities such as applying for fellowships, and lack of available mentoring from faculty and staff (Brunsma et al., 2017).

Black Students Enter SSW with Traumatic Backgrounds

In addition to racial trauma, it is estimated that 54% to 85% of all college students have experienced some form of trauma (Boyraz et al., 2018; Carello & Butler, 2014; Read et al., 2011).

Many college students enter college with pre-existing histories of trauma, also known as complex trauma (Boyraz & Granda, 2019).

The effects of being black in America.... is pretty much the same that it's had on me my whole life....you always notice things from a different perspective, and you are always just aware of what's going on around you and if you're not aware.... It'll kind of shake you up into understanding that this is America.....so I think being black in America will always have some type of toll…There is nothing that you can do. **~ Baani, Black Graduate Student ~**

Racial Experiences in SSW

There's been a lot of racial insensitivity here in the School of Social Work. One of my closest friends, whom I started with, transferred to another school. She was black. A few of the black students and there were only a handful of us to begin with. They left the program…I'm not feeling safe in the classroom or feeling wanted within the school…There is a need to educate non-black classmates constantly. They do not realize how ignorant they are. The comments they make are extremely offensive. The extreme microaggressions never go away. Faculty members are also racist and yes, we black students do know which ones are racist. They are harmful to us, and I can't imagine how they will affect our clients. **~ Bisa, Black Graduate Student ~**

Racial Experiences in SSW

- I had a professor that talked about black women's maternal mortality and then she proceeded to tell a story about a white woman to let us know that it happens to more than just black people. It felt like, you know when black lives matter, and people say all lives matter. Yes, we understand that all lives matter, like everybody has a right to humanity, but we're saying that black people have been systematically denied. I've noticed a lot of my professors make racially insensitive comments…It's to the point where I feel uncomfortable being in class. **~ Machina, Black Graduate Student ~**

Ongoing Murder of Black People

- Being in school has been challenging for me. Because I feel like there has not been a great deal of support for me, which has been quite difficult. In this program, we are still expected by faculty members to carry the team on our back end, even though all Black men and women are dying at the hands of police all around us. We still must turn in assignments on time and be able to cope. **~ Bisa ~**

- Every week, it's hard to see more Black people killed by the police and police brutality…Black people are dying all around me. There's this narrative that we are strong human beings. We're not superheroes…Just because we're strong or like we can do it or we can handle it. So that's very frustrating. I had to tell my advisor this week, like, look, I can't do this. It is too much! **– Lulu ~**

Political Climate

- It's just exhausting. I think being a black person living in this country and in this world with all the anti-black rhetoric that's just everywhere…The blatant comfort that people feel well expressing their racism… Who would think, in this day and age, we still would be dealing with this? I'm just disgusted. **~ Hasina ~**

Psychological Effects

- **Constant Rumination over events**

As a Black person, sometimes you're constantly questioning like is this racist? Was it prejudice? Why am I feeling this way about this? And so, like I have one professor, for example, over the summer she constantly says Blacks in reference to Black people. It sounds racist. It just hurts my spirit. **~ Cadee ~**

- **Unsafe**

George Floyd, Briana Taylor, all these things are happening around us, and like not having a safe space to really chat with folks that just are experiencing similar emotions and stuff has been quite difficult. **~ Bahati ~**

- **Hiding Parts of Themselves**

That is what it was like the whole first semester being here, especially when it comes to speaking and writing in English. I'm not from here…So I worry about my accent slipping up. I've been worried about that since I was in middle school. I worry about pronouncing things wrong. I worry about how I carry myself and how I speak. I am constantly censoring myself. So, it's been kind of exhausting in terms of that…I guess being a black foreign person can weigh on you. **~ Hasina ~**

Emotional Effects

- **Sadness**

- There are quite a lot of White students in this program. I actually hope never work with Black people. Seriously, it makes me sad. It is distressing to think they are going to be unleashed in my community. I have encountered so many White people in this program who are dangerous and do not even know it. **~ Bisa ~**

- **Hopelessness**

- In the majority of my classes, I am the only African American…It's hard peeling back those layers and seeing different aspects of my history and seeing how other people view African American history. It's hard to deal with. We are still oppressed by modern-day slavery. We are still going through some of the same issues…Will things ever change? **~ Baani ~**

Physical Effects

- Recently, I had a heart attack. I also got an appointment with the endocrinologist. I told her all my symptoms and she was like; I think I know what it is. We'll get some blood work…Stress was the reason behind a lot of miscarriages I had and a whole host of other symptoms. While in graduate school, I have gained so much weight. I cannot lose it, no matter how much I work out. I have sleep issues…On October 19, I got an implant cardiac implant placed against my breastbone…I have had a lot of health issues during my second year in the program. **~ Tayla ~**

Experiences of Black Students in Practicum

Black social work students report ongoing exposure to covert and overt affective (prejudice), behavioral (discrimination, microaggressions), and cognitive (stereotype) components of racism (Ostrom, 1969) while in their social work practicum (Johnson et al., 2021; Razack, 2001).

Often, Black students feel isolated because they cannot identify with the agency and are placed in roles that highlight the agency's ideas of "diversity", which can be misleading as they have the least amount of power to affect change (Johnson et al., 2021).

"Current practicum requirements mirror past practices of professional volunteerism by demanding students to work for free, a privilege few can afford" (Johnson et al., 2021, p. 5). Pay for placement movement - Yet not all practicum sites can afford to pay students.

Black students are more likely to experience early career burnout (Amir et al., 2018), increased behavioral health challenges (Cokley et al., 2013), and increased time to obtain their Master's degree (Dinnerson, 2019).

Recommendations - Practicum

- Practicum advisors and supervisors receive increased anti-racism & anti-oppressive training and support that also includes ongoing assessment of institutional culture, policy, and standards (Johnson et al., 2021; Ladhani & Sitter, 2020). - ETHICS TRAINING

- Practicum and other social work courses must address institutional racism that speaks to the reality of marginalized people's oppression and prepares SW students to work with issues of racism (Ladhani & Sitter, 2020; Singh, 2019).

- BIPOC Affinity Groups
    - Men's Consultation Group
    - Queer Affinity Space - almost exclusively trans

- Prevent tokenization of BIPOC students in practicum - Bidirectional relationships where BIPOC students can grow and do not have to be in positions to educate staff.

- Ensure all practicum subgroups have multiple BIPOC students

Ways to Help & Support Black Students

- Affinity Group Space
  - Arab and Muslim Students
  - Black Students
  - Jewish Students

- Support for BIPOC students around the biased licensing exam - MDH Expansion Grant

- Mentoring and coaching of BIPOC students - MDH Expansion Grant

- Climate survey - Faculty & Staff Retreat is dedicated to improving the climate for all marginalized students.

- Ongoing commitment to better serving our BIPOC students

Takeaway

- Black graduate students have more to contend with than just learning.
- They are experiencing racism and microaggressions in SSW.
- They are affected by the ongoing murder of Black and Brown people.
- The political climate also affects them.
- The extra added burden that Black students must carry makes graduate school more challenging.
- Black students may need additional or other kinds of support than their white and BIPOC counterparts to fully participate and thrive.

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