

Microaggressions, Mentoring, and Connectedness: Doctoral Students' Experiences in Counselor Education

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Abstract:

This descriptive, correlational research study examined the prevalence of racial microaggressions among doctoral students of color in counselor education, and the relationships between experiences of racial microaggressions, relational mentoring, and social connectedness. Implications and future directions are provided based on the results.

Keywords: counselor education | doctoral students of color | microaggressions | racial microaggressions

Article:

Introduction

Students of color continue to experience marginalization in the form of racial microaggressions (Chakraborty, 2013; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; McCabe, 2009; Ong et al., 2013; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2015; Sue & Constantine, 2003; Sue et al., 2009; Wong et al., 2014). Microaggressions are documented in classrooms, in interactions with faculty and peers, as well as in the campus environment (Henfield et al., 2011; Henfield et al., 2013; Solorzano et al., 2000; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2015; Sue et al., 2009). Racial microaggressions are experienced by master's and doctoral students of color in counselor education (Michael-Makri, 2010; Vaishnav, 2021) with no difference between master's or doctoral level students, gender of participants, or racial groups in

their experiences of racial microaggressions (Michael-Makri, 2010). While the prevalence of racial microaggression is known in counselor education, the impact of these experiences on students in counseling programs is not well known.

There has been more research exploring the impact of racial microaggressions on undergraduate students than on graduate students. These researchers note that experiencing microaggressions can have negative physical, social, and psychological implications on the well-being of undergraduate students of color (Chakraborty & McKenzie, 2002; Ong et al., 2013; Schoulte et al., 2011), such as feelings of discomfort, self-doubt, exhaustion, isolation (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; McCabe, 2009), and lack of social connectedness with peers, faculty, and the academic program (Clark et al., 2012; Solórzano, 1998; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2015). Questioning of intelligence or academic abilities by peers and faculty has resulted in negative impacts on academic performance among marginalized undergraduate students, typically resulting in students considering dropping a class or changing universities (Solorzano et al., 2000; Yosso et al., 2015). While the findings are important, and results can be transferred to graduate student experiences, the generalization is limited. For example, dropping a class or changing universities becomes more difficult at a graduate level, particularly during doctoral studies—when students are expected to engage in a specific, specialized curriculum.

Students of color have experienced racial microaggressions in their counseling programs (Baker & Moore, 2015; Michael-Makri, 2010). These students report feeling the need to “play the game” to prove themselves to people in their department (Baker & Moore, 2015), and feel their white counterparts are given priority for opportunities—especially mentoring opportunities (Baker & Moore, 2015). While these researchers shed light onto the problem of racial microaggressions in counselor education, this study (Baker & Moore, 2015) is qualitative in nature, based on small samples, or focused on one racial identity—thus limiting generalizability. While Michael-Makri's (2010) study is a quantitative study with a larger sample, they only focused on the prevalence of racial microaggressions, and not the overall impact, or factors that would moderate the impact, of racial microaggressions.

Racial Microaggressions

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). Microaggressions can be so subtle that the targets often blame themselves, leading to the internalization of these experiences (Sue et al., 2007). For both undergraduate and graduate students, racial microaggressions occur in academic spaces, such as classrooms, interactions with faculty, peers, and teaching assistants, and during social events (Vaishnav, 2021; Baker & Moore, 2015; Henfield et al., 2011; 2013; Solorzano et al., 2000; Yosso et al., 2015). Michael-Makri (2010) surveyed 187 racial and ethnic minority students in counseling programs of which 116 were master's level students and 71 were doctoral level. Results indicated that racial and ethnic minority students experience a moderate level of microaggressions. Further, in counseling and clinical psychology graduate programs, racial microaggressions have extended into supervision as well (Constantine & Sue, 2007). Black doctoral students experienced microaggressions by supervisors toward supervisees and their clients, including invalidating race and culture, stereotyping Black clients, being cautious of providing feedback to supervisees in fear of being viewed as racist, primarily focusing on clinical weakness, thinking of clients of color as the cause of their own

issues, and offering culturally inappropriate treatment accommodations (Constantine & Sue, 2007). While Constantine and Sue provided specific examples of racial microaggressions in supervision, this leaves out the broader departmental and program culture where microaggressions have been documented (Vaishnav, 2021; Baker & Moore, 2015; Clark et al., 2012; Henfield et al., 2011, 2013). Additionally, focusing solely on just what is experienced limits the understanding of the overall impact of racial microaggressions on doctoral students in counselor education programs.

Racial microaggressions increase negative mental health symptoms, such as anxiety and depression (Liao et al., 2016), foster self-doubt, increase a sense of disconnection from faculty and peers, reduce a sense of belonging or participation in campus life (Baker & Moore, 2015; Henfield et al., 2015; Solorzano et al., 2000; Yosso et al., 2015), and are negatively associated with social connectedness to the university community (Clark et al., 2012; Liao et al., 2016). African American and Latinx undergraduates report feeling drained, invisible, frustrated, and alienated as a result of their experiences of racial microaggressions (Solorzano et al., 2000; Yosso et al., 2015). As mentioned, the majority of these findings are qualitative in nature, and focus on undergraduates or the larger university setting, with little exploration examining the direct impact of racial microaggressions from one's academic program is needed. More so, the impact of racial microaggressions on social connectedness to one's academic program among doctoral students of color in counselor education is needed.

Social Connectedness

Social connectedness is defined as “an enduring and ubiquitous experience of the self in relation with the world” and is an aggregate of distal and proximal relationships with peers, community, and society (Lee & Robbins, 2000, p. 484). Economic, political, ethnic, and social forces, such as racism, sexism, war, and other current events, can disturb an individual's social connectedness (Townsend & McWhirter, 2005). A core tenet of relational cultural theory (RCT) is that establishing connection fosters fulfilling human relationships, while disconnection (as a result of unfulfilling relationships) is known to have adverse effects on individuals (Comstock et al., 2008). Individuals who are disconnected often feel hurt, rejected, isolated, and marginalized (Miller & Stiver, 1997). These are similar to the outcomes of racial microaggressions.

When individuals of color experience microaggressions based on their identities, they may experience what RCT identifies as the central relational paradox, which in turn impacts their ability to connect authentically with others (Comstock et al., 2008; Miller & Stiver, 1997)—including peers and faculty in their graduate programs. The central relational paradox is when individuals who are yearning for connection use certain strategies to cope with emotional distress caused by disconnection (Comstock et al., 2008). Doctoral students of color often cannot be their authentic selves, potentially needing to hide parts of their identity to fit into the academic environment or program (Baker & Moore, 2015; Henfield et al., 2011, 2013). Therefore, it could be hypothesized that racial microaggression experiences in their counselor education program would make doctoral students of color feel less connected to their program. This disconnection with individual relationships can influence doctoral students' overall social connectedness with the academic program; suggesting that as racial microaggressions in a program increase, the social connectedness a doctoral student of color feels with their program would decrease.

Increasing an individual's social connectedness through fostering relationships could possibly help heal the emotional wounds caused due to experiences of discrimination (Hogg &

Frank, 1992 in Townsend & McWhirter, 2005). One example of this can be through fostering a mentoring relationship for doctoral students in the academic program. Mentoring has been recognized as one of several ways that can help doctoral students succeed through program completion (Lamar & Helm, 2017). Mentoring plays a key role in supporting doctoral students in academia (Cockrell & Shelley, 2011; Curtin et al., 2013; Roberts et al., 2019). A supportive advisory (or mentor) relationship has been associated with a stronger sense of belonging and a form of support for doctoral students across different programs (Curtin et al., 2013; Cockrell & Shelly, 2011). However, as noted by Baker and Moore (2015), students of color in counselor education reported feeling that they did not receive the same mentoring opportunities and relationships as their White peer students.

Not all mentoring relationships are created equal. Relational cultural theorists recommend relational advising/mentoring, which closely follows the principles of RCT in mentoring practices (Fletcher & Ragins, 2007). Relational advising/mentoring is “an interdependent and generative developmental relationship that promotes mutual growth, learning and development within the career context” (Ragins, 2012, p. 519). Relational mentoring has yet to be examined among doctoral students in counselor education, in general, as well as in relation to impacting social connectedness to one's program.

According to The Council for Accreditation for Counseling and Related Education Programs' (CACREP) 2016 standards, “the academic unit makes continuous and systematic efforts to attract, enroll, and retain a diverse group of students and to create and support an inclusive learning community” (p. 6). Almost half of the doctoral students (39.67) in CACREP-accredited programs are students of color (CACREP, 2016, 2018). While it is known that doctoral students experience racial microaggressions in counselor education programs, it is not clear the impact that these experiences have on a social connectedness to one's academic program. Additionally, relational advising/mentoring could moderate the relationship of experiences of racial microaggressions on social connectedness with their academic program by providing formal support to doctoral students of color. Exploring this relationship would provide an opportunity to initiate discussions around the impact of racial microaggressions and help programs to examine their departmental climate for all students, including students of color. The research questions for the current study include: 1. Do doctoral students of color experience racial microaggressions in their counselor educator programs? 2. Does experiencing racial microaggressions relate to an individual's social connectedness to their counselor education program? And 3. Does relational mentoring moderate the relationship between experiencing racial microaggressions and a doctoral student of color's social connectedness with their counselor education program?

METHOD

The purpose of this descriptive, correlational research study was to first, continue to understand the prevalence of racial microaggressions among doctoral students of color in counselor education, and to examine the relationships between experiences of racial microaggressions, relational mentoring, and sense of social connectedness.

Participants

A total of 101 doctoral students participated. Inclusion criteria included CACREP-accredited programs, identifying as a student of color, over the age of 18, and identifying as a doctoral student

who has attended at least one semester within their program to ensure they are able to talk about their experiences in the program. A priori test using G*power with a power size of 0.80 to reduce Type II error, moderate effect size, and alpha as 0.05 determined a minimum sample size of 68 participants was needed.

Of the final sample of 101 doctoral students, over half of the students identified as Black/African American ($n = 53, 53\%$) followed by Latinx/Latinx American ($n = 25, 25\%$), Asian American ($n = 7, 7\%$), Native American/Alaska Native ($n = 1, 1\%$), Multiracial ($n = 6, 6\%$), or Race/Ethnicity not reflected in the options ($n = 9, 9\%$). The sample consisted of majority females ($n = 78, 78\%$), followed by males ($n = 21, 21\%$), and gender nonbinary ($n = 2, 2\%$). The majority of the participants identified as heterosexual ($n = 80, 80\%$), while others identified as lesbian (5%), gay (3%), bisexual (7%), or (6%) sexual orientation not reflected in the choices provided. While only a few doctoral students indicated they were in their first year (but beyond one semester, $n = 5, 5\%$), almost half of the doctoral students identified as second-year doctoral students (45%) followed by third year (32%), fourth year (12%), and beyond fourth year (7%). In this sample, only 14% identified as international students. Eighty-six percent of the participants ($n = 86$) were enrolled in their program full-time, while the remainder (15%) were enrolled in their doctoral program part-time. Finally, almost all participants were enrolled in a face-to-face program (89%), with a few participants being enrolled in either an online only program (4%) or a hybrid program (8%).

Procedures

Participants were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling via email listservs and word of mouth. The researcher reached out to faculty at CACREP-accredited doctoral programs in the United States and requested faculty to disseminate the recruitment email with the link to the survey. The first 75 participants received a \$15 Amazon gift card as compensation for their participation in the study.

Measures

Participants were asked to complete a demographics survey, along with three additional measures.

Racial Microaggressions

Racial microaggressions was assessed using the Daily Life Experiences scale (DLE; Harrell et al., 1997), a subscale from the Racism and Life Experiences Scale (RaLES). The DLE subscale is a 20-item subscale that specifically focuses on experiences of racial microaggressions (Harrell, 1997). Participants are asked to respond on a 6-point Likert-type scale to assess the frequency (0—never to 5—once a week or more) with which participants experience microaggressions in their lives (DLE-Frequency) and how much are they bothered (DLE-Bother; 0—has never happened to me to 5—bothers me extremely) as a result of these experiences. For the purpose of this study, the instructions were modified to ask participants to reflect on their experiences with individuals in their counselor education program while responding to the questions. DLE's reliability ranged from 0.89 to 0.92 (Harrell et al., 1997). Internal consistency for the DLE in the current study was strong (DLE-F, Cronbach $\alpha = .93$; DLE-B, Cronbach $\alpha = .91$; DLE Total, Cronbach $\alpha = .95$). Criterion validity for DLE-Bother with perceived stress was 0.27 ($p < 0.01$) and for DLE-

frequency with urban stress was 0.38 ($p < 0.001$). Construct validity was DLE-Bother and DLE-Frequency with racial ID salience was 0.23 and 0.22 ($p < 0.01$), respectively.

Social Connectedness

The Relational Health Indices (RHI)-Community subscale (RHI-C) of the overall Relational Health Indices measure was used (Liang et al., 2002). The RHI-C assessed the sense of belonging or connectedness to one's academic department. Participants respond on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1—never to 5—always) asking each participant to respond in relation to peers and faculty in their department, with higher scores reporting higher feelings of connectedness to one's department (Liang et al., 2002). The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.90 (Liang et al., 2002). For RHI-C, concurrent validation with loneliness was -0.49 ($p < 0.01$). Cronbach's alpha for the current study was .87.

Relation Mentoring

The RHI-mentor (RHI-M) subscale assesses the quality of mentoring for doctoral students of color in this study. The participant responses were measured on a 5-point Likert-scale (1—never to 5—always). A total RHI-M score is created, with higher scores indicating a greater quality of mentoring experienced by doctoral students of color. The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.86 (Liang et al., 2002). Construct validity was obtained by comparing RHI with The Mutual Psychological Development Questionnaire (MPDQ; Genero et al., 1992) and was 0.68 ($p < 0.01$). For this study, participants were asked to complete the RHI-M while thinking of their advisor/dissertation chair. Cronbach's alpha for RHI-M for this study was .95.

Data Analysis

The SPSS statistical software was used to analyze data collected from the Qualtrics survey. Descriptive statistics determined the extent to which participants experienced racial microaggressions in their respective counselor education programs. Regression analyses were used to answer the second and third research questions regarding the relationship between racial microaggressions and social connectedness, and whether relational mentoring moderated the initial relationship (Baron & Kenny, 1986). A preliminary analysis of independent-samples *t* tests and analysis of variance determined no statistically significant differences with demographic variables (such as race, age, year in program, etc.) with respect to microaggressions or social connectedness.

RESULTS

Racial Microaggressions

The average DLE Total score for all doctoral students of color in this study was 78.58 ($SD = 35.22$), which equates to a 1.96 on a scale of 0 to 5, indicating that doctoral students of color in counselor education programs experience racial microaggressions. While this is the average score and some participants noted a 0, that is, never experiencing microaggressions or not being bothered by microaggressions in their CE programs, many noted a 5, indicating that they experienced them

once a week or more and were extremely bothered by them. Exploring the DLE subscales revealed that doctoral students experienced racial microaggressions from their academic programs on average less than one time a year to few times a year (DLE-F, $M = 22.85$, $SD = 17.71$), which likens to an average of 1.69 ($SD = 0.88$) on the 0-to-5-point Likert scale. Students felt bothered little to somewhat by the experiences of racial microaggressions (DLE-B, $M = 44.73$, $SD = 20.05$), which compares to 2.23 ($SD = 1.00$) on the Likert scale. Post-hoc analyses were conducted to verify whether DLE scores differed by demographic information. No significant differences were found within race and ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation.

Racial Microaggressions and Social Connectedness

A regression analysis was conducted to determine whether experiencing racial microaggressions relates to social connectedness for doctoral students of color in counselor education programs. The regression model was significant ($F(1,99) = 21.75$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.18$; see Table 1). In the model, racial microaggressions was negatively and moderately related ($\beta = -0.4$, $SE = 0.028$, $p < 0.001$) to social connectedness, suggesting that as the experience of racial microaggressions increases, the social connectedness to one's department decreases.

Table 1. Stepwise Regression Analysis

	Variable	B	B	SE
Step 1	DLE Total	-0.129*	-0.42	0.028
Step 2	RHI-M	0.416*	.428	.079
Step 3	DLE Total x RHI-M	-0.003	-.387	0.003

Impact of Relational Mentoring as Moderator

A stepwise hierarchical regression was conducted to explore the moderating impact of relational mentoring from advisor/dissertation chair on the relationship between racial microaggressions and social connectedness while controlling for demographic variables. Step 1 included racial microaggressions as the independent variable, step 2 included relational mentoring, and step 3 included the interaction between racial microaggressions and relational mentoring to show the moderating effect of relational mentoring on the dependent variable, social connectedness. When adding step 3 for the interaction, while the ANOVA table was significant ($F(3, 97) = 18.33$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.31$), the multicollinearity was high and the overall interaction was not significant (see Table 1). Next, the authors ran the hierarchical regression as two steps and ran the interaction by itself to test whether multicollinearity was an issue. However, this model was not significant ($F(1,99) = 1.425$, $p = 0.235$, $R^2 = 0.014$). Therefore, relational mentoring did not moderate the relationship between racial microaggressions experienced and social connectedness. While there is no interaction effect, relational mentoring did have a direct and significant impact on social connectedness ($F(2,98) = 27.73$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.36$). In the model, relational mentoring was positively and moderately related to social connectedness ($\beta = 0.4$, $SE = 0.079$, $p < 0.001$).

DISCUSSION

Overall, participant responses support two of the three hypotheses regarding the prevalence of racial microaggressions and its impact on social connectedness. The responses also indicate that relational mentoring positively related to social connectedness. The results of this study indicate that racial microaggressions have a negative relationship with social connectedness, and while faculty mentoring does not moderate this relationship, it has a positive relationship with students' experiences of social connectedness to one's academic program. Doctoral students of color in this study reported experiencing racial microaggressions from peers and faculty in their counselor education programs, on average, a few times a year, with some students reporting experiencing racial microaggressions in their departments monthly to few times a week. On average, students report a moderate impact from these experiences, specifically stating these experiences were moderately bothersome, with some students reporting that racial microaggressions from their academic program bothered them extremely. This aligns with the catch-22 experience and the dilemmas of responding to racial microaggressions as noted by Sue and colleagues (2010). Participants may be bothered by experiences at a higher intensity because of the dilemmas they may face while responding to microaggressions, such as attributional ambiguity, response indecision, time constraints in responding, denial of experiential reality, impotency of actions, and fear of consequences. This has been captured qualitatively where doctoral students of color in counselor education programs have reported experiencing self-doubt and questioning their reality as a result of experiencing racial microaggressions (Vaishnav, 2021).

The average scores for DLE-F ($M = 1.69$, $SD = 0.88$) and DLE-B ($M = 2.23$, $SD = 1$) in this study were low compared to a similar study conducted 10 years earlier (Michael-Makri, 2010), where the mean scores were 2.35 and 2.37, respectively. There could be several possible reasons for this change in scores. First, our field continues to push for higher standards of multicultural competencies within the academic curriculum, which could have led to the possibility that racial microaggressions have decreased over the last decade within academic programs. This push for higher standards is evidenced by a number of scholarly strides in the counseling field, such as the development of Multicultural and Social Justice Competencies for counselor educators and books, such as the Racial Healing Handbook and Microintervention Strategies for Disarming Microaggressions (Ratts et al., 2015; Singh, 2019; Sue et al., 2019) and several content-based and empirically published articles in exploring the prevalence and implications of racial microaggressions across several disciplines which could have led to an overall increased awareness of microaggressions in our field—thus potentially decreasing experiences students have within their departments.

A second explanation for lower DLE scores among students in the current study is that the DLE was developed to measure experiences of microaggressions in daily life experiences, and not within academia specifically. Therefore, while the instructions were altered to reflect this, certain items (e.g., “Being observed or followed while in public places”) may not fit with the general experience of microaggressions within academia, resulting in items becoming less relevant to life within a department or possibly confusing participants and, as a result, skewing the total score of the scale. While this may be a concern, the DLE scale has been used previously in studies examining experiences of racial microaggressions for master's and doctoral students of color in counselor education programs (e.g., Michael-Makri, 2010), and thus was appropriate to use in the current study. Third, it is important to consider respondent biases, such as threat of exposure and social desirability, which could have skewed participant responses (Krumpal, 2011). Regardless,

racial microaggressions are occurring in counselor education programs, and they are impactful and bothersome to doctoral students experiencing them.

For doctoral students of color, experiencing racial microaggressions had a negative correlation to social connectedness within one's academic program, and experiencing relational mentoring had a positive correlation to social connectedness in one's department. This supports the findings from previous qualitative studies on students of color and their experiences of racial microaggressions in academic programs (Vaishnav, 2021; Solorzano, 1998; Torres et al., 2010), which students highlighted led to negative outcomes like disconnection (Baker & Moore, 2015; Clark et al., 2012; Henfield et al., 2011, 2013; Regis, 2016). The current study with doctoral students of color in counselor education programs affirms findings from previous qualitative studies at undergraduate and graduate levels. Further, given the importance of mentoring in supporting doctoral students, as evidenced by the regression analysis (Table 1), findings support the implementation of relational mentoring to support the overall social connectedness of doctoral students of color. However, it should be noted that regardless of mentoring, experiencing racial microaggressions from members within one's academic department does still lead to a lower sense of connectedness to the academic department.

Overall, RCT serves as a guide to understand the impact of racial microaggression on disconnection and the incorporation of relational mentoring, a growth-fostering relationship, for doctoral students of color in counselor education. This is because RCT theorists conceptualize experiences of marginalization as chronic disconnections leading to the central relational paradox, wherein individuals try to hide parts of self to connect with individuals furthering them into isolation. This behavior is supported by previous research wherein authors have highlighted that doctoral students of color often cannot be their authentic self and need to hide parts of their identity to fit in (Vaishnav, 2021; Baker & Moore, 2015; Henfield et al., 2011, 2013) due to experiences of marginalization which lead to disconnection. Relational mentoring takes into account these chronic disconnections as a result of microaggressions and provides an opportunity for students to feel validated and authentically connect with individuals in their academic program. Further, Fletcher and Ragins (2008) noted three ways in which relational mentoring is unique. First, it challenges the view that mentoring is a one-sided relationship. Second, traditional mentoring measures success through career advancements, autonomy, and differentiation from others. RCT challenges this concept by viewing career development through interconnectedness with others and the acquisition of relational skills. Third, relational mentoring acknowledges power dynamics in the relationship. Practicing mentoring through an RCT lens means practicing “power with” mentee rather than mentor having a “power-over” relationship that tends to exist in most hierarchical relationships (Fletcher & Ragins, 2008). Thus, having a relational mentoring relationship, similar to what is described here within RCT, positively supports students’ reported social connectedness to the department.

Limitations

While the findings in this study are important, the limitations need to be noted. First, the sampling strategy in this study was nonrandomized, thus restricting the ability to calculate response rates and limiting generalizability. This sampling strategy was necessary given the population (i.e., doctoral students of color) consisted of a small subset of the counselor education community. Therefore, recruitment strategies were more intentional and through word of mouth, emails, and listservs. Additionally, since the DLE, RHI-C, and RHI-M are self-report measures, there is a

possibility of social desirability bias. Krumpal (2011) noted that when socially sensitive topics (such as racism) are discussed, respondents may misreport or underreport their experience in order to represent socially desirable attitudes and norms. Social desirability may have occurred if participants experienced a potential threat of disclosure, that is, whether their responses would be exposed to third-party individuals resulting in the risk of retaliation from peers, professors, and their academic institution. Additionally, racial microaggressions experienced outside the academic program could have impacted an individual's social connectedness, however, they were not explored. It is important to acknowledge that racial microaggressions could impact an individual's social connectedness in more than one environment, just as social connectedness to individuals outside of the academic environment (e.g., religious or spiritual organizations, family, community) could provide a buffer for doctoral students of color's connectedness within their academic program. However, only the experiences within the academic environment were measured, and it is important to note that a relationship was found. Further, it is important to acknowledge that while participants were asked to think of their advisor/dissertation chair in completing the RHI-M, they could have had relational mentoring relationships with other faculty that could have impacted social connectedness but were not captured in this study.

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Counselor Education Programs

This study used RCT as a guide for understanding the impact of racial microaggressions on social connectedness. First, faculty in counselor education programs could actively take steps to reduce microaggressions in their academic programs. This could be through workshops, brown bag sessions, training of faculty, and infusing multicultural and social justice principles in all curricula. For example, for every chapter or learning unit in any course, counselor educators can bring in conversations regarding how this can apply to individuals with intersecting identities. Educators could also invite scholars from minoritized identities as guest speakers who have expertise in different content areas. Next, faculty could incorporate relational mentoring in their interactions and relationships with doctoral students of color. This could be achieved through faculty relationships with students (such as advisor, supervisor, dissertation chair, instructor) that embody core principles of mutual empathy, relationship authenticity, and response ability/empowerment that are necessary for a growth-fostering relationship (Jordan et al., 2004). When the five good things of “a sense of zest, a better understanding of self, other, and the relationship, a sense of worth, an enhanced capacity to act or be productive, and an increased desire for more connection” are present in connections, they can lead to mutually empathetic, authentic, and growth-fostering relationships (Miller, 1986, p. 3). Doing so would not only minimize disconnection that is experienced as a result of microaggressions but could also provide relational mentoring that would foster growth and development for students of color. These practices can provide support and motivation for students to continue their doctoral studies. This is important given the need for an increase in faculty of color who can serve as role models and cater to a diverse population of students in our field. In order to recruit and retain faculty of color, counselor education programs need to recruit and retain the doctoral students of color within their programs. One of the many ways to do this is by providing a supportive, relational, and positive, growth-fostering educational experience.

Counselor education programs could also invite student representatives in their faculty meetings to serve as liaisons between students and faculty. This can create an open line of communication and the opportunity to discuss issues like racial microaggressions within the academic program. Programs could also formulate and incorporate relational mentoring for doctoral students, especially doctoral students of color, given that there is evidence supporting its positive correlation on social connectedness within academia. A few authors have called for incorporating relational mentoring strategies within counselor education programs. For example, Comstock and colleagues (2008) address RCT in their manuscript, “Relational-cultural theory : A framework for bridging relational, multicultural, and social justice competencies.” Similarly, Purgason and colleagues (2016) published an article on “Culturally relevant advising: Applying relational-cultural theory in counselor education” that focuses on RCT within advising, especially for students from minoritized backgrounds. Faculty could explore these published works to better understand the integration of RCT within counselor education programs.

Doctoral Students

This study provides empirical support and validation to doctoral students of color who experience racial microaggressions and experience the catch-22 dilemma in ways to navigate these experiences. This is the only study to date that explores the negative impact of racial microaggressions toward social connectedness and provides a strengths-based approach to help support students who feel disconnected from their program. Doctoral students of color can advocate for relational mentoring programs within their academic program or connect with a faculty member so that they can form a formal or informal relational mentoring relationship and can support their well-being as they navigate their experiences in counselor education programs. They could set expectations with their mentor for frequency of meetings and ask for mentoring around specific challenges, particularly navigating racial microaggressions within their academic programs. Researchers could also formulate a formal guideline for relational mentoring in graduate programs and explore the efficacy of this program within counselor education for doctoral students of color. Further, advanced doctoral students of color could encourage incoming doctoral students of color to connect with a faculty member who could serve as a relational mentor.

CONCLUSIONS

Racial microaggressions are a part of doctoral students’ experiences in counselor education programs and, therefore, understanding the prevalence and the impact could help future researchers in examining ways to reduce experiences of racial microaggressions within academia. Further, by utilizing a strengths-based approach of relational mentoring for doctoral students of color via faculty in their department can increase social connectedness. This provides additional insight for researchers and counselor educators, in supporting and retaining students of color within academia.

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