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# Outsiders-Within: Critical Race Theory, Graduate Education and Barriers to Professionalization

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*This article uses the lens of critical race theory to examine the experiences of minority students in and outside of the social work education classroom. Research has not critically analyzed the structures, policies and practices of graduate education programs and how they influence the socialization experiences of students. Qualitative interviews with 15 African American and Latino students reveal that their experiences are often characterized by marginalization and conflict. They suggest that certain aspects of the professionalization process create and support forces that reproduce stratified social relations. These problematic relations have a negative impact on minority students threatening their persistence and professional development. The perspectives of minority students in their own voices provide critical insights into actions graduate programs can take to change the quality of student life in predominantly White institutions.*

*Keywords: graduate education; critical race theory; minority students; professional socialization; marginalization*

## Introduction

Since the early 1970's when the Council on Social Work

Education (CSWE) acknowledged the importance of cultural diversity for social work education and practice, schools of social work have been mandated to increase diversity in the curriculum, faculty and student body. But that alone is not sufficient for a profession that seeks to promote social justice and social change. Schools must also confront the inequalities that continue to undermine the professional development of minority students. Because social work education takes responsibility for training future social workers, educators must critically assess the social and academic experiences of students. Only then can we uncover elements of the professionalization processes that have remained hidden. This requires ongoing evaluation of the range of course offerings and content, reading lists, paradigms and theoretical perspectives, student mentoring practices, and evaluation strategies. It is these aspects of graduate education that socializes students toward identifying with and committing themselves to professional careers as social workers.

A number of scholars have suggested that the socialization process presents barriers for minority students that may in part account for their under-representation in graduate education programs. Minority students often come to institutions of higher education with attitudes and behavior patterns that are different from the culture of graduate schools making their path through school more problematic than it might be for a student with the dominant forms of cultural capital. (Bowie and Hancock, 2000, Patterson-Stewart et.al. 1997; Romero and Margolis, 1999, Turner and Thompson, 1993, Weaver, 2000). How minority students experience the professionalization process should be of interest to social work educators because it is central to the theoretical, methodological and concrete work of the profession.

### Theoretical Assumptions

While alienation and marginalization have been identified among minority students in graduate programs, much of this work is based on survey data. Most do not include students' daily experiences and interactions with others in the institution and there is little discussion of the links between what

takes place in colleges and universities and the larger societal context.

The philosophical approach of critical race theory (CTR) offers a strong conceptual framework upon which to assign meaning and practical application of the research findings regarding minority students. Key components of CRT that are relevant to this study include the use of narratives to understand people's experiences; exploration of the ways in which institutional structures, practices and policies perpetuates racial/ethnic educational inequalities; emphasis on the importance of viewing policies within a historical and cultural context and a focus on how race and racism are interwoven into the structures practices and policies of colleges and universities (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Ladison-Billings, 2000; Solorzano and Villalpando, 1998). While people of color can experience race, gender and class oppression simultaneously, this paper will focus primarily on race marginality as it relates to the process of professional socialization in social work education.

#### *Socialization of Minority Students in Graduate Social Work Programs*

Although the process of professional socialization has been of interest to researchers in many disciplines since the 1950s, there are very few conceptual discussions or empirical studies on the process of professional socialization in social work education (Barretti, 2003). Moreover, the socialization literature within social work is largely concerned with students' socialization to professional values rather than the process by which a student becomes a professional (Feldman, 1971; Judah, 1979; Landau, 1999; Lusk & Miller, 1985; McLeod & Meyer, 1967; Merdinger, 1982, Sharwell, 1974; Varley, 1963; Yamatani et al., 1986). Critically, none of these studies consider the impact of race and/or ethnicity.

One exception is Barretti's (2003) study of the socialization of BSW students in social work education. Consistent with more general studies (Beck et al., 1961; Judah, 1979) of professional socialization, this work suggests that students actively construct their professional socialization. She notes that students entered social work school with well-defined expectations of their role models that correspond to their vision of

ideal social workers. The study also finds that professional socialization is not uniform or consistent and does not produce a homogeneous class of practitioners who subscribe to the same values. The study finds that minority students had different and sometimes marginal socialization experiences.

Weidman et al. (2001) suggest that because socialization and training norms revolve around a White male standard, minorities may regard their instruction and expectations as unrealistic. Their values may also conflict with those of the White male academic culture. As a result, socialization has been most successful for those who could fit the status quo (Turner & Thompson, 1993).

### *Institutional Factors and the Experiences of Minority Students in Social Work Education*

The institutional context in which students are educated can also affect their social and academic experiences. Solorzano, Ceja and Yasso (2000) suggest that a positive institutional climate includes the following: a significant numbers of students, faculty, and administrators of color; a curriculum that reflects the historical and contemporary experiences of people of color; programs to support the recruitment, retention, and graduation of students of color; and a college mission that reinforces the institution's commitment to pluralism.

The literature suggests that the institutional environment in social work programs is not pluralistic but is one of marginalization, discrimination, negative labeling, low expectations, and attitudes described as symbolic racism (Bahram et al., 1997; Bowie & Hancock, 2000; Longres & Seltzer, 1994; Swank et al., 2001; Weaver, 2000). Longres and Seltzer (1994) maintain for example, that because of the small number of minority faculty and peers in most graduate social work programs, minority students often find themselves isolated without appropriate role models and mentoring relationships. Others (Weaver, 2000; Basham et al., 1997; Bowie & Hancock, 2000) found that sensitivity to minority students among faculty and administration is often minimal or nonexistent and minority students are often frustrated by the absence of a culturally relevant curriculum in their graduate program. The lack of diversity in the student population, faculty, staff, and

curriculum also restrict the nature and quality of minority students' interactions inside and outside the classroom, threatening both their academic performance and social experiences (Swail et al., 2003).

## Method

The study was designed to examine the experiences and narratives of minority students in order to identify factors that influence and contribute to their professional development. A homogenous sampling strategy (Patton, 1990) was used to focus the study. Recruitment was conducted through three minority student clubs because they provided a forum to meet a large number of minority students. Students who agreed to be interviewed comprised the sample. The sample included 15 graduate students enrolled in an MSW program in a predominantly White public institution. They ranged in age from 22 to 40 years of age.

All interviews were initiated via telephone by the researcher. Participants were provided with a brief description of the nature of the study and the expected length of each interview. A convenient time and place for the interview were also discussed. The semi-structured, in-depth interview was used as the method of data collection because it is sharply focused, highly intensive and productive (McCracken, 1988). Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Interviews touched on a wide range of issues related to the graduate experience: the original decision to pursue graduate education, the application process, experience in the classroom and in their program, and financial and mentoring support. They were asked to describe events that stuck in their minds or other experiences that influenced decisions, choices and career plans. A final question asked respondents to recommend strategies to facilitate the success of minority students currently enrolled in their program.

The interviews were transcribed and each interview was read several times in search of patterns, causal flows and propositions (Miles and Huberman, 1994). In coding the data, core themes were identified, initially through descriptive coding and then through more in-depth categorical and theoretical

coding. Analysis of the data revealed eight core themes: cultural and racial isolation, lack of relevance of the curriculum to minority issues, invisibility and distance from program staff, interaction with faculty, interaction with peers, mentoring and support, race and supervision, and curricula and university-wide changes.

### Cultural and Racial Isolation

Minority students reported that one of the most difficult aspects of the graduate education process is the cultural and racial isolation they experience. Participants were primarily attracted to their school because of its perceived racial/ethnic diversity. Not surprisingly, they were shocked and disappointed when they realized that the program was not as diverse as they expected. These students described their experience with this:

First day of class I kept looking out for the African American and Latino professors. You can't imagine how I felt when I didn't see any. It's this feeling you get of wanting to feel safe and like you belong. When you don't feel that, it's just not the same. You just don't build the same connections. ML

I felt very isolated when I came here. I expected a lot more people of color. I walked into the classroom and I thought, did I miss something? I didn't expect that the program was going to be a majority people of color, but I expected a lot more. That upset me. What else upset me is the lack of staff of color . . . DS

Others noted that the lack of minority presence in the program was not only shocking, but it also complicated their adjustment to the program.

I really wasn't quite sure what to expect when I came here, but the expectations I did have are different from the actual experience. . . I expected a more diverse faculty. I was shocked at the faculty breakdown when I came here. I saw very few people of color. I had

come to expect, based on the reputation of the school, that there would be more diversity among the staff . . . Quite frankly, all of this has made the adjustment for me very difficult. KS

I was really taken aback at the number of White students and faculty in the school. I thought it would be more diverse. I thought there would be more minorities because the school is in an urban area. It took me a while to adjust to this fact. SG

### Lack of Relevance of the Curriculum to Minority Issues

The isolation that minority students experience in graduate programs is further reinforced by the absence of minority perspective or experience in the curriculum. Participants overwhelmingly stated that the curriculum had little relevance to their lives or the people with whom they work. The following quotes are characteristic of responses in this regard:

A lot of us got into this because we wanted to help our communities. We came here to learn about how we can do that effectively, so I think the program needs to offer more courses that are particular to other communities. It needs to be more multicultural in its approach. KS

Most of the classes were structured in such a way that there wasn't room for discussion, even if you felt like you wanted to say something. After class we would meet and discuss what went on in class and how we felt about it. It was our way of expressing those things we wanted to but couldn't express in class. We found other avenues to channel the anger that gets pent up in class. This was always very helpful to me. GP

If the curriculum had more literature about people of color by people of color, it might feel less like someone telling you about your experiences. I got really tired of learning about what my experience was through the eyes of people whom I felt didn't have a clue based on how it was presented. I got tired of hearing about the



Black experience from White writers. There was this sense of hopelessness about that experience from these perspectives. ML

### Invisibility and Distance from Program Staff

In their narratives about their graduate experiences participants provided in-depth descriptions of events, situations, and interactions with others that they perceived to have affected their adjustment and professional development. One thread running through the interviews is the feeling of being “invisible” and the chronic inability of White faculty, students, and administrators to see minority students as individuals. As an African American student explained:

Part of the problem, I believe, is that they are not really seeing Kurtis. They are seeing a Black person and Black people don't belong in grad school. It would be great if people just had an idea of me even if they dislike me for being Kurtis and not for being a Black man. KS

This point of view is also supported by a Latino student who said:

The first thing they see is a woman of color, and yes you should see that because its part of who I am. But that's not the only thing about me. I also want them to see me and understand me not necessarily as a woman of color but as an individual. KG

The subtle forms of stereotyping that students experience makes race the determining factor in social interaction that often lead minority students to feel stigmatized and alienated.

One student discussed how his experience with program administration has undermined his earlier passion for his chosen profession, suggesting that noncognitive personal variables such as feelings, attitudes, and perceptions of program staff erode the motivation needed for successful completion of the program. The student also notes that his is not an isolated experience but rather generalizable to many of his classmates.

I think they get this message in the first year and by the second year they are burnt out. I still care very much about social work but that message has really brought my passions down. It really had a negative effect on me. SG

Critically, minority students perceive program administration/staff as unable to appreciate the sacrifices they make to be part of the graduate program. The essence of these sentiments is captured in the following quote:

For some of us, we are also adjusting to no income, or having to continue to produce an income at the same time that you are struggling to do this. There are a lot of emotional consequences that tie into all that and I don't think they really look at this at all. KS

When viewed through a critical lens the conflicting views of support between administration and minority students become evident. The university appears to see monetary contribution to students as adequate support while students are looking for additional support in the form of caring and concern.

### Interactions with Faculty

Several threads emerged from informant responses about their relationship to program faculty. The themes that surfaced include difficulty forming relationships with White faculty, low expectation and difficulty receiving feedback.

Two-thirds of respondents interviewed for this study reported difficulty relating to White faculty. Moreover, White faculty are often viewed with suspicion and mistrust. Many of the participants expressed reservations about admitting difficulties to White faculty because they feared it would be regarded as further evidence of their inadequate preparation for college and of not belonging. As one student explained:

You just have to be better and you have to show it. Going to faculty when you are having problems is like admitting that you really can't cut it. It's a lot easier

to talk to your peers when you are having trouble or feeling confused or unsure of yourself. GP

Others feared that asking for help might negatively affect their course grades. One student noted that she is unable to open up to White faculty because when she has tried to have conversations in the past, she did not feel welcomed.

For me I have only been able to [talk openly] with minority professors... It's hard for me to go to White professors and say I am having a hard time. Maybe because I have tried before and I haven't felt welcomed. I felt like I was being put down or like I wasn't smart enough. SS

One of the most significant features of Black relational responses to racial stratification is the degree of distrust of White Americans (Ogbu, 1994). Years of negative contact with educational institutions may have also left minority students with the fear that they will suffer negative consequences if they expose ignorance or inadequate preparation when they meet with professors.

Lower expectations of performance and assumptions about the student's lack of ability also surfaced as factors that tended to block communication with White faculty. Study participants felt that White faculty do not believe that they can handle difficult coursework and other requirements the way White students can.

A lot of times professors would praise my work really enthusiastically and I could see that a lot of it was a surprise. They have this assumption that you can't do the work. DS

Both White faculty and students of color enter college with assumptions and stereotypes formed through earlier experiences both in and outside of the educational system. While these students do not necessarily accept these assumptions and stereotypes they are not entirely free from their influence. Participants admitted having feelings of incompetence prior to their graduate experience. However, they also believed these

feelings were exacerbated by further subtle messages of incompetence from White faculty and staff.

Several students reported that stereotypical assumptions about their ability to perform in graduate school also made it difficult to get useful feedback from faculty. They indicated that faculty comments were either overly positive or overly critical. A Latina student described her responses to a feedback session with her adviser.

Last year my supervisor, who was a person of color, told me that she thought my ability to look at situations analytically in terms of the power structure, race, class, and gender was one of my strengths. This year I have another supervisor who is White, and she described the same characteristics as a weakness. When I spoke with her about it, she said that in this one particular log entry I focused more on race issues than the positive outcome of the situation. So my weakness was having a social justice lens. I shared this with my faculty adviser, who is also a White woman, because I wanted her to know how I felt about it. She really didn't get it. She thought that I was being defensive. MP

Most people have difficulty assessing feedback about their performance. However, as Feagan, Hernan and Imani (1996) point out, minority students are particularly sensitive to the character and quality of the feedback they receive given the possibility of bias in mostly White college settings. The above-quoted student noted how her ability to analyze her work through a social justice lens was seen as positive by a supervisor of color but as a deficit by a White supervisor. While both supervisors might be correct in their assessment, in dynamic relationship to both prior experience and present setting, only one of the sources of feedback can be processed. Given the level of racial tension in some graduate programs White faculty may also fear giving students of color critical feedback on their work because they do not want to appear insensitive or racist. The result is an atmosphere of suspicion and distrust that is felt by everyone (Romero and Margolis, 1999).

## Mentoring and Support

Having minority professors was seen by all as critical. In particular, respondents overwhelmingly expressed a need for mentoring relationships with minority faculty. They elucidated the meaning of having a minority faculty member as their adviser, describing minority faculty as supportive, genuine and understanding. Participants also stated that they found it easier to share their vulnerabilities with minority faculty because of their shared experiences with marginality. These comments are typical:

I was always able to build good relationships with minority professors. They make me feel good about pursuing this [graduate school]. Even when I am having problems, they make me feel I can do it. I was never able to connect to White professors in the same way. MP

I think it's hard for White faculty to understand what it's like to be a student of color. It doesn't mean that they can't be helpful, but it's just not the same. AS

Given the problems of marginality and alienation experienced by minority students in social work education, the need for mentorship is crucial. As Collins (1994) reported mentorship often led to greater success among protégés, and those who had a mentor were more satisfied with their careers than those who did not. However, the absence of faculty of color in graduate programs coupled with the difficulty that minority students have in forming relationships with White faculty further exacerbates this problem.

## Interaction with Peers

Because most graduate programs have low minority enrollment and few minority faculty members, students of color often find themselves lacking both informal and formal supports. The participants identified the importance of having minority peers available in their respective programs. These respondents described how they depended on their peers for

support and validation.

I remember the first day of class. I was so scared. . . . I thought that I was the only one that felt that way... When we got together, I realize there were other students who felt that way... And that made me stronger. RST

We would get together and talk about what happened in class. I personally found some of the remarks very offensive, but nobody felt that they could say anything. After a while you start to think that it's just you, so it's good to hear other students say that they also found it offensive. AO

Difficulty forming relationships with White peers further intensified these students' need to create a supportive family that was considered essential to their survival. Interpersonal conflict with White peers was identified as a factor that negatively affected their graduate experience. Minority students felt that their peers did not understand them and were often racist in their characterization of minority individuals. They noted also that minority students often had to initiate interaction with White students or risk being ignored.

### Race and Supervision

Apart from the cross-cultural conflicts that exist in the classroom and in relationships with faculty and peers, students overwhelmingly stated that cross-cultural differences also interfered with the field instruction relationship. They indicated that field instructors are generally reluctant to raise cross-cultural issues in practice. Students also felt that cross-cultural differences and perceived supervisory responses have influenced their willingness to raise concerns about their learning needs in the supervisory relationship.

There are a lot of issues in the field placement around race. There is a lot of tension. It really makes it hard to express yourself... I feared them thinking I was lazy or I am just another minority person trying to get over.

Just fearing that race thing again. You don't want them to think that you can't do the job. ML

Others described having to distance themselves from issues around race for fear of creating discomfort or appearing oversensitive to the issue.

In the field of community organizing, most of the organizers that I have worked with have been White, and sometimes as a Latina I see things like racial tension with a client or with the community and I would bring that up with my supervisors and they don't see it. It's hard to explain to a White supervisor that these things are happening without making things uncomfortable. So after a while you also pretend that you don't see it. AO

The lack of attention to race and diversity in the supervisory relationship complicates the professionalization process for minority students in a number of ways. First, it encourages students of color to stop identifying with their community concerns and to shift loyalties to faculty and peers in their profession. Second, it encourages them to become blind to personal experience of inequality; and third, it helps students to develop a detached stance from racism and other social issues affecting their communities (Romero and Margolis, 1999). From a critical race perspective situations such as these also serve to enforce the ideology that requires people of color to see their experiences with regard to race and racism as particularistic rather than linked to larger cultural and societal forces.

Although acquiring "professional distance" is considered part of developing a professional identity this requirement may be particularly burdensome for minority students because it requires a constant adjustment between the duality of being a minority, which is tied to a sense of community and being a professional. Consequently some minority professionals are caught in a conflicting web of expectations, which goes beyond being a professional or being a minority (Gilkes, 1982).

## Curricula and University-wide Changes

Respondents identified a number of actions that might facilitate an environment that is responsive to the needs of minority students. Their responses suggest that the goal of an inclusive environment cannot be reached through the selection of students alone but by targeting the curriculum and the institutional environment. Specifically, they suggested that increasing the number of minority faculty and students, establishing a more culturally relevant curriculum and the inclusion of race and other cross cultural content in the curriculum would create a more hospitable environment for minority students.

## Conclusion

As the demographic changes in the country continue to take hold graduate programs need to prepare students to work and learn in a multicultural society. This exploration of the experiences of minority students highlights the challenges they must confront during the professionalization process. It suggests that for minority students, graduate social work education is one of uncertainty, sacrifice, and strain. This is due in part to concerns that students bring with them, but more significantly, to the marginal experiences which seem to characterize their socialization into the social work profession. However, much of the literature on professional socialization ignores the realities of inequality and persistent discrimination endured by students of color in graduate education programs. If these programs are to become places where students of color can thrive, the barriers and obstacles they face must be recognized, understood and targeted for change.

CTR maintains that those at the margins can use their outsider-within stance to provide insight and vision. The perspectives of minority students in their own voices provide critical insights into actions that graduate education programs can take to increase the quality of life on predominantly White campuses. Improving the educational experiences of minority students is not just a matter of fairness but is central to the profession's ability to provide appropriate and effective services to all of its clients.



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