12-18-2018

Doctoral-Level Counseling Students' Experiences of Social Class Microaggressions

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Abstract

The authors recruited 11 doctoral-level counseling students to participate in a study exploring the lived experiences of people who have encountered social class microaggressions (SCMs). Findings (consisting of 6 themes) suggest that SCMs are a distinct phenomenon arising from interpersonal and environmental exchanges that damage recipients. The authors present implications for counselor education and future research trajectories.

Experiences of privilege and oppression continue to permeate the daily lives of people living in the United States (Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, & Huntt, **2013**; Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Butler, &

McCullough, **2016**; Sue et al., **2007**). Although overt expressions of hostility are considered to be ill-mannered and undesirable behaviors, covert discrimination and degradation continue to be prevalent in the day-to-day interactions of individuals and groups that experience interpersonal and systemic marginalization (Ratts et al., **2016**; Sue et al., **2007**). These subtle and commonplace indignities communicate to recipients that they are *less than* dominant culture individuals, that they do not belong, and that their realities are invalid. These daily hostilities are known as *microaggressions*, a term coined by Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, and Willis (**1978**).

For the last 2 decades, scholars have generated empirical and theoretical work (Constantine, **2007**; Constantine & Sue, **2007**; Nadal, **2011**, **2013**; Sue, **2010a**, **2010b**; Sue et al., **2007**; Torres-Harding, Andrade, & Romero Diaz, **2012**) documenting the nature of microaggressions, including the forms they take (i.e., microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations) and the ways in which they are transmitted (i.e., language, nonverbal behaviors, and environment). *Microassaults* include overt or covert actions or environments that communicate denigration and hostility (e.g., slurs, swastikas). *Microinsults* tend to be more covert and involve actions or environments that are offensive or indicate contempt for the recipient. *Microinvalidations* tend to be more covert and include actions or environments that ignore, undermine, or dismiss the lived realities of recipients (Sue et al., **2007**). Most commonly, researchers have investigated microaggressions rooted in race, gender, and sexual identity (Capodilupo et al., **2010**; Lewis et al., **2013**; Shelton & Delgado-Romero, **2011**; Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, **2008**). However, microaggressions can manifest in relation to other identity dimensions and in any relationship where power hierarchies, stratification, privilege, and oppression are present (Sue, **2010b**; Sue et al., **2007**). Because of this, leading microaggression scholars routinely encourage the examination of microaggressions across other identities (L. Smith & Redington, **2010**; Sue, **2010a**, **2010b**), including intersecting identity dimensions (Liegghio & Caragata, **2016**; L. Smith & Redington, **2010**). To date, microaggressions related to social class have received little scholarly attention. The current study attempts to address this gap by investigating experiences of microaggressions related to social class—namely, *social class microaggressions* (SCMs).

Social class is a complex construct associated with one's ranked place in the world relative to others based on economic and social factors (Cook & Lawson, **2016**). We use the following definition: *Social class* is a subjective identity dimension composed of discrete socioeconomic status (SES) variables (i.e., income, education, and occupation) that combine with additional factors, such as resources, location, shared and individual experiences, and perceived status, that shape attitudes, beliefs, worldviews, values, and behaviors (Cook & Lawson, **2016**; Liu, Soleck, Hopps, Dunston, & Pickett, **2004**). To identify social class as an identity dimension, people use many descriptors and terms that may vary by person or group (e.g., poor, blue collar, upper class, middle class, lower class, working poor, upper crust, elite, owning class, ruling class, working class). In addition, people often conflate social class and SES (Cook & Lawson, **2016**). Although SES is necessary to defining and understanding social class, social class is not SES in and of itself (Cook & Lawson, **2016**).

SCMs are a burgeoning research area. In clinical settings, difficulties associated with both identifying microaggressions and finding ways to combat them have been researched (Liegghio & Caragata, **2016**). Investigators have examined constructs related to SCMs in higher education settings as well (Sarcedo, Matias, Montoya, & Nishi, **2015**). Young, Anderson, and Stewart (**2015**) coined the term *hierarchical microaggressions* for situations in which participants experienced a systematic devaluing of their personhood based upon their institutional role. L. Smith, Mao, and Deshpande (**2016**)

investigated *classist microaggressions* in poor and working-class students. Their results indicated that microaggressions related to social class negatively affected participants via financial barriers, alienation, and stigmatization.

SCMs in an educational context might include comments such as "You are such an inspiration growing up how you did. How did you move on and up so well?" or "You really need to focus on school and not your other job right now. You can make money when you graduate." L. Smith et al. (**2016**) reported that SCMs can include assumptions about students' backgrounds and about whether students understand how to navigate higher education contexts. For example, some participants in their study reported that professors were surprised if their students did not identify as middle class or could not afford course materials. Others reported not knowing "unspoken guidelines" (p. 138), expectations, and professional etiquette when interacting with professors. In addition, participants reported feelings of disconnection from their families of origin and challenges sharing their higher education experiences. Microaggressive environments, experiences, statements, and beliefs can be insulting or convey that the recipient's needs are not relevant or valid. In addition, messages privileging middle or upper social class values (e.g., achievement and ambition, the importance of financial investing, centralizing one's occupation as the reason for living) can create microaggressive environments for those in other social class statuses (Cook & O'Hara, **2017**; L. Smith et al., **2016**). Even though results from existing studies indicate that SCMs are a real and persistent threat in higher education settings, SCMs have not been explored in counselor education.

Ethical codes, accreditation standards, and professional guidelines require that counselors attend to related constructs of social position and SES (American Counseling Association [ACA], **2014**; Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], **2015**; National Board for Certified Counselors, **2012**; Ratts et al., **2016**). Professional standards do not expressly use the term social class; they only name constructs related to it. Because social class is distinct from and more nuanced than SES, the absence of the term is notable and reflects the need to continue studying social class–related issues. Indeed, the absence of the term may also reflect society's lack of understanding about social class. Thus, it is imperative that professional counselors increase their competence regarding social class and SCMs and research SCMs to potentially prevent additional marginalization. Furthermore, if members of the counseling profession understand how SCMs manifest, then counselor educators and supervisors can integrate education, prevention, and response interventions throughout their roles and curricula.

To understand how doctoral-level counseling students experience SCMs, we used qualitative inquiry—specifically, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Although the phenomenon of microaggressions has been documented by researchers, SCMs represent a newer facet not yet explored in depth. Thus, the purpose of our study was to explore and understand the experiences of SCMs. Because the study was exploratory and not confirmatory, we avoided labeling experiences with preestablished categories. We used the following research question to guide our study: What are the experiences of doctoral-level counseling students who have encountered SCMs during counselor education training?

Method

We utilized IPA for this investigation. Rooted in existential philosophy, IPA is a type of phenomenological research that attends to meaning and process (Brocki & Wearden, **2006**; Larkin & Thompson, **2012**; J. A. Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, **2009**). IPA allows researchers to attend to perceptions and complicated interpersonal processes, such as microaggressions (J. A. Smith et al., **2009**). Researchers utilizing IPA acknowledge a double hermeneutic that includes both the meaning participants create and the meaning researchers create (Larkin & Thompson, **2012**). Data analysis focuses on how things are understood instead of merely what happened. Constantine and Sue (**2007**) used IPA to study microaggressions, and IPA is particularly useful in exploring phenomena that may be complex and sensitive (J. A. Smith et al., **2009**). Our data analysis developed findings in two clear areas: the lived experiences of SCMs, and the function of SCMs. As such, two manuscripts were warranted (American Psychological Association, **2010**; Hunt, **2011**); in the current article, we explore the lived experiences of SCMs.

Participants and Procedure

The institutional review boards at both authors' universities granted approval, and in conducting our study, we conformed to ethical standards for research (ACA, **2014**). Homogeneous, criterion, snowball, and purposeful sampling strategies were used to select participants (Brocki & Wearden, **2006**; Larkin & Thompson, **2012**; Patton, **2014**; J. A. Smith et al., **2009**). We recruited individuals who were from a CACREP-accredited doctoral program and had experienced microaggressions related to social class and/or SES. We intentionally chose doctoral students because we found no empirical literature confirming or denying this phenomenon in counselor education. In addition, because of their extended formal education and exposure to sociocultural issues, we believed the doctoral students could best articulate the phenomenon. We contacted fellow counselor educator colleagues across the United States asking them to share a description of our study and our contact information with students in their programs. Interested participants contacted us, and we prescreened them to ensure they met inclusion criteria. We excluded two people who did not meet the criteria. We invited the remaining participants to complete demographic information through an online portal (**eSurv.org**), to review the informed consent paperwork, and to participate in two semistructured interviews. We requested participation in two interviews in order to be thorough and to provide opportunities for context and deeper understanding, consistent with the iterative process inherent to IPA (J. A. Smith et al., **2009**). Once participants completed the first interview, we sent them a $15 electronic gift card.

The demographic information we collected included major sociocultural identity variables. Participants could self-identify using a write-in option if the options provided did not accurately reflect their identities. To promote confidentiality, participants chose pseudonyms, which were used to discuss interviews and during data analysis. Semistructured interviews consisted of questions related to experiences of SCMs. We drafted interview questions rooted in the literature, including some questions modeled after other microaggression studies. For the first interview, sample interview questions included, "What comes to mind when you hear the term social class microaggressions?" and "Think of some times during your counseling training program in which you felt uncomfortable because you perceived the experience to be a social class microaggression. Please describe and give as many details as possible."

For the second interview, we asked participants to reflect on thoughts and experiences related to SCMs that had occurred since the first interview (Seidman, **2006**; J. A. Smith et al., **2009**). For example, we

asked participants "to share any additional information that you have thought of regarding your experiences of feeling slighted, challenged, put down, etc., based on your social class/SES group affiliation and/or identity" and to "share any additional information that you have thought of regarding the terms social class microaggressions and classism." Before we launched the study, we conducted two pilot interviews with individuals who met the inclusion criteria, but whose information and responses are not included in the findings. The purpose was to use their feedback to improve the interview process, identify necessary changes, and provide additional rigor. Through feedback and by reflecting upon the process, we made some minor adjustments to the interview questions.

The final group of participants (*N* = 11) included individuals from across the United States. Nine were located in the South, one was in the Northeast, and one was in the Rocky Mountain region. They ranged in age from 28 to 54 years old and included 10 women and one man. No one identified as transgender or gender expansive. Participants were racially diverse, with six identifying as Black/African American, four as European/White American, and one as Hispanic/Latinx. Two participants further identified as multiracial. Two participants identified as bisexual, eight as heterosexual, and one offered no response. All identified English as their primary language used for reading, speaking, writing, and communicating. Relationship statuses included four married, five single, and two divorced participants. Their living communities ranged across urban, suburban, town, and rural settings. Three participants indicated the presence of a chronic health condition or disability, and two of the three indicated limitations in daily functioning. Participants could identify the social class status(es) of their families of origin and their current social class status(es); many participants selected more than one social class. For family of origin, participants denoted the following social class statuses: six lower class, five middle, four working, four lower middle, two upper lower, and one upper middle. Current social class statuses were reported as follows: seven middle, two working, two upper lower, one lower middle, and one upper.

Data Collection and Analysis

After obtaining consent, we interviewed participants and audio recorded the interviews (10 via phone, one via Skype). We split interviews between research partners, with one author interviewing six participants and the other interviewing five. Throughout the interviews, we attempted to build rapport through empathic neutrality by using appropriate and selective self-disclosure, transparency, validation, and accurate reflections of content, feeling, and meaning (Patton, **2014**; J. A. Smith et al., **2009**).

We began data analysis during data collection and continued after data collection had concluded. Throughout the recursive process, we engaged in reflection through systematic journaling, memoing, bracketing, and discussions. We used IPA protocols by focusing on what mattered to the participants and why it mattered (Brocki & Wearden, **2006**; Larkin & Thompson, **2012**; J. A. Smith et al., **2009**). After transcription, we began by reading and rereading the transcripts multiple times. We noted initial reactions, questions, patterns, and comments. This initial coding included identifying *objects of concern* and *experiential claims*. The objects of concern included anything that was important to the participants (e.g., relationships, events, interactions). The experiential claims included the meanings participants constructed from their experiences and answered the questions "Why does this matter?" and "So what?" Both researchers independently coded every interview. Once the interviews were coded, we discussed our initial impressions and preliminary codes to reach consensus. We documented all of our initial codes and emerging ideas during this initial round of coding.

Throughout coding, we developed possible, tentative interpretations of the interviews (Brocki & Wearden, **2006**; Larkin & Thompson, **2012**; J. A. Smith et al., **2009**). We identified *theme bundles*, including clusters and patterns that made sense together, while trying not to label themes prematurely. Also, we developed an *interpretive account* that included preliminary interpretations and ongoing researcher dialogue about the meaning of the data. After the initial round of coding, we held two additional coding rounds to identify patterns and abstract categories by collapsing and synthesizing initial coding ideas. We engaged this part of analysis through multiple means, including creating diagrams, flow charts, bullet points, and color-coded lists to clarify how the transcripts, codes, and themes might be related. We used computer software, photographs, and sticky notes to move and visually shift our data so that we might explore different connections visually and linguistically.

Although we met formally after initially coding each interview and sharing our memos throughout the process, we also had spontaneous dialogue as needed to check our assumptions. We tried to be speculative, transparent, and cautious in our interpretations in order to remain open to ideas and to honor participants' accounts. Then, we organized and structured the material so that we could identify relationships among and between participants. Throughout analysis, we kept an audit trail and tied participant quotes to the emerging themes.

Trustworthiness

We utilized multiple strategies to promote trustworthiness and address bias. We began by exploring and documenting our positionalities, identities, expectations, and biases. We engaged in ongoing journaling, memoing, and researcher dialogue. To promote credibility, confirmability, and authenticity, we asked participants to participate in a second interview to reflect further on their SCM experiences. We used member checking by inviting participants to review their transcripts. About half (n = 5) agreed to the second interview and member checking. In the second interview, participants elaborated and reflected further on their experiences of SCMs since the first interview (J. A. Smith et al., **2009**). In our findings, we provided lengthy participant quotes to contextualize and situate the information (J. A. Smith et al., **2009**). We utilized an audit trail and collaborated with two auditors (counselor educators) who provided feedback about our themes, findings, and process. Throughout our study, we engaged peer researchers in peer consultation. Because of the interpretive nature of IPA, peer validation and auditing are more crucial than member checking (Larkin & Thompson, **2012**) to attend to the double hermeneutic central to IPA.

To promote rigor and address bias, we documented our positionalities and reflexivity statements at the outset and throughout the study. The first author identified as a European American, cisgender female who was raised in and identified as middle social class. The second author identified as a European American, cisgender female who was raised in upper-lower social class, and identified as both upper-lower social class and middle social class. We both utilized a constructivist paradigm and acknowledged the constructs of language, identity, power, privilege, and marginalization as defining, cocreating, shaping, and reflecting reality. Before we began the study, we believed SCMs existed but were not well documented; however, we attempted to maintain a stance of exploration, not confirmation, throughout our investigation. We assumed there would be some variation and possibly confusion about the meaning of social class as it relates to microaggressions. Also, we believed many of the examples might revolve around money explicitly (a narrowly defined SES variable) because social class is often reduced to SES only. However, because SES is a part of social class, we believed the participants' statements

would illuminate SCMs. We chose to investigate counselor education doctoral students' lived experiences of SCMs to understand whether this phenomenon exists in counselor education and if so, how it manifests and impacts doctoral students.

Findings

The study findings suggest that SCMs are an observable phenomenon that has multiple negative consequences for recipients. We present six unique yet intersecting themes that arose from the data, illustrating the impact these experiences had on participants and the meaning they constructed from those experiences. We illustrate each theme with direct quotes that provide insight into the relational, emotional, and cognitive significance SCMs had on participants.

I Feel Trapped in a No-Win Situation

Many of the participants articulated classic examples of no-win situations. In these instances, the person must choose between two options that offer detrimental outcomes; however, the people giving the options are unaware they are creating such situations for the individual. The participants in this study felt emotionally trapped among multiple bad choices, believing there were no good choices.

One participant recounted an interpersonal incident in one of her courses. She had self-advocated to complete one particular program milestone as early as possible (which was consistent with the timeline and policies in her catalog) so that she could progress quickly and limit the financial burden of being in graduate school. However, in practice, the other members of her program commonly completed this requirement later in their course of study. The participant knew her self-advocacy might irritate those in positions of power and strain relationships with those in her institution. She perceived that she had to assimilate or face negative consequences, even though she was within the bounds of her course catalog. She recounted the public retaliation of one of her professors that occurred in front of the class:

> They went ahead and had to make a change to some university policy because I had brought to light that there was a disconnect … there was like, discrepancies between two policies or something. And so [the professor] came into our classroom and said … "You can thank [participant name] for that. And [participant name], if you want to make any other corrections to the policies please just cc me on the email." So, that was not so micro of an aggression stated in front of my whole class.

Another participant described an experience from her counseling skills course. For her, the interventions students were required to learn appeared to be relevant only for certain segments of client populations. She experienced a no-win situation in that her professors were grading her on her ability to demonstrate skills that were most effective for specific populations (i.e., the dominant culture). However, she believed these skills might not be as effective or appropriate for people of marginalized social class backgrounds. For her, the SCMs related to the system in which she was embedded. Cognitively, she believed what she was being taught was not comprehensive enough to help certain social class communities; however, she also knew she had to perform a certain way to succeed in her institutional context. She shared an experience that occurred in one of her counseling classes:

I don't think that we were able to explore other ways to interview people, and I got a lower grade than I expected based on the approach that was required…. That was very troublesome for me because it felt like that if you didn't use their methodology and interview skills, then you weren't going to be able to get through this program. I realized that a lot of the ways that I have developed my tool set or built up my tool set to work with people of color of a certain [social] class would not be used or be able to be used in this class…. I don't think it's a reflection of all the different ways to work with people and we were graded on that, and so for me that felt like a microaggression, like, okay, this is the way you're supposed to do it, this is how this [social] class of people wants to be treated, so this is what we're going to do.

Your Insensitivity Is Harming Our Relationship and Me

Multiple participants shared stories about how SCMs damaged their relationships and sense of self. They indicated that culturally insensitive remarks and recommendations became a source of tension and disconnection. For many participants, these comments demonstrated a profound lack of understanding and knowledge of the participant. They felt insulted and emotionally hurt. A participant recounted the following interchange with a favorite professor:

I was in my graduate program. I was getting close to the end of that, and I was talking with one of my favorite professors who is still a good friend and mentor and would never intentionally say something hurtful to me because he's very strengths based, especially when it comes to me. But he was talking about what I was doing for my doctoral program and how I could start to shed [the] skin of kinda coming from a lower class background, and I knew that wasn't intentionally offensive, but you can't, you know, seeing someone's background or experience as a negative thing is kinda an example of that [SCM]. [As though] it's something that I need to get over or get rid of.

Another participant reflected on a time when her professor had instructed her to make appointments when meeting with others, as is professional practice. According to this participant, the SCM was her professor assuming she did not know about this professional expectation because of her cultural background (a rural, lower social class community). The participant felt shame and self-doubt as a result of this experience:

I think that had a lot of impact because I think I had this template in my head, that shame cycle of not being good enough. Especially when the whole thing about that meeting and appointment made me think like, did I really deserve to be here? Why didn't I stay where I am from and work on the farm for the rest of my life? What makes me really think that I can be here? And of course, I know that that's not true … but yeah, it really made me feel for a while— do I really deserve to be here?

Another participant explained her lack of trust and self-protection as a result of SCMs. These factors impacted her relationships and opportunities for connectedness with her professors and cohort:

There is no trust there; if I was struggling I would never tell them. You know, I wouldn't go to my mentor or something, no. Because they are going to tell me to quit my job. I can't quit my job, so the relationship is strained…. I don't show it to anybody, but they get on, you know, it frustrates me. So, I don't really have that bond with anybody.

You Expect Me to Handle Work and Money Like You Do

Participants' examples of SCMs often focused on paid compensation, worker identity, and finances, all of which relate to social class. This appears to be a unique, distinguishing feature of SCMs. For instance, a participant recounted a stressful interaction with one of her professors and members of her program. For her, the professor's words indicated a lack of awareness of the participant's cultural identity and the lived experience related to financial resources. She shared,

> There was one incident with a professor where she said, "You know, you seem like you're having a hard time, or you might be a little snippy or you're, you have a bit of an attitude of some sort, maybe you should quit your part-time job, maybe you're working too much." To me, there was no question of like, was it my part-time job that was a problem? Maybe I was having an issue within the program, and also, I can't just quit my job…. It's not that simple for me to not work.

The same participant recounted,

> It [social class] was never really brought up because I'm really the only person in the program that needs to work as much as I do. Everybody else in my cohort, they're only working part-time this summer. None of them work during the year … it's always, "Oh you're working again, oh I hope you're practicing self-care, oh my gosh are you taking a break?" And I'm like, I don't, I have to … I don't have the option. I don't really know what people want me to do. I have to work.

The words of her cohort peers were framed from a position of concern and caring related to the participant's "self-care." However, the participant's life circumstances required a different order of priorities. For the participant, these interchanges meant that her peers did not understand her reality because they were asking her to do something she perceived as impossible and damaging. The effect on her yielded strained relationships between her and her cohort.

Another participant shared her frustrations with the chronic assumptions others in her program made regarding money and time devoted to paid work:

> I can see now how that was kind of more of a continuous thing. Like, they would always want to get together but at very expensive restaurants or, you know, or we once got together at one of their houses and she [a professor] lives in this huge house in the middle of nowhere. Or people that just didn't have to work, and so when we were doing practicum experiences, it was no problem for them doing practicum. The rest of us are working like 13, 14 hours a day to try to get it to work.

A different participant reported interactions with her graduate school admission process that she perceived could be SCMs. She noted different graduate school financial offices had various levels of clarity regarding financial expectations, tuition status, and funding. She chose the school that was the best fit for her, but she believed she was in financial jeopardy because of the institution's procedures. For her, the SCM was that she was expected to navigate a system (an institution) that assumed she had access to money. She recounted,

> I'm not sure if this is a microaggression or not…. With the program I did end up choosing, I couldn't even get an official notice from the graduate school saying I had been officially accepted…. There's been one financial issue after another with this institution. And I'm glad I came to this program, I think it's going to be the right fit for me, but I have, for example, over

the summer, I'm an out-of-state student and I took an online course and they were supposed to have done something to get in-state tuition, but somebody didn't tell somebody else to make it go through so I was getting charged like $10,000 for one class ... I couldn't front this money to pay for a course until they got everything settled. I have a lot of student loans because I was a first-generation college student and I needed to know financially, you know, what the situation was going to be, and it just took a really, really long time to get that information.

As the participant talked about the situation further, she stated,

I don't think it was intentional. But I think as an institution ... yeah, I guess maybe it could be [a microaggression], because I don't think it was intentional, but I think as an institution they need to be, and as a program, they need to be more sensitive about the finances of it all. Not everybody can just pick a program because it's the right fit for them. We need to know what our financial situation is going to be. So that, really for me, was something, at one point I ... this made me regret that I was in the program, and wished I'd chosen the other one.

I Feel So Confused

Many participants recounted confusion about their experiences of SCMs. Some had attribution confusion: They wondered if they were experiencing a microaggression related to their social class, gender, race, or some combination of the three. It was challenging for them to make sense of these experiences. Other participants explored how their other identities impacted how they understood SCMs.

One participant shared her experience of feeling confused. She felt confusion not only in whether a microaggression was occurring, but also about what part of her identity was being targeted, stating, "Did that just happen to me? And what kind of ism was that, that just happened to me? Was it classism, racism? We don't know what kind of ism that was; we just know that it happened."

For another participant, her social class status, in particular her income, made it challenging for her to acknowledge her White privilege. She was confused about how her race privilege related to her lived experience of being marginalized by social class. She experienced confusion related to her intersecting cultural identities (of being White and low income) and explained further,

I was definitely one of the people who White privilege was very hard for me to grasp at first because I grew up in [a large, urban city] so ... even though I was White, I grew up numerically as a minority but still having some of those White privileges. But also being low income. So that was really hard for me to understand at first.

I Have Learned How to Deal With SCMs

In addition to the harmful impact of SCMs, we noticed many participants demonstrated resilience and an ability to reframe. For instance, they described strategies they developed because of navigating microaggressive experiences. They reported strengthening resistance behaviors, coping skills, and an expanded capacity for empathy. Although the experiences were not enjoyable, many participants appeared to have grown as a result. One participant shared her approach:

I have a, I wouldn't call it a bad habit, but I have a habit of confrontation…. Confrontation doesn't scare me. So, it's sort of … it's sort of one of those things where, if, if there is an issue, I confront that issue, and so some people can deal with that and some people can't.

Another participant described her skill development with how to navigate social class systems that were new to her. She shared, "Over time I have learned to play the game. I know what to say. I know what not to say. I know when to say it. I know when to do things, when not to do them."

One other participant identified greater self-awareness as a result of her experiences of SCMs. Also, she will apply what she learned to her future as a counselor educator:

I have learned this past year and in the doc[toral] program that part of our job as faculty and as supervisors is to have an open dialogue with students and have them create an area of safety where they feel comfortable discussing these things, and that is a big part of being a teacher or a supervisor especially in what we do. So that gave a greater scope of awareness with that as well. I don't think that I would have had that if I had not had those experiences.

I Now Know What Needs to Change, and This Is What We Need to Do

We identified several recommendations and goals for counselor educators that were rooted in the participants' experiences. In general, participants encouraged strategies that are consistent with counselor competence and relationship development (e.g., being self-aware, checking assumptions). These ideas arose as a direct result of participants' experiences of SCMs and reflections on those experiences. One participant suggested that

they [SCMs] are every bit as valid, that they are every bit as impactful and … people need to try and be aware of them. Just as much as you do if it were race, or ethnicity, or gender, or sexual orientation.

A participant recommended,

I would encourage counselor educators to talk about social class microaggressions with their students, maybe in multicultural class but really across all of the classes that we teach so that the students can really begin to look for those things in their practicum and in their internships and even in their everyday lives…. As educators, bringing that up as a concern or as an issue for our students so that it begins to enter into their awareness.

Another participant reflected,

I would say it would be great to have a conversation in class, and I would let people define it [social class] for themselves like even if they aren't, they see themselves upper middle class or lower class, let people define it for themselves and let that play out, because I think that [social] class will become a big issue in therapy and therapeutic modalities as we have more people who need mental health treatment and that we need to be more inclusive—when we select how we are going to help people of different levels.

In the words of another participant,

Particularly for students who identify as minorities, or they experience some type of oppression and the professor is aware of it, they oftentimes want to become an ally very quickly. They want

to help you. They want to work with you…. And that's appreciated, but you have to make sure the person wants that from you. Just because you have the greatest hope for them, and you want to help them, doesn't mean they necessarily will bond with you to receive that help, and you have to be okay with that.

One participant summarized our findings with the following advice: "Know your students individually. Ask before you assume. Never jump to a conclusion. And never make a student feel like what you're saying is right and they're wrong when it comes to their personal life."

Discussion

In this study, we explored doctoral-level counseling students' encounters with SCMs. Our findings indicate that SCMs are consistent with what is known currently about microaggressions and that SCMs parallel other microaggressions (e.g., insensitive remarks) in form as well as in methods of transmission (e.g., institutional barriers; Liegghio & Caragata, **2016**; L. Smith et al., **2016**; Sue, **2010b**; Sue et al., **2007**). Additionally, we found similarities in how recipients felt as they persisted and attempted to make sense of SCMs (e.g., invalidated, confused). Furthermore, although SCMs do harm, they also have the potential to stimulate growth and resilience, or what Sue (**2010b**) called "strength through adversity" (p. 84). Many participants shared adaptive and creative responses to the repeated denigration, oppression, and *othering* they experienced.

Similar to examples of racism, sexism, and heterosexism, SCMs appear to exist on individual, cultural, and systemic levels (L. Smith & Redington, **2010**; L. Smith et al., **2016**; Sue, **2010b**). Participants shared instances of personal attacks and insults. Also, they relayed examples of cultural mismatches in expectations about what is *normal* and acceptable behavior. Additionally, they recounted interactions at the systemic and institutional levels whereby they experienced marginalization from the policies and expectations of their environments. In these ways, SCMs epitomize the adage of a "slow death by a thousand cuts" (Sue, **2010b**, p. 66). SCMs are relentless. Participants believed there was no escape, and the impact was devastating.

Often, participants felt as though they were in a no-win scenario, caught between the reality of their lives and the assumptions of others. This caused a great deal of discord, frustration, and disappointment. It is important to note that participants approached their situations by trying to fit in and comply with expectations. However, through their experiences of SCMs, they learned they did not fit in and could not always meet expectations, which spurred responses of isolation, guardedness, shame, and hopelessness (Constantine & Sue, **2007**; Liegghio & Caragata, **2016**; L. Smith et al., **2016**).

Applications of power and power dynamics were evident throughout the data. Often, participants received microaggressive messages from people in positions of power, whether from expected authority figures or members of dominant sociocultural groups (Sarcedo et al., **2015**; L. Smith et al., **2016**). Notably, the experiences did not overtly stem from open dialogue about social class. Instead, it appears participants perceived SCMs arising from indirect, subtle messages from people benefiting from a classist system (Cook & O'Hara, **2017**). Furthermore, according to participants' reports, the systems and people transmitting SCMs appeared to be largely unaware of the harm they were imposing. A hallmark of microaggressions is that they are most often outside the awareness of those in power who send the message to recipients they do not belong, are inferior, need to assimilate, or need to disappear (L. Smith, Li, Dykema, Hamlet, & Shellman, **2013**; L. Smith, Mao, Perkins, & Ampuero, **2011**; Sue, **2010b**). It

appears people engaging in SCMs are exhibiting cultural encapsulation about the harmful impact their unexamined expectations and lack of awareness have on recipients.

Implications for Counselor Education

It is important for the counseling profession to foster training environments and relationships that are growth promoting, validating, open, and safe. We recommend counselor educators and supervisors expand their awareness, knowledge, skills, and actions (Ratts et al., **2016**) regarding SCMs and incorporate competence-building activities into counselor preparation and continuing education. As we better understand SCMs, we can better prepare professional counselors to recognize, prevent, intervene, and recover when SCMs occur. Furthermore, we concur with recommendations to create safer environments for counselors and students to reflect on their beliefs, biases, and prejudices. This is particularly important for established professionals (i.e., not students) who may believe they could lose credibility or professional integrity if they were to admit they have unknowingly participated in oppressive or discriminatory behavior (Liegghio & Caragata, **2016**).

Although this is a valid concern, we believe there is strength in changing one's behaviors and uncovering ways to support others and to dismantle SCMs. For example, counselor educators who want to identify as support persons or advocates might consider broaching this topic with students to obtain permission to enter an advocacy role. A script might be,

> I think you might be experiencing marginalization related to social class or other dimensions of your identity. I know you are capable of handling yourself, and, at the same time, I'm wondering if I might advocate with you or on your behalf. If that would be helpful, please let me know how I might support you or connect you with resources.

However, this kind of intentional interchange can occur only if the educator has come to terms with previously held biases and is able to recognize that a student is experiencing SCMs.

We assert counselor educators and higher education administration officials must learn more about the needs, resources, and lived experiences of students of various social class backgrounds, particularly students who are first-generation college students, who are from low social class, and/or who have limited resources (Sarcedo et al., **2015**; L. Smith et al., **2016**). This might include surveys, focus groups, continuing education, or informal discussions where they broach topics related to SCMs and social class, including beliefs people hold about low social class groups (L. Smith et al., **2011**, **2013**, **2016**). Information about institutional deadlines, policies, and financial aid should be as simple and clear as possible to promote true access to higher education.

Furthermore, universities could provide mentoring and programmatic support for first-generation doctoral students that mirrors undergraduate programs, such as the Educational Opportunities Program, that rarely extend to graduate studies. In addition, congruent with our findings, it is important to include students' voices in crafting and implementing policies affecting them, including well-meaning support systems within programs. Students' feedback is imperative to providing effective support and interventions to meet their needs (L. Smith et al., **2016**). Counselor educators and supervisors could promote change at higher levels by presenting this information (with or on behalf of students) to clinical coordinators or university administrators.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations exist within this study. First, although our sample was national, most participants lived in the southern region of the United States. It is possible experiences of SCMs might have different meanings in different regions, and future research could examine experiences in other regions. Second, we selected participants who acknowledged the existence of SCMs and could articulate having experienced SCMs. Future researchers should consider how people who have not experienced SCMs understand the construct, including if they have witnessed SCMs and whether they may have participated in SCMs in the past. A third limitation includes the potential variations in interpretation among researchers. It is possible other researchers may have different interpretations; we encourage additional investigations. Finally, our participants included only one male participant and no participants who identified as transgender or gender expansive; we recommend interviewing people of diverse gender identities as gender may be a component of understanding the lived experiences of SCMs.

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