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A new praxis : exploring class-based microaggressions and the application of relational-cultural theory and liberation psychology in social work practice and research

Lynn Hutton

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ABSTRACT

This theoretical thesis was undertaken to explore and describe the field of

microaggression research, bring attention to the existence of class-based microaggressions, and

consider contemporary theoretical approaches to research and practice that could be applied to

the field of social work in the context of class-based oppression. Relational-cultural theory and

liberation psychology were examined for their relevance to social work's role in addressing class-

based microaggressions in practice and research. Literature was reviewed in areas related to

racial and ethnic microaggressions, gender microaggressions, sexual orientation

microaggressions, class-based microaggressions, and the theoretical frameworks of relational-

cultural theory and liberation psychology. Through exploring these topics and their relation to

social work's professional Code of Ethics, social workers are challenged to consider their

profession's role in helping people in need, addressing social problems, challenging social

injustice, and valuing the inherent dignity and worth of the person in their practice and research.

A NEW PRAXIS:

EXPLORING CLASS-BASED MICROAGGRESSIONS AND THE APPLICATION OF

RELATIONAL-CULTURAL THEORY AND LIBERATION PSYCHOLOGY IN

SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

A project based upon independent investigation, submitted in
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Lynn Hutton

Smith College School for Social Work
Northampton, Massachusetts 10163

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All of the work I have invested in earning this M.S.W. is dedicated to the loving memory of my dad, David E. Hutton. Thank you, Dad.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

In this theoretical thesis, I will conduct a literature review to explore the phenomenon of class-based microaggressions, a relatively new area of investigation in the field of psychology research and social work. Following an explication of general microaggressions and class-based microaggressions, I will propose the application of two theoretical frameworks - Relational-Cultural Theory and Liberation Psychology - to social work research and practice. Such theories, I will argue, have the potential to increase awareness of unintentional class-based discrimination in social work practice and empower both clients and social workers to work towards eradication of class-based oppression, be it on an individual or community level.

I will begin Chapter 2 by providing background information on the origin of the study of microaggressions, reviewing the empirical literature and addressing how and why microaggressions are understood as causing psychological harm. In Chapter 3, I will build on the discussion of general microaggressions by delving into the specific phenomenon of class-based microaggressions, providing examples of classism in everyday life and highlighting the relevance of class and class-based discrimination to the mental health field and social work practice. In Chapters 4 and 5, I will summarize the theoretical frameworks of Relational-Cultural Theory and Liberation Psychology. These two approaches are well-suited to address the harm of class-based microaggressions and merit further exploration for their potential to empower both clients and clinicians. Finally, I will conclude with a brief discussion about the relevance of increasing awareness of class-based microaggressions in social work practice and

incorporating the aforementioned theoretical frameworks, as they hold tremendous potential for empowering clients and social workers to address the marginalization of people based on their social class status. Class means different things to different people, so to say that one is exploring class-based microaggressions is not to propose the study of a universally accepted or agreed upon phenomenon. Class, as a word and a concept, is murky territory. This is precisely why it is so important to make the effort to engage in critical thinking about class and shed light on the many ways issues of class impact our lives and identities. The aim of this theoretical thesis is not to propose one universal understanding of definition of classism. Rather, my aim is to increase awareness of class as a significant dimension to one's identity and experience and expose how unexamined classist beliefs and language contribute to oppression and psychological harm.

I will begin by sharing a personal reflection from a recent experience in the field of clinical social work. My intention is two-fold. First, I would like to provide an example of a real-life clinical experience to illustrate my understanding of how unintentional class-based microaggressions can manifest in social work practice. Second, I would like to be transparent about the fact that I am a researcher with a particular subjective viewpoint. Sharing a personal clinical perspective is my attempt to counter the notion of value-neutral research and advise the reader of my orientation towards the material.

Reflections from the Field

To illustrate both the embedded and often invisible nature of class-based microaggressions, I would like to begin with a vignette from my graduate fieldwork. The setting is my first year field placement and I'm learning how to do an intake and assessment for a new client. The client comes into the agency for the first time, looking nervous and defiant at the

same time, like the new kid in school who doesn't want a room full of strangers to sense that he has any vulnerability. "Glad you made it!" the clinical supervisor says, "why don't you come in here and we'll get started." The three of us walk into the student intern office, a small room with two desks and a circular table by the door. We sit down at the table and the clinical supervisor introduces me, "this is one of our new interns and she'll be learning how to do intakes today, so she's going to be observing and helping me." The supervisor turns to me and, as if there was no one else in the room, says, "Now, what you're going to want to do is start by getting his contact information, birthday, social, Medicaid number…" etc. As the supervisor gives me instructions, the new client sits in the chair and looks out the window. The door is left open and other interns are wandering in and out of the office while phase one of the intake is underway. I wonder if he feels as uncomfortable as I do while the supervisor talks to me about the client as if he weren't there. It's only my second week of placement, so I'm nervous about doing anything that could be perceived as causing trouble. Even though my stomach is in knots, I don't say anything about closing the door or offering the client more privacy. The intake and training continue. The supervisor doesn't say anything explicitly offensive, but she continues to ask the client personal questions with no apparent regard for the total lack of privacy. Eventually, we finish this portion of the intake and the client is taken to one of the "rehabilitation" groups. Later, I ask the supervisor about the protocol for offering clients privacy during their intake. She says something along the lines of, "Oh, they're fine. They're so used to this...most of them have been in the system for a long time and they're totally unfazed by giving us their personal information. Don't worry about it."

It was true that most of the clients at this agency had been in "the system" of social services for quite sometime. Most of the clients had also been raised in urban poverty and were

subsisting on various types of public aid. They had been, or were, homeless and were trying to access "the system" for help. As far as I knew, none of these people had any financial resources at their disposal. It bothered me that we weren't making more of an effort to respect their privacy and individuality during intakes. While it was true that the new clients appeared nonchalant and "cooperative" during their intakes and no one requested that we close the door, I couldn't help but feel there was something deeply problematic and disrespectful about our approach. Given that social workers have an ethical responsibility to respect clients' rights to privacy and confidentiality, a principle that is written in to our professional Code of Ethics (NASW Code of Ethics, 2008, pp. 10-12), this didn't sit well with me. It gnawed at me for the entire year. I did what I could to create as much privacy as possible within the physical space limitations of the agency, but I could never guarantee a private space to conduct intakes and assessments. (Keep in mind that intake assessments usually include detailed questions about people's personal histories, a point to which I will return.) The agency in this example served people who were on Medicaid and/or Medicare, Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), or public assistance. In other words, all of our clients were living in poverty. In general, the agency served its clients with the warmth and compassion and staff did the best they could with the resources they had. That said, I felt that "the system" - not necessarily the individual actors working within the system - was not adhering to the mandate to respect privacy and confidentiality of clients. I would like to stress again that I don't believe any one individual working at this particular agency had classist or racist intentions, which is ultimately one of the main points of this literature review. The system in which social workers practice is part of an even larger societal context with inherently classist, racist, and sexist tendencies (among others). Had the individuals coming into the agency owned more financial resources and more social

currency, they probably would not have been required to go through an intake, nor asked to share their personal information in a public setting. I don't believe they would have been treated as if they were simply unaffected by the lack of privacy and respect for their individual experience. With more resources and access to power, clients have a choice in where they seek services and, therefore, are not expected to comply with a system that doesn't respect their unique and individual experience. Again, there were no intentionally classist or racist staff members acting out their conscious biases in this situation. In fact, the majority of staff people came from poor and working-class backgrounds and there was a fair amount of racial and ethnic diversity amongst the staff. This is what is so insidious about working in a larger context in which laws are made and cultures are created that reinforce class biases - acts of class-based discrimination are often subtle, under the radar, and invisible, especially in the "helping" professions, where some of us may assume that we don't hold implicit or explicit biases based on class. In graduate school, we talk about the socioeconomic status of our clients, we acknowledge the role of poverty in creating difficulties for our clients, and we even name the oppressive sociocultural systems in place. Rarely, though, do we engage in a deep exploration of what class is, how it affects our lives and our clients' lives, and how we can address and dismantle classism in our profession. As a result, the deleterious effects of class-based bias remain invisible and part of the status quo. The purpose of this thesis is to explore and describe the phenomenon of class-based microaggressions and provide two theoretical approaches that could readily be applied to addressing classist microaggressions in practice and in research. Both theoretical frameworks are embedded with a social justice mandate.

I would like to continue with the fieldwork example of intakes and assessments in a community mental health or public clinic setting, as I believe that these interventions, in and of

themselves, could be experienced as a form of microaggression. (I will define the concept of microaggressions in the following chapter.) Imagine that you have ended up at a county mental health clinic or a small community mental health agency. Perhaps you have been experiencing symptoms that have alarmed you or your loved ones and you are seeking help. You don't have health insurance and you can't afford to pay for private mental health services. Most likely, during your first in-person visit to the clinic you will go through the administrative process of an intake. During this intake, the mental health worker - possibly a clinical social work graduate student - will ask you for some basic information: name, birth date, address, social security number (if you have one), address, emergency contact, etc. Once this demographic information is collected, your worker will probably advise you that she or he will need to ask you some personal questions in order to complete an assessment. The assessment is to determine how well you are functioning, what services you might benefit from, etc. Depending on the worker assigned to you, you may or may not be advised that you don't need to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable. The assessment portion of intake begins and includes questions like: "Have you ever been hospitalized for psychiatric reasons? Have you ever had any legal problems? If so, please describe. How often do you drink alcohol or use drugs? If so, which ones and how much? What is your sexual orientation? If gay, how old were you when you came out? When was your first sexual experience? Was it consensual? Have you ever been the victim of physical or sexual abuse? If so, please describe. Are you in a relationship?" etc. The questions asked on an initial assessment will vary from agency to agency, but in my experience, they tend to include questions like those listed above, among many others. For some people, answering such questions is not problematic in any way. In fact, it may even be liberating, as they are relieved to finally have the opportunity to speak with a caring professional about their

experience. I would argue, however, that including such questions as a routine part of an intake at a community mental health clinic, where the majority of clients are poor to low-income, initial assessments have the potential to enact microaggressive interventions. Poor and low-income clients are asked to reveal an enormous amount of highly sensitive detail about their personal experience on their first or second day of meeting the intake worker, in which there may not yet be a sense of trust. In order to receive treatment, they must comply with the intake and assessment process (though, they have the option of not answering questions of their choosing, but rarely exercised this option in the intakes I conducted). Conversely, clients who can afford to pay for a private mental health practitioner are generally not required to go through any manualized intake assessment procedure. During the first appointment, the majority of mental health practitioners will most likely ask something along the lines of, "So, what brings you here today?" Then, over the course of treatment, the client will control how and when to share personal information. These examples are intended to show how socially embedded class-based bias has the potential to impact the people we serve and how subtle, often invisible, forms of unequal treatment play out. It is generally not the intention of a community mental health worker to cause harm or distress to their new clients. The worker is part of a larger system, however, where unintentional discrimination happens on a daily basis. In the next chapter, I will begin to address the phenomenon of class-based microaggressions through an exploration of the empirical literature available in the field of microaggression research. Chapter 2 will focus on the historical foundation of microaggression research and summarize many of the themes that emerged from the study of racial, gender, and sexual orientation microaggressions.

CHAPTER II

Microaggressions

In this chapter, I will rely primarily on a review of the empirical literature related to microaggressions as I explore the origin of this relatively new field of study and describe the phenomenon of microaggressions in detail. The term "microaggression" originated in a 1978 study by the Harvard psychiatrist Chester Pierce, along with fellow researchers Jean V. Carew, Diane Pierce-Gonzalez and Deborah Wills. The study was called, "An Experiment in Racism: TV Commercials" and was published in the journal *Television and Education*. The aim of the study was to teach media literacy through helping people discern hidden messages being communicated through media and empowering them to be active and conscientious consumers rather than passive receivers of biased, commercial information. Through this study, the researchers constructed a methodology that they hoped could be applied to other types of interpersonal interactions in addition to racism, such as sexism or childism. According to the 1978 study's authors, it was an earlier study of childism (Pierce and Allen, 1975) that led to the "experiment in racism" study. The emerging field of microaggression research and can be seen in Pierce and Allen's (1975) definition of "childism" as "the automatic presumption of superiority of any adult over any child" (Pierce & Allen, 1975, p. 267). Regarding the impact of such an automatic presumption of superiority, the authors asserted that this behavior could often results in serious and protracted psychologic, such as low self-esteem, peer conflicts, and craving for attention and, further, that physiologic stress that frequently carries over into the child's adult life (Pierce and Allen, 1975, p. 268). Contemporary microaggression research is based on this

foundational understanding that an automatic presumption of superiority over others leads to prolonged mental and physiological stress.

Microaggressions are currently defined by Sue (2010) as "the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership" (p. 3). Often, "these hidden messages may invalidate the group identity or experiential reality of target persons, demean them on a personal or group level, communicate they are lesser human beings, suggest they do not belong with the majority group, threaten and intimidate, or relegate them to inferior status and treatment" (Sue, 2010, p. 3). Microaggressions are everyday occurrences that may appear trivial or harmless at first glance, but cumulatively, carry significant power. The most widely cited scholar in contemporary microaggression research is Derald Wing Sue, a professor of psychology and education in the Department of Counseling and Clinical Psychology at Teachers College and with the School of Social Work at Columbia University. A review of the microaggression research literature conducted in 2010 revealed that there have been 20 published papers in recent literature specifically on microaggressions. Of these publications, 10 are nonempirical or theoretical. Of the remaining 10 empirical studies the majority were qualitative in their approach, with the dominant methodologies being consensual qualitative research (CQR) and interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), which will be described in greater detail later on. What is important to note here is that these qualitative measures allow for detailed exploration and description of the phenomenon, rather than attempting to provide an "answer" or explanation. This model of research privileges the complex over the reductionist, thereby fostering an appreciation for the complexity of the human experience. This literature review will draw

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heavily on the findings of Sue and his colleagues, as they are currently the leaders in the field of microaggression research.

In *Microaggressions and Marginality* (2010), Sue revisits and expands on the themes raised in his earlier 2007 work, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*, and states that "the most detrimental forms of microaggressions are usually delivered by well-intentioned individuals who are unaware that they have engaged in harmful conduct toward a socially devalued group" (Sue, 2010, p. 3). The power of these "small slights" lies in their ability to operate under the radar of consciousness or intention, mask themselves in the disguise of a compliment and/or to leave the target of the microaggression questioning their subjective perception of reality. Sue (2010) restates his earlier categorization of the three types of microaggression: 1) microassault, 2) microinsult, and 3) microinvalidation (Sue, 2010, p. 7). *Microassaults* are conscious biased beliefs or attitudes that are held by individuals and intentionally expressed or acted out overtly or covertly toward a marginalized person or socially devalued group. This category most closely resembles what Sue (2010) defines as "old-fashioned racism, sexism, or heterosexism" (p. 9), whereby people feel comfortable blatantly expressing their biased beliefs. *Microinsults* differ from microassaults in that they are "likely to occur outside the level of conscious awareness of the perpetrator" (Sue, 2010, p. 9). Microinsults are either interpersonal interactions (verbal/nonverbal) or environmental cues that communicate rudeness, insensitivity, slights, and insults that demean a person's racial, gender, sexual orientation, group identity and heritage, or other group membership (Sue, 2010, p.9). *Microinvalidations* "are similar to microinsults in that they generally occur outside the level of conscious awareness of perpetrators" (Sue, 2010, p. 10). This form of microaggression, however, is perhaps the most insidious, damaging, and harmful form, because microinvalidations

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directly attack or deny the experiential realities of socially devalued groups" (Sue, 2010, p. 10). Socially dominant groups hold the power to define reality, as their norms tend to dictate the expectations and standards for all people living in a particular society. As a result, the day-to-day experiences of reality for people who are marginalized in a society fall outside of the "norm." Thus, their subjective reality is invalidated and the subjective reality of the dominant group is institutionalized as "objective reality." To illustrate the nature of microaggressions, I have included the following examples:

- A White man or woman clutches her purse or checks his wallet as a Black or Latino man approaches or passes them. (Hidden message: You and your group are criminals);

- An Asian American, born and raised in the United States, is complimented for speaking "good English." (Hidden message: You are not a true American. You are a perpetual foreigner in your own country);

- An assertive female manager is labeled as a "bitch," while her male counterpart is described as "a forceful leader." (Hidden message: Women should be passive and allow men to be the decision makers);

- A female physician wearing a stethoscope is mistaken for a nurse. (Hidden message: Women are less capable than men);

- Students use the term "gay" to describe a fellow student who is socially ostracized. (Hidden message: People who are weird, strange, deviant, or different are "gay") (Sue, 2010, p. 4).

In the field of microaggression research, the categories of racial, gender, and sexual orientation microaggressions have been the most widely studied to date, with racial microaggressions making up the bulk of that research, followed by gender and sexual orientation, respectively. Microaggressions, however, can be enacted upon any group that is marginalized in a society. They may, for example, be based on gender identity, religion, (dis)ability, social class, immigration status, indigenous heritage, etc. What is so salient about the phenomenon of microaggressions is how inextricably linked it is to oppression, social injustice, and psychological distress, and how incompatible it is with the professional values of social work, specifically the ethical principles of challenging social injustice and respecting the dignity and worth of the person (NASW Code of Ethics, 2008, p. 5).

Racial & Ethnic Microaggressions

The bulk of microaggression research is focused on racial and ethnic manifestations of microaggressions. Such research has primarily studied the phenomenon in academic and counseling settings, though there are some studies focused, for example, on the "Black American experience" or the "Asian American experience" that have been extrapolated upon and applied to more specific situations. The following study exemplifies the major themes found in the existing research exploring the experience of students of color. While this study explores the experience of Black undergraduate students, similar themes emerge in the studies of Latina/o students and Asian American students.

Watkins, LaBarrie, and Appio (2010) used consensual qualitative research (CQR) as a methodology to explore the experiences of Black undergraduates and their perceptions of the impact of racial microaggressions in their lives. Ten self-identified Black undergraduate students from a predominately White northeastern university participated in semi-structured

interviews about their experience. Ten domains, or themes, emerged from the analysis. I've summarized the themes below, as they help trace the progression and accumulation of racially based tensions and negative experiences in academic settings. Further, the research supports the stance that much of the harm from microaggressions stems from its cumulative effects on target populations over time (Sue, 2010).

Participants reported having High-School related experiences in which they described feeling racially stereotyped and/or experienced racial tension with peers, teachers, and guidance counselors in high school. Upon entering the university setting, participants described the demographic climates of their universities, which included students, faculty, and administrators, as predominately White. The racial stratification of jobs on campus was also noted by participants, who indicated that Black and Latino/a staff were often employed in lower-status positions in comparison to White counterparts. Participants also noted that they typically felt disappointed that their college climate was unwelcoming and did not embrace racial diversity (Watkins et al., 2010, pp. 32-33). With regard to the participants' perceptions of and reactions to racial microaggressions, participants generally described being racially stereotyped and having encountered racism. All participants reported experience on campus with stereotypes, for example, that Black people are (1) ignorant or unintelligent; (2) loud, tactless, low class, or "ghetto"; and (3) angry, violent, or criminal. Participants typically felt that White people did not understand racism or the race-related experience of people of color because their experiences in society are very different. Participants typically described experiences with subtle racism or racial microaggressions as having a subjective quality, making them difficult to identify and prove, because this form of racism can be unintentional in comparison to more blatant forms of racism (Watkins et al., 2010, pp. 33-35). This is a critical point with regard to the study and

experience of microaggressions. Research on aversive racism, a contemporary form of bias "that hides in the assumptions/beliefs/values of well-intentioned people" and "is difficult to identify in its motivational manifestations" (Sue, 2010, pp. 13-14), creates a barrier to identifying racism and, therefore, showing the "harm perpetrated against socially devalued groups in our society" (Sue, 2010, p. 14). As such, targets of aversive racism or invisible microaggressions may expend a great deal of psychic energy trying to process interactions in which the perpetrators motivations for a microaggressive comment or action were unclear (Sue, 2010). Watkins et al.'s (2010) study also revealed that participants experienced subtle racism, racial tension, and/or discomfort with faculty and students in the classroom, as well as with administrators and staff. A number of participants reported being confused by experiences with administrators and/or staff in which they perceived subtle racism. Notably, participants often felt that working with administrators and staff who are either people of color of have experience working with students of color was beneficial. Amongst peers, a number of participants maintained friendships with mostly other students of color. These participants hypothesized that the makeup of these friendship groups was either a product of similar life experiences or was typically due to involvement in race-based and/or class-based academic support programs. Other participants typically maintained a diverse, interracial group of college friends. The intersections of race, gender, and social class also emerged in Watkins et al.'s (2010) study. Participants typically expressed that Black males are frequently seen as academically inferior and/or physically threatening. A variant number of female participants reported being perceived to be oversexualized and/or portrayed as having an attitude. Participants' experiences related to social class background or financial issues indicated students of color experienced a lack of financial support and face challenges in affording college and, further, encountered ignorance from White people about the difficulties and barriers people

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of color ace in paying for college, or they are assumed to be working class. Participants typically reported having to balance multiple physical responsibilities, e.g., school, work, campus positions, etc., or having to take on tasks without support (Watkins et al., 2010, pp. 37-39).

Watkins et al.'s (2010) study also asked about factors that promote resilience. Participants revealed several factors that helped them cope with the negative psychological impact of microaggressions, including family, friends, religious faith, academic support programs, the multicultural center, involvement in clubs, academic leadership positions and journal writing. Participants typically expressed being inspired by those who work toward change and influence others, including peers, influential alumni, celebrities, and the university's mission. Results were similar to those found by Hernández, Carranza, & Almeida (2010), in which they reported on active coping strategies that reduced stress and promoted resilience in mental health professionals who had been targets of racial microaggressions. Both studies revealed the importance of engaging in an active coping skills, e.g., journal writing, organizing, seeking support from friends, that help targets deal with "the perniciousness of subtle racism" (Hernández et al., 2010, p. 207). This study (Watkins et al., 2010) confirmed that Black college students are experiencing racial microaggressions on campus, with White peers, faculty members, administrators, and campus staff being primary perpetrators of subtle racism.

Racial microaggression research in mental health counseling settings has explored cross racial supervisor-supervisee dyads (Constantine & Sue, 2007), microaggressions against Black psychologists (Constantine, Smith, Redington, & Owens, 2008), mental health professionals' adaptive response to microaggressions (Hernández et al., 2010), racial microaggressions against African American clients in cross-racial counseling relationships (Constantine, 2007), microaggressions against Black Americans and implications for counseling (Sue et al., 2008),

microaggressions by supervisors of color (Murphy-Shigematsu, 2010). The themes that emerged from each study are summarized here.

Constantine et al. (2008) studied the phenomenon of microaggressions against Black psychologists. Their results revealed that Black psychologists reported alternating feelings of invisibility/marginalization and/or hypervisibility; having their qualifications or credentials questioned or challenged by other faculty colleagues, staff members, or students; receiving inadequate mentoring in the workplace; being expected to serve in service-oriented roles with low-perceived value by administrators or other faculty colleagues; experiencing difficulties determining whether subtle discrimination was race or gender based, feeling self-consciousness regarding their choice of clothing, hairstyle or manner of speech; and coming up with coping strategies to address racial microaggressions in their work environment (Constantine et al., 2008, pp. 348-355).

Constantine and Sue (2007) researched cross-racial supervisor-supervisee dyads, in which supervisee participants reported the following themes with regard to their experiences with supervisors. Participants felt there were invalidating racial-cultural issues; their supervisors made stereotypic assumptions about black clients; their supervisors made stereotypic assumptions about black supervisees; supervisors were reluctant to give performance feedback for fear of being viewed as racist; they focused primarily on clinical weaknesses, blamed clients of color for problems stemming from oppression; and, finally, offered culturally insensitive treatment recommendations (Constantine & Sue, 2007, pp. 142-153).

In Sue et al.'s (2008) study of racial microaggressions against Black Americans and the resulting implications for counseling, Black American participants reported that others made assumptions of their intellectual inferiority; they felt treated like a "second-class citizen," they

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experienced assumptions of criminality, assumptions of inferior status; an assumed universality

of the Black American experience; and an assumed superiority of White cultural values and

communication styles (Sue et al., 2008, pp. 330-338).

Constantine (2007) looked at racial microaggressions against African-American clients in

cross-racial counseling relationships, which is a common scenario in mental health clinic settings

where a predominant number of professional are white. Participants reported experiencing their

cross-racial counselors as overidentifying with the African-American clients experience; denying

personal or individual racism; assigning unique/special status on the basis of race or ethnicity;

making stereotypic assumptions about members of a racial or ethnic group; accusing African-

American clients of hypersensitivity regarding racial or cultural issues; espousing the

meritocracy myth; providing culturally insensitive treatment considerations or recommendations;

accepting of less than optimal behaviors on the basis of racial-cultural group membership;

idealization of African-American clients; and dysfunctional helping/patronization (Constantine,

2007, pp. 1-16).

Finally, in Murphy-Shigematsu's (2010) study of microaggressions by supervisors of

color against supervisees of color, supervisees of color reported hearing the following from their

supervisors of color: "But you look white!" and "You know what it's like to be on welfare."

Supervisees of color reported that they had the following response to their supervisors: "I'm

White, but I'm not American" and "You're not seeing me!" (Murphy-Shigematsu, 2010, pp. 16-

18).

In all of the above studies, participants reported multiple negative assumptions being

made about their identities and experience based solely on their racial group membership. A

tangible current of invalidation and dismissal of individual experience ran through the majority

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of themes, giving voice to the disempowering and insidious nature of microaggressions. As stated by Constantine et al. (2008), microaggressions are like "death by a thousand cuts" (p. 86).

Hernández et al. (2010) researched how mental health professionals cope with experiencing racial microaggressions. In their study of mental health professionals from diverse ethnic backgrounds, results demonstrated that actively engaging with coping strategies promoted resilience. Participants reported that they follow their own individual processes of identifying thoughts, feelings and responses to perceived microaggressions; engage in self-care; draw on their spirituality; confront microaggresions; seek and receive support; document microaggressions; seek mentoring; and participate in collective organizing (Hernández et al., 2010). Actively engaging in some type of coping strategy in response to an environment in which microaggressions are commonplace appears to be a key factor in how mental health professionals and others protect themselves from the negative impact of racial microaggressions, as participants in more than one study (e.g., Watkins et al., 2010) reported on factors that promote resilience or help with coping. As the field of microaggression research moves forward, it will be important for social workers to have an understanding of protective factors and coping skills that can be employed in the service of reducing the harm inflicted by microaggressions as well as eliminating microaggressions altogether. In the earlier example of Black undergraduates' experiences with microaggressions (Watkins et al., 2010), maintaining a focus on future success has been shown to encourage optimism and resilience in Black people as they confront racism (Utsey, Hook, Fischer, & Belvet, 2008, pp. 208). In addition, participants who felt supported, encouraged and inspired by influential alumni, celebrities, and fellow peers felt optimistic and inspired to work towards future change, which, in turn, promotes resilience (Watkins et al., 2010, p. 45).

Other Socially Devalued Group Microaggressions

The literature also reveals microaggressive behaviors perpetrated against other socially devalued groups, for example, American Indians (Clark, Spanierman, Reed, Soble, & Cabana, 2011), Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Queer clients (Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2011), and women (Nadal, 2011). Microaggressions against other socially devalued groups will be explored only briefly here, as the concept of microaggressions and how they are unintentionally perpetrated has been thoroughly illustrated in the above subsection on racial and ethnic microaggressions. Because I will be building my Chapter 3 investigation of class-based microaggressions on the foundation of previous microaggression research, however, it is worthwhile to spend some time reviewing the literature on microaggressions perpetrated on other socially devalued groups. Second to race and ethnicity, gender-based microaggressions appear to be the most explored (though, scholarly research studies are scarce). Nadal (2011) addresses gender-based microaggressions, as do Capodilupo et al. (2010), and Sue (2010). Research on gender-based microaggressions appears to be emerging primarily from the core group of researchers (referenced above) who are working out of Teachers College, Columbia University. While overt sexism may no longer be legally sanctioned in the U.S., acts of gender discrimination remain culturally embedded. Acts of subtle and covert sexism tend to remain hidden or unnoticed because they are built into cultural and societal norms (Swim & Cohen, 1997). Few studies have investigated the dynamics of subtle sexism, but the literature that does exist suggests that subtle sexism invalidates women, dismisses their contributions and accomplishments, and limits their effectiveness in social and professional settings (Benokraitis, 1997; Nielson, 2002; Watkins et al., 2010). In Swim and Cohen's (2001) study of subtle sexism and its consequences on men and women, evidence emerged that subtle sexism is experienced

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regularly by women and that it can lead to a myriad of psychological stressors for women including a decrease in comfort and self-esteem and feelings of anger and depression. In order to understand gender microaggressions, researchers Capodilupo et al. (2010) examined the literature on various forms of sexism and explored how gender microaggressions could be different from other manifestations of sexism. One way is that gender microaggressions can be categorized as gender microassaults, gender microinsults, and gender microinvalidations (Nadal, 2010). As mentioned earlier, microassaults are described in the literature as resembling "old-fashioned" sexism, i.e., blatant and overt sexist behavior (Capodilupo et al., 2010, p. 195). Microinsults are described as "behaviors and statements that are often unintentional and convey negative messages about women" and microinvalidations "deny the experiential reality of people based on their membership in a particular gender group" (Sue, 2010, p. 195). Capodilupo et al. (2010) conducted focus groups in order to document women's experiences with gender-based microaggressions and create a corresponding taxonomy of gender-based microaggressions. Focus group participants reported experiencing sexual objectification, being treated like second-class citizens, assumptions of inferiority, denial of the reality of sexism, assumptions of traditional gender roles, use of sexist language, denial of individual sexism, and environmental microaggressions. Participants in the above research overwhelmingly reported incidents and perceived messages that represented sexual objectification and assumption of traditional gender roles (Capodilupo et al., 2010). As with racial microaggressions, gender-based microaggressions ascribe stereotypical characteristics based on dominant cultural norms to individuals who are members of a certain group, regardless of the accuracy of such traits or an individual's experience outside of the "norm." Further, like racial microaggressions, the reality that many people experience as true is denied and redefined by the culture at large. The same phenomenon

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is also being played out with regard to microaggressions against LGBTQ individuals (Shelton &

Delgado-Romero, 2011).

To date, there is a scarcity of literature studying the manifestations of microaggressions

on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals. Shelton and Delgado-Romero (2011)

studied the experience of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer clients in psychotherapy and their

findings support the existence of sexual orientation microaggressions within the therapeutic

environment. Participants reported that their therapists tended to focus on their sexual

orientation as the problem bringing them to therapy, overidentify with LGBQ clients, make

stereotypical assumptions, warn of the dangers of identifying as LGBQ, express heteronormative

bias, and/or avoid and minimize the client's sexual orientation (Shelton & Delgado-Romero,

2011, p. 215). Nadal et al.'s (2010) acknowledged the lack of scholarly literature about the

LGBTQ experience with microaggressions and extrapolated on previous studies in order to

provide a conceptualization of sexual orientation and transgender microaggressions. Nadal et al.

(2010) propose the following taxonomy of LGBT microaggressions as a starting place for

understanding the potential impact of microaggressions on these groups and individuals and

laying a foundation for future research: (1) Use of Heterosexist Terminology; (2) Endorsement

of Heteronormative Culture/Behaviors; (3) Assumptions of Universal LGBT Experience; (4),

Exoticization; (5) Discomfort/Disapproval of LGBT Experience; (7) Assumption of Sexual

Pathology/Abnormality; (8) Denial of Individual Heterosexism; and (9) Environmental

Microaggressions (Nadal et al., 2010, pp. 227-229).

In all of the aforementioned examples of microaggressions, there is an invalidation of

individuals' lived reality that takes place. While explicit discrimination is easy to identify and,

therefore, "easier" to work against, subtle invalidations and discrimination are more difficult to

identify and are likely to cause targets to feel isolated and disoriented. Thus far, this literature

review has focused on microaggressions based on race, gender, and LGBTQ identity. In the next

chapter, the dynamics of class and class-based microaggressions will be explored.

CHAPTER III

Class-Based Microaggressions

While there is a substantial body of historical literature dedicated to exploring socioeconomic class, locating research that specifically address the phenomenon of class-based microaggressions proved to be difficult. Works about classism and human welfare are available (Bullock, 1995; Bullock & Lott, 2006; Collins & Yeskel, 2005; Strier, 2008), but studies dedicated to class-based microaggressions were elusive. To my knowledge, the primary scholar writing about class-based microaggressions is Laura Smith at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her work will be referenced shortly.

My perspective on class, which is informed by growing up as White in the United States in a family of modest means, is that class location intersects with every aspect of one's identity in some way or another. Further, given the hyper-capitalist culture of the United States, class (like race) is often used as a measure of a person's value and worth. In my experience, "What do you do for a living?" is one of the first questions Americans (from the United States) ask each other. Given that one's social class has far-reaching consequences in how that person will experience life, it is of critical importance that social workers consider how classist beliefs, language, and practices impact the populations with whom we work as well as the work itself. Strier (2008) states, "without cultural competence, skills and awareness of the presence of biases in professional practices, social work could remain ethnocentric and part of the clients' oppression system" (p. 237). Even Jane Addams, Hull House founder and early social worker, acknowledged that "the role of social work and the key to social justice should be found in inter-

class cooperation" (Strier, 2008, p. 238). Considering the field of social work's emphasis on increasing self-awareness and integrating cultural considerations into practice, it stands to reason that social workers should be concerned with the class-based realities of our clients and closely examining our own relationship to class, always with an eye towards uncovering possible unconscious biases. To not examine the phenomenon of class-based microaggressions and implicit class-based bias will only increase the likelihood of unwittingly participating in microaggressive acts or judgments towards those we are committed to serving.

As referenced above, one of the scholars leading the movement to examine classism and class-based microaggressions in the mental health helping professions is Laura Smith of Teachers College, Columbia University. In Smith (2010), relevant research on classism is synthesized, examples of everyday classism are provided and the author proposes that mental health professionals must conscientiously bring class considerations alongside other cultural considerations, such as race and gender. Rather than being strictly about money, class encompasses identity, education, language, social location, etc. (Smith, 2010). When people think of class, a number of ideas come to mind - wealth, or lack thereof, status, prestige, or lack thereof, newspapers with photos of wealthy people dressed up for social events, lords and ladies of English nobility, the caste stratifications of traditional Indian culture, or words like *classy*, *trashy,* and *low-rent* (Smith, 2010, p.5*)*. The idea of class conjures up a mix of language, images, beliefs and standards by which people navigate the world. Smith (2010) proposes a social justice understanding of social class, "... that accounts for the ways in which social class is not just a question of different lifestyles or even just a function of money, it is also a question of structural power, privilege, and disadvantage" (p.5). With regard to class, every person's individual story plays out within a broader sociocultural context in which privilege and

disadvantage are not distributed equitably. Social work's professional ethic that "change efforts are focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice" (NASW Code of Ethics, 2008, p. 5) places social work on the side of advocating for those who are oppressed by classism. Simultaneously, social work's professional ethic to "respect the dignity and worth of the person" (NASW Code of Ethics, 2008, p. 5) means that social workers are uniquely suited to consider the psychological impact of classism on individuals and communities. Social work professionals are required, by trade, to look at the full context of a person's life when assessing how best to provide services that won't be complicit in maintaining an oppressive status quo. One way of understanding social class is as a dimension of socially constructed identity and oppression on the order of race, gender, sexual orientation, and (dis)ability, with the corresponding system of class-based bias and discrimination labeled as classism (Smith, 2010, p.7). Bullock and Lott (1995) define classism as "the oppression of the poor through a network of everyday practices, attitudes, assumptions, behaviors, and institutional rules" (p. 119). "Because cultural narratives shape our ability (or inability) to see the existence of social class, the examples of classism all around us often manage to evade notice" (Smith, 2010, p. 31). Smith (2010) organizes examples of classism in categories such as "cultural invisibility," or "educational inequity," and also creates a category for "class-based microaggressions" as one form of classism. I would argue that microaggressions are the manifestation of all types of classism and that the terms classism and class-based microaggression can often be used interchangeably. In other words, the actions and beliefs that are informed by classist attitudes and that Smith (2010) labels classism could be labeled microaggressions as well, due to the hostile, derogatory, or negative messages they convey to target persons or populations. I interpret Smith's (2010) taxonomy of classism to also be a

taxonomy of class-based microaggressions and will present it as such. This taxonomy includes: cultural invisibility, negative attitudes and beliefs toward the poor, educational inequities, health care inequities, disparities in the judicial system, and environmental injustice (Smith, 2010, p. 31).

Cultural Invisibility

Harvard professor of sociology Lee Rainwater wrote in 1970 that the predominant way of seeing the poor is to not see them as part of society at all: "The central existential fact of life for the lower class...is that their members are not included in the collectivity that makes up the 'real' society of the 'real' people" (p. 10). Lott (2002) came to the same conclusion when stated that "the dominant response to the poor by the nonpoor is that of distancing…in the form of exclusion, separation, devaluing, and discounting" (p. 108). About growing up in poverty, the writer Dorothy Allison (1994) observed, "My family's life was not on television, not in books, not even in comic books" (p. 17). A more current example, and according to Smith (2010), perhaps

> one of the best examples of the taken-for-granted invisibility of the poor people in the mainstream U.S. cultural experience [was] the widespread astonishment at the depth of American poverty revealed in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, which struck the Gulf Coast in 2005. (p.32)

> After seeing who escaped the flood and who remained behind, it's impossible to ignore the shocking breadth of the gap between rich and poor. It's as if we don't even see poor people in this country anymore. (Robinson, 2005, para. 3)

Negative Attitudes and Beliefs Toward the Poor

Ehrenreich, (2001), writes about the year she spent working minimum-wage jobs to see if she could support herself (she couldn't). Ehrenreich (2001) describes the contemptuous attitudes towards poor and working-class people. About wearing her maids uniform in public, she writes, "I used to stop [at the supermarket] on my way home, but I couldn't take the stares, which were easily translatable into: what are *you* doing here?" (Ehrenreich, 2001, p. 100). Smith (2010) also provides a glimpse into the social psychological literature in which Ehrenreich's experience is supported. Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, and Tagler (2001) found that "stereotypes about the poor were found to be significantly more negative than stereotypes about the middle class" (p. 225). Participants "endorsed traits such as *lazy, stupid, dirty,* and *immoral* more often for poor people than for middle-class people" (Cozzarelli et al., 2001, p. 215). Hoyt (1999) found that the most frequently referenced stereotypes for poor people were *uneducated, lazy, dirty, drug/alcohol user,* and *criminal* (pp. 189-210). Bullock, Wyche, and Williams (2001), analyzed media representations of poor people and found that when the poor do appear in mainstream media, it is often via daytime reality shows such as *Jerry Springer* or police live action programs where they are presented to viewers negatively as dysfunctional, unruly, promiscuous, and/or drug users. Smith (2010) conducted a survey in which participants' responses showed they were more likely to assign certain types of crimes with specific class categories. For example, when asked who would commit the infraction of embezzling money from the company that one owns, the criminal would most likely have to be wealthy to begin with, and such actions were associated with the wealthy. Only poor people, however, were considered most likely to commit infractions that could be committed by people at any class position, such as painting graffiti in public places (Smith, 2010, p. 33).

Educational Inequities

Kozol (2005) documents unequal access to educational opportunities, showing that students in poor communities attend schools that have fewer computers, fewer library books, fewer classes, fewer extracurricular activities, and fewer teachers than students in more affluent neighborhoods (Chapter 2). In Fine, Burns, Payne, and Torre's (2004) study with poor and working-class youth in California, the young people who participated in focus groups attest to the messages communicated to them about their worth through the decaying buildings and inadequate resources:

> It makes you feel less about yourself, you know, like you sitting here in a class where you have to stand up because there's not enough chairs and you see rats in the buildings...So in all honesty, it really makes me feel bad about myself. Obviously, you probably can't understand where I'm coming from, but it really do. And I'm not the only person who feels that. It really make you feel like you really less than. And I already feel that way because I stay in a group home because of poverty. (p. 2199)

Health Care Inequities, Disparities in the Judicial System, & Environmental Injustice

The annual United Nations Human Development Report in 2005 reported that "among poor people and people of color...health indicators are worse in the United States than in some developing countries" (Smith, 2010, p 36). In a series of articles on class by the New York Times (that was later made into a book), it was reported that class is associated with everything from risk factors for chronic illnesses to quality of care, access to care, availability of social and financial support during illnesses, relationships with doctors, and overall stress level (Scott, 2005).

Regarding classist disparities in the judicial system, Smith (2010) begins by offering one simple word: bail. "Mentioned casually in television reports and newspaper headlines, this overt form of discrimination operates blatantly as the poor remain in prison cells while wealthier people accused of the same crimes go home" (Smith, 2010, p.37). Further, Smith (2010) reports, despite claims by the U.S. that it's a leader in human rights, America spends considerably less than other developed countries on legal assistance for poor and working-class citizens, allocating only about a sixteenth of what Great Britain budgets for civil legal assistance, a sixth of what New Zealand provides, and a third of what some Canadian provinces guarantee (p.37). American University philosophy professor Jeffrey Reiman (2007) has posited that the criminal justice system itself is classist at the deepest levels of its operations. Reiman's (2007) perspective is that the criminal justice system keeps the threat of crimes within public awareness, for example by focusing on rising and falling crime rates, characterizing crime as misdeeds of the poor, and distracting public awareness or sustained interest away from the actions of class elites via corporate fraud, hazardous working conditions, risky high-level financial service ventures, etc. The system protects the interests of the powerful as it "deflects the discontent and potential hostility of Middle America away from the classes about them and toward the classes below them" (Reiman, 2007, p. 4).

Classism and racism also play a significant role in environmental injustice, so that waste tends to flow towards communities with "weak response capacity" (Heiman, 1996, para. 10). In urban areas this could mean garbage dumps, bus depots, trash-burning plants. In rural areas, such as the Appalachian Mountains, this could mean slurry ponds of coal sludge, a tar-like mixture of soil, water, and the toxic chemicals used in coal processing. Environmental injustice in the Appalachian Mountain region extends to the working conditions inside the mines as well, where

there have been "literally hundreds of fatal mining disasters over the last century" (Smith, 2010, p. 38). In one example, Smith (2010) reports that the Sago Mine in Sago, West Virginia, had "racked up 270 safety violations over...two years, with government records showing that the owner knew about and failed to correct many of them" (p. 38).

An Unlivable minimum wage and the Deprecation of labor organizations

For people working in the middle-and owning-classes, Smith (2010) argues, the right of organizing and advocating for concerns that relate to their own or their business' welfare - chambers of commerce, professional associations, lobbying groups, and think tanks, for example - is taken for granted. When poor and working-class people organize to participate in workplace negotiations and decision-making, however, they are not greeted with the same casual acceptance. Labor unions are, perhaps, the sole avenue by which working-class people can have a voice in their workplaces, where they do not own or control resources, where they do not have authority in the content or availability of jobs, and where they don't occupy roles in the corporate power structure. "Cultural acceptance of the devaluing and undermining of working people's right to have their voices be heard seems contradictory in a country that prides itself on democracy and the idea of a level playing field" (Smith, 2010, p.41).

Psychological Dynamics of Class-Based Microaggressions

"Negative attitudes toward the poor leave their traces within ordinary, unexamined experiences and language use...once we become aware of them, we can see that everyday interactions and popular culture are replete with class-based messages and slights" (Smith, 2010, p. 33). A key point that Smith (2010) makes is that "although the perpetrators of microaggressions are often unaware of the implications of their behavior, poor people who are exposed to classist microaggressions are usually able to detect that they are being insulted, even

if politely" (p.34). She illustrates this point with a reference to a collection of essays by lesbians about their class backgrounds. Author and contributor, Chaney (1994), transitioned from a working-class youth on a hog farm to a privileged college campus in an urban area and wrote about the unconscious symbols and rituals that her new peers at college used to signal class membership, "Table manners seem to evoke some of the ugliest class righteousness'" (Chaney, 1994, p. 174). From the same collection of essays, Author, Evans (1994), described the impact of a casual comment by a friend who was a dental student:

"What kind of parents wouldn't provide their children with something as important as dental care?" I grow quiet as I think of my childhood, of not having gone to the dentist until I was in my mid-teems, of having teeth pulled because they were too decayed to fill...Shame washed over me as I realize that I am the type of person the dental student is talking about, shame that my parents couldn't manage money better, shame that there wasn't more money to manage...[but] I keep my mouth shut, for my mouth is one of the places that I carry evidence of my poverty. (Evans, 1994, p. 163)

Sue (2010) identified four major psychological dilemmas or dynamics created by racial microaggressions and, with regard to moving microaggression research forward, has said this, "As the understanding of psychological dynamics of racial microaggressions has developed, many other marginalized groups have begun to translate how microaggressions may be tied to group-specific stereotypes, biases, and misinformation" (p. 18). I propose building on the existing framework for understanding the psychological dilemmas and dynamics caused microaggressions, while holding the reality that this research is a work in progress and that other socially devalued groups will experience microaggressions in ways that are similar and

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dissimilar to members of targeted racial and ethnic groups. The psychological dilemmas or dynamics, as identified by Sue (2010) are: (1) the clash of realities between the dominant group and socially devalued group members, (2) the invisibility of unintentional bias and discrimination, (3) the perceived minimal harm of microaggressions, and (4) the catch-22 of responding (p. 11). In the first case, the dominant group in a society has the power to construct what is true and normative in the larger cultural discourse, so experiences that do not align with the dominant culture's definition of normal are seen as abnormal and problematic. Targets of class-based microaggressions, therefore, are given the message that their perceptions of reality are inaccurate or wrong and the personal experiences which they know to be true are not valid. Second, the invisibility of unintentional bias and discrimination maintains the status quo, prevents people from recognizing discrimination and taking action against it, and fosters an environment in which biased cultural conditioning goes unchallenged. Sue and colleagues (2010) frequently allude to their position that overt discrimination is much "easier" to challenge than invisible discrimination, because it can be seen and addressed. Thirdly, minimizing the impact of microaggressions on a target person can lead to a number of negative consequences. The cumulative affect of microaggressions over a lifetime and the invalidating imperative to "get over it" or "stop making such a big deal about it" can contribute to a hostile and invalidating campus and work climate (Dovidio et al., 2009; Rowe, 1990; Solórzano et al., 2000), devalue social group identities (Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008), lower work productivity and educational learning (Salvatore & Shelton, 2007; Sue, 2010), perpetuate stereotype threat (Cardinu, Maas, Rosabianca, & Kiesner, 2005; Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002), create physical health problems (Brondolo, Rieppi, Kelly, & Gerin, 2003; Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999), and assail mental health by creating emotional turmoil, low self-esteem, and psychological

energy depletion (Sue, 2010). Finally, there is also the catch-22 of responding to a perceived

microaggression. Because many microaggressions are not consciously or intentionally delivered,

the target person is in the position of trying to ascertain whether or not an insult took place, what

the motivations behind it might have been, if they (the target) are overreacting, and if or how to

respond. If the person chooses not to respond, "he or she may suffer from a sense of low self-

esteem, a feeling of not being true to the self, and a loss of self-integrity. Yet, to confront the

perpetrator or to raise the issue may result in negative consequences" (Sue, 2010, p.17). What is

clear in all of the above examples is that microggressions have the power to negatively impact

individuals' overall well-being and that dealing with microaggressions on a daily basis uses a

considerable amount of psychic and emotional energy.

Thus far, this literature review has focused on describing and exploring the phenomenon

of microaggressions, with special attention to class-based microaggressions. Shedding light on

this phenomenon and suggesting that issues of class bias and discrimination are real and merit

further exploration is one of the primary goals of this paper. The call for further exploration

would be incomplete, however, without also considering theoretical frameworks that social

workers could apply to their practice in the service of increasing awareness of class-based bias

and, further, reducing the likelihood that they will unwittingly become entangled in the dominant

cultural practices that maintain a classist status quo. Social workers are mandated by their code

of ethics to challenge social injustice (NASW Code of Ethics, 2008, p. 5). The value of service

to others is also reflected in the social work professional mandate, as the code of ethics states that

the primary professional goal for social workers is to "help people in need and to address social

problems" (NASW Code of Ethics, 2008, p. 5). It is, therefore, critical that social workers

attempt to understand all of the ways their clients have experienced marginalization and that they

actively seek therapeutic frameworks designed to address multiple dimensions of relational

experience, social context, and psychological difficulty while staying true to the mandate for

social justice. Traditional, Western psychodynamic frameworks place a premium on

individuation and autonomy, seeing "the self as functioning better if it is more independent of

other selves" (Jordan, 2010, p. 2). In the context of oppression based on group identity, such as

classism, it may be advisable to incorporate therapeutic frameworks that have been built around

the centrality of human relationships in a social context. I propose, therefore, that social workers

consider using a relational-cultural based style of social work practice when trying to address the

dynamics of class-based oppression. Relational-cultural theory is based on a model of human

development that places connection [with others] at the center of growth (Jordan, 2010, p. 3).

Further, relational-cultural theory posits that "human beings seek to participate in relationships in

which people both give and receive" (Jordan, 2010, p. 4). By incorporating the tenets of this

theory into social work practice, there may be increased potential to reduce individual victim-

blaming (for example, blaming someone for living in poverty), empower clients and social

workers to increase community connections and engage in social action, and to allow for a less

hierarchical stance of therapist-over-client. This theoretical framework is well-suited to social

workers wanting to work against class-based microaggressions due to its emphasis on the social-

relational context, its commitment to mutual empowerment between people, and its stance

against individual victim-blaming. A synthesis of relational-cultural theory follows.

CHAPTER IV

Relational-Cultural Theory

Formulated by women psychologists at the Stone Center at Wellesley College, relational-cultural theory/therapy (RCT) was a response to the Western-centered psychological theories that generally depict human development as a trajectory for dependence to independence. Such theories value autonomy, independence from others, and the concept of an internally and individually based self (Jordan, 2010). Relational-cultural theory (RCT) is a departure from this concept. Relational-cultural theory "is built on the premise that, throughout the life span, human beings grow through and toward connection. It holds that we need connections to flourish, even to stay alive, and isolation is a major source of suffering for people, at both a personal and cultural level" (Jordan, 2010, p.1). Further, "RCT challenges not only the prevailing developmental theories, which frame independence as the hallmark of mature development, but some of the basic tenets of 21st century Western culture, which celebrate autonomy, self-interest, competition, and strength in isolation" (Jordan, 2010, pp.1-2). Jordan (2010) provides a comprehensive overview of RCT, tracing its history and development in the 1970's through the present and providing suggestions for new and future applications of the theory. (Judith Jordan, PhD, is currently the director of the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute and founding scholar at the Stone Center at Wellesley College. She is also an assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. Dr. Jordan has spent the past 20 years working with the late Jean Baker Miller, Irene Stiver, and Jan Surrey on the development of what is now known as relational-cultural theory.)

Relational-cultural theory grew out of the work of psychiatrist Jean Baker Miller's

"groundbreaking book, *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (1976)" (Jordan, 2010, p.9). Miller

critically examined psychiatry's perspective on what would be considered women's "weaknesses"

and argued that they could be seen as strengths. She began to deconstruct the concept of the

"neutral" psychology of the individual (i.e., a strictly autonomous, internal, individual self that

grows and develops according to its own internal programming) and proposed instead that

hidden forces of power and dominance play a major role in shaping social and individual

development (Jordon, 2010, p.9). RCT's theoretical proposition is that relationships are at the

center of growth and the utility of the concept of a self, specifically a *separate self*, is called into

question (Jordan, 2010, p. 9). In 1978, Miller began to work with the psychologists Judith

Jordan, Irene Stiver, and Jan Surrey to critique the ways in which traditional psychodynamic

theories misrepresented women's experience. Their collaboration is what became known as the

Stone Center Theory and self-in-relation theory, which generated the body of work that

comprises RCT. It should be noted that another psychologist at Harvard, Carol Gilligan, was

separately and independently exploring similar questions about traditional developmental

theories and their application to the psychology of women (Jordan, 2010, p. 10). According to

Jordan (2010), while RCT grew out of and embraced a feminist and social justice perspective,

early RCT theory was skewed by the fact that the original writers were all white, middle class,

and well educated. She elaborates by saying that, unfortunately, early RCT was duplicating the

very power distortions they were trying to protest by "talking about woman's *voice* rather than

women's *voices*" (p.11) and "women of color, lesbians, other sexually identified women,

physically challenged women, and women from different economic backgrounds personally

communicated in conferences, workshops, and Works in Progress that 'the theory group' was

committing the very distortions of exclusion they were protesting" (p.11). This feedback

illustrated how "the assumption of universality by the privileged dominant group creeps in to

even the post conscious attempts to incorporate diversity and appreciate power inequities"

(Jordan, 2010, p.11). According to Jordan, members of the original RCT group acknowledged

that they were coming from a position of great privilege and unearned advantage with the

unchecked assumptions of universality that often accompany such a position, or to quote bell

hooks (1984), living at "the center" rather than at the "margin" (as cited in Jordan, 2010, p.11).

The fact that the RCT "founders" heard the feedback and incorporated it into the practice of RCT

is one of the ways that RCT stands out as particularly applicable to addressing microaggressions,

social injustice, and espousing social work values.

  Jordan (2010) outlines the basic tenets of contemporary relational-cultural theory. First

and foremost, RCT places a premium value on the importance of relationships, especially

"growth-fostering" relationships (p. 23). Rather than endorse the notion of the supremacy of

autonomy and individualism, RCT "seeks to lessen the suffering caused by chronic

disconnection and isolation, whether at an individual or societal level, to increase capacity for

relational resilience, and to foster social justice" (Jordan, 2010, p. 23). The effects of privilege,

marginalization, and cultural forces are seen by RCT as central to psychological

development...[and] relational development is always completely suffused with social and

cultural identities" (Jordan, 2010, p. 23). The core concepts, as articulated by Jordan (2000 &

2010) are:

1. People grow through and toward relationship throughout the life span.

2. Movement toward mutuality rather than separation characterizes mature
   functioning.

3. Relationship differentiation and elaboration characterize growth.

4. Mutual empathy and mutual empowerment are at the core of growth fostering relationships.

5. Authenticity is necessary for real engagement and full participation in growth-fostering relationship.

6. In growth-fostering relationships, all people contribute and grow or benefit. Development is not a one-way street (p. 24).

One of the goals of development from a relational perspective is the development of increased relational competence and capacities over the life span (Jordan, 2010, p. 24). Rather than moving toward greater separateness and independence, the goal is to increase people's capacity for relational resilience, mutual empathy, and mutual empowerment (Jordan, 2010, p.24). In essence, RCT acknowledges and honors interdependence among people and systems. Jordan's elaboration on the core theoretical concepts of RCT follows.

Mutual Empathy and Growth-Fostering Relationships

Mutual empathy is the core process that allows for growth in relationship, defined as openness to being affected by and affecting another person. In mutual empathy, both people move with a sense of mutual respect, an intention for mutual growth, and an increasing capacity for connectedness. For mutual empathy to lead to growth, both people must see, know, and feel that they are being responded to, having an impact, and mattering to one another. The growth that occurs is both affective and cognitive and leads to an enlarged sense of community. Supported vulnerability, a feeling that one's vulnerability will not be taken advantage of or violated, is necessary for mutual empathy. (Jordan, 2010, p. 104)

Ideally, mutual empathy allows people to feel that they can bring more and more of themselves into relationship without feeling that it is necessary to split off and hide the parts of their experience that could be seen as unacceptable or threatening (to themselves or others in the relationship, be it individuals or community). RCT proposes that the need for connection, i.e., "an interaction between two or more people that is mutually empathic and mutually empowering," in which growth is a priority, is the primary motivation in people's lives (p. 102). Such relationships would ideally have five outcomes, or "the five good things," as outlined by Jean Baker Miler: a sense of zest; a better understanding of self, other, and the relationship (clarity); a sense of worth; an enhanced capacity to act or be productive; and an increased desire for more connection (Miller & Stiver, 1997).

Disconnection

Jordan (2010) writes that disconnection occurs when one person misunderstands, invalidates, excludes, humiliates, or injures another person in some way (p. 25). RCT views disconnections as a normal part of relationships and an area for enormous growth, provided that the disconnection can be addressed and reworked. For example, "when an injured person, particularly one who has less power, can represent her or his experience of disconnection or pain to the more powerful person and be responded to, with interest or concern, the less powerful, hurt person has a sense of 'mattering,' of having an effect on the other" (Jordan, 2010, p.25). Through such processes, connections are strengthened, relational competence is strengthened, and places of "empathic failure" can be transformed into places of increasing trust and strength in relationships. What is critically important to note, as it relates to microaggressions, is that from an RCT perspective, if the target person is not allowed or encouraged to voice her or his hurt or anger, that person will learn to suppress that aspect of her or his experience. Thus, she or he

learns to hide aspects of themselves, mold themselves to fit in, and present to others (especially those holding more power) with inauthenticity in order to stay in relationship. This can lead to the less powerful person feeling "profoundly disempowered and unseen" (Jordan, 2010, p. 26). If this happens repeatedly, the relationship itself (be it to a person, a community, or a larger societal system) is diminished and a condition of chronic disconnection may develop. Often, the person who is less powerful in the situation feels that he or she is to blame for the disconnection and feels "immobilized and increasingly isolated" (Jordan, 2010, p. 26). From an RCT perspective, as explicated by Jordan, this kind of dynamic not only creates isolation and disempowerment at the personal level, it also preserves the politics of dominance, making the case once again that "the personal is political, the political is personal" and, according to Jordan, "the rewriting of a psychological paradigm becomes an act of social justice" (Jordan, 2010, p. 26).

Relational Images

RCT uses the term "relational images" to conceptualize the inner constructions and expectations we each create out of our experiences in relationships (Miller & Stiver, 1997). In other words, our past relationship experiences are remembered in our psyche (as "relational images") and these images, or understandings and expectations of relationships, are brought to bear on current and future relationships. This is another psychodynamic way of understanding that our present is anchored in our past, and specifically, our relational past. Ideally, relational images are flexible, can be adjusted, and do not create inappropriate generalizations. Jordan states that when relational images are overly generalized or rigid, they can prevent people from fully participating in the actual relationships at hand. In this way, she says, they operate similarly to the psychodynamic language of "transference" in therapy, i.e., "bringing

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expectations from the past to bear on the present in a way that distorts current reality" (Jordan, 2010, p. 26). RCT sees "transference" as a phenomenon that emerges in all relationships, not just in the therapy room, and thus, "replication becomes problematic when it keeps people 'stuck in the past' and not free to engage in new relationships in the present" (Miller & Stiver, 1997, p. 138). RCT does not advocate "neutrality" in the therapy room, rather, the therapist is encouraged to actively participate in helping to reshape relational images through exploring memories of past relationships, the accompanying images, and the contingent expectations of relationships. In RCT, individuals search for "discrepant relational images" to counteract the core relational images that paint relationships in "all or nothing " terms. In essence, a discrepant relational image is re-framing and re-working a previously held idea about oneself in relationship, i.e., countering the negative belief with something more optimistic. For example, the relational image of "No one likes me when I start acting like my real self" could be countered by the discrepant relational image of "When I show my true self, my friend, _____, appreciates me." Within the context of relational images, Jean Baker Miller came up with the concept of "condemned isolation" (Miller, 1989). Jordan (2010) explains condemned isolation was a way of understanding how fixed the pain of relational images can be when they keep us locked out of relationship and out of hope. In condemned isolation,

> we feel immobilized, unworthy, and alone, and we feel we have created this reality. The individual feels that she or he is to blame for her or his powerlessness and hopelessness and there is something intrinsically 'wrong' with her or him. Under such conditions, she or he will not risk the vulnerability necessary to make connections, [as] the threat of further isolation is too great. (Jordan, 2010, p. 28)

This idea of condemned isolation brings to mind the manifestations of classism and the example of the student from a poor school district in Chapter 3. This student's school didn't have enough chairs in the classroom, so students had to stand during class. Rats were seen running around the building. The student who participated in the study perceived that the dilapidated school environment communicated that the students who were poor were valued less by society than those who were not. In addition, the student assumed that the interviewer wouldn't have a shared experience and understand the student's reality, that is, the student's experience was isolated and outside the norm. About the lack of resources and supplies at school, the student said, "it makes me feel bad about myself…and less than…you probably can't understand where I'm coming from" (Fine et al., 2004, p. 2199). In order to address and transcend the experience of condemned isolation, a therapist in this case may want to consider addressing the social issues that created the disempowering school environment in the first place while simultaneously exploring the student's positive relational images in the service of counteracting negative beliefs about the self. By discussing negative beliefs and re-framing them with something more optimistic, clients may feel a renewed sense of agency in establishing connections with others, even though the system itself erects barriers to social connections. As in Watkins et al. (2010), study participants reported that feeling optimistic and working towards future change promoted resilience when coping with the oppression of microaggressions (p. 45). Another example from Chapter 3 that comes to mind when considering the powerlessness and hopelessness of condemned isolation is that of Evans (1994), who described her dental student friend as making a judgmental statement about the "kind" of people who don't take their children to the dentist. Evans (1994) identified her parents as being those "kind" of people because they couldn't afford

to take her to the dentist and wrote of feeling ashamed and needing to keep her mouth shut in

order to hide the parts of herself that were not acceptable to others.

Controlling Images and Shame

This dimension of RCT is particularly relevant to the phenomenon of class-based microaggressions. Jordan references the work of African American sociologist Patricia Hill Collins in which she "explored the ways society creates controlling images to shame and disempower certain groups" (Jordan, 2010, p. 28). Controlling images define who we are, what is acceptable, and what we can do. Collins' (2000) stance is that "that controlling images - like stereotypes of 'mammies, matriarchs, [and] welfare mothers" are actually lies that hold people in their place and induce the notion that change cannot happen" (pp. 69-70). When immersed in a sea of distorting and controlling images, Jordan (2010) writes, it is hard for people to stay with their own truth (p. 29). Another Stone Center colleague, Walker (2005), is quoted as saying: "From a Relational-Cultural perspective, strategies of disconnection give rise to internalized oppression, a complex of relational images grounded in the distortions and disinformation required to normalize the inequalities of a power-over culture" (Walker, 2005, p. 54). Strategies of disconnection (or, in ego psychology terms, defenses) tend to arise around shame and a sense of unworthiness. In RCT, shame is thought to be a contributing factor to the sense of immobilization people feel as well as a major source of chronic disconnection. RCT portrays shame as a tool that is imposed on people to control and disempower them (Jordan, 2010, p.29). Further, shame is not only a powerful way to silence and isolate individuals, but it also plays a large role in silencing and disempowering marginalized groups whose members are strategically, if often invisibly, shamed in order to reinforce their isolation and thus their subordination (Jordan, 2010, p. 29). Jordan (2010) touches on the phenomenon of microaggressions, stating that a dominant group's authority can be maintained by the widespread power tactic of silencing those who present differing views of reality; when seemingly small acts of violence or disrespect

go unnamed and unchallenged, their invisibility plays into the power tactics of the dominant systems (Jordan, 2010, p.29). Marginalized groups often internalize the dominant group's standards and internalized oppression functions to perpetuate shame and disempowerment (Jordan, 2010, p. 30). Similar to the findings of earlier cited racial microaggression research, in which an "active coping" strategy helped reduced the negative psychological impact of experiencing microaggressions, RCT posits that, often, "moving from group shame to a sense of worth is based on the effects of creating a cohesive group pride, [e.g.] gay pride, black pride, girl power, etc." (p. 30). Creating or joining a community buffers individuals from the disempowerment of marginalization and creates an empowered movement in which people reclaim their dignity and their right to be respected by others.

Relational Resilience and Relational Courage

The essence of relational resilience, as defined by RCT, is "the capacity to move back into connection following disconnection and the capacity to reach out for help" (Jordan, 2010, p. 31). RCT suggests that developing relational resilience is crucial to anyone's healing, however, therapists must not force or push a connection with clients. Rather, therapists must slowly and deliberately provide experiences of safe connection and of reworking empathic failures (Jordan, 2010, pp. 31-32). A crucial point that Jordan makes is that therapists must demonstrate to clients that the well-being of the relationship and the client is more important than certainty, being right, or maintaining our own self-images as "good, empathic therapists." An RCT therapist must work actively with disconnections and relational failures. For example, Jordan states that therapists should apologize when they are wrong, work with their own defensiveness when under attack, and not assume automatically that the entire problem rests in the client (e.g., therapist not reducing the disruption to "projective identification" to explain therapists reaction). The idea of

relational resilience is a way of explicitly communicating to the client that they have an impact on the therapist and matter to the therapist. This, in essence, places paramount value on the relationship and provides a new relational image or "road map" for navigating complex human relationships in a way that fosters mutual growth.

Related to the concept of relational resilience is relational courage. In the context of RCT, relational courage is meant to challenge the concept of courage as an internal trait, that is, a characteristic of individuals who undertake enormous risks alone, or that strong people will not experience fear or uncertainty in frightening situations (Jordan, 2010, p. 32). Instead, courage is viewed as feeling the fear and finding support to deal with it. In other words, RCT talks about the importance of en-*couraging* other people, helping develop courage in one another. Encouragement is understood as being akin to empowerment, as it involves facilitating the development and maintenance of a sense of confidence and hope in the face of trying conditions (Jordan, 2010, p. 32). Relational-cultural therapy

> contributes a cohesive approach to doing psychotherapy, but it also serves as a conceptual framework for undertaking social action. RCT practitioners in clinical settings frame their work around healing the suffering of the individuals they see in treatment. But they also recognize a larger mission of changing the social conditions that create much of the suffering that people endure. RCT is not about changing people to fit into dysfunctional cultural conditions but empowering them to heal in connection and in turn to heal others in connection. A part of the ripple effect of growth in connection often spills into participating in social change through creating alliances or communities that are built around relational values. (Jordan, 2010, p. 33)

I am proposing relational-cultural theory as a framework for social workers to use in their work against the manifestations of class-based microaggressions because it is my belief that the theory's orientation towards growth-fostering relationships de-stabilizes the dominant cultural myth that poverty is a result of individual failures. Also, RCT is structured to value mutual relationships and well-being over whether or not the therapist is "good" or "right" (Jordan, 2010). With the freedom to be in relationship *with* people, instead of *over* people, my interpretation of RCT is that social workers can use it to create and maintain egalitarian therapeutic structures in any number of contexts. In order to strengthen the whole fabric of community, people must engage in relationships with one another. If models of growth-fostering and mutually-empowering relationships can be incorporated into social work practice, I see the potential to enhance empathic connections with others, reduce the shaming and blaming of individuals for societal problems, and promote a culture that holds the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

I would like to propose another therapeutic framework for working against class-based microaggressions and simultaneously serving social work's social justice mandate. Challenging the conditions that cause poverty, suffering, and unequal treatment is a core concept in social work practice. I would be remiss if I did not also include a theoretical framework that is organized around the guiding principles of social justice and preferential treatment for those who are oppressed. Liberation Psychology, as envisioned by Ignacio Martín-Baró (1994), speaks explicitly to the social justice principles embedded in social work. This is a model that prioritizes the position of marginalized people in society and calls on mental health professionals to stand with marginalized people and engage in social action to counter oppressive dominant paradigms. Liberation Psychology is a theoretical orientation that, in my mind, can provide social workers with the tools and courage to truly engage in anti-oppression work. Because

Liberation psychology is rooted in the principles of standing side-by-side with people who are poor and marginalized, engaging in a practice based on Liberation Psychology may be an extremely effective way to address and work towards dismantling class-based microaggressions. While Liberation Psychology isn't entirely new, it is not well known in the field of clinical social work in the United States. Therefore, included in the following summary of liberation psychology principle is historical background on this orientation.

CHAPTER V

Liberation Psychology

Building on the previous chapter's assertion that a relational approach can serve as a conceptual framework for taking social action, I would like to explore a different, yet complementary, theoretical framework in which social justice is a central guiding principle. Liberation psychology, inspired by the Christian movement liberation theology, is an approach to psychology (though applicable to all "helping professions,") that calls for the field of psychology to "stop focusing attention on itself, stop worrying about its scientific and social status, and instead propose an effective service to the needs of the majority of the population" (Martín-Baró, 1994, p.26). The purpose of this chapter is to bring attention to this particular orientation and consider its application to social work, specifically with regard to conducting research in the service of social justice. Martín-Baró, the Jesuit scholar and psychologist who proposed the concept of a liberation psychology, wrote and published his works in Spanish. The majority of his writings have not been translated into English. As a result, this chapter relies heavily on the 12 essays that have been translated, as well as scholarly secondary sources written in English about Martín-Baró and liberation psychology.

Goodman, Walling, and Ghali (2010) assert that social justice must be a primary concern of the psychological sciences explore the lives and works of European philosopher Emmanuel Levinas and Latin American social psychologist Ignacio Martín-Baró, both of whom advocated that justice must be a central component in psychological thought and practice. An exploration of the work of the philosopher Emmanual Levinas (see Levinas, 1969, 1985, 1989, 1990; Malka,

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2006) is outside the scope of this literature review, as the focus here lies specifically on Martín-Baró and the application of liberation psychology to clinical social work and classist microaggressions. Levinas' work, characterized by his critiques of Western philosophy and its understanding of the self as defined without reference to other (Goodman et al., 2010), is, however, quite relevant to the field of social work and social justice and relational-cultural frameworks.

Goodman et al. (2010) address the role of psychology and social psychology in implicitly espousing certain cultural values. They reference the ideas of Cushman (1995) that state that the field of psychology is inevitably tied to the surrounding sociopolitical, economic, and religious context and, therefore, implicitly endorses particular values and, further, that the field of psychology has been critiqued for acting in a complicit manner with an unjust status quo, reflecting and perpetuating oppressive societal structures and cultural practices. (p. 586). One way of countering this tendency, according to Goodman et al. (2010), is to bring social justice frameworks to the center of their social psychology practice and research. The field of social work aspires to do as well (NASW Code of Ethics, 2008, pp. 5-6). As a means to bring social justice to the center, Goodman et al. (2010) suggest that mental health professionals incorporate the work of Ignacio Martín-Baró and his idea of liberation psychology into social psychology research methods and practice. I propose that the field of social work also consider bringing liberation principles to the center of research and practice as a strategy to counter social injustice. I have chosen to explore a small, yet significant piece of Martín-Baró's work here: his application of liberatory research methods to public opinion polls. By highlighting this aspect of Martín-Baró's work in Latin America, Goodman et al. (2010) demonstrate how empirical study can be practically applied to uncover oppressive practices so as to affect social change. I see this

approach as having particular relevance to the study of class-based microaggressions because the goal of Martín-Baró 's public opinion polls was, in large part, to shed light on that which was invisible and to give voice to the silence maintained by oppressive practices (Goodman et al., 2010).

Because Ignacio Martín-Baró and liberation psychology are not well known to the field of psychology or clinical social work, I will include Goodman et al.'s (2010) overview of Martín-Baró's background here. Martín-Baró was born in Spain in 1942. When he was seventeen, he entered the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) of the Catholic Church in Orduña, Spain. He was transferred to El Salvador in 1960. After spending several years studying theology in Latin America and Europe and engaging in his pastoral duties in rural El Salvador, he was ordained as a Jesuit priest in 1970, at age 28. Shortly thereafter, he began graduate study in social psychology at the University of Chicago. Throughout his graduate studies, he frequently returned to El Salvador to teach, write, and participate in the functions of his religious community. After completing his doctorate, Martín-Baró became the head of the psychology department and the vice rector at the Universidad Centroamericana (University of Central America; UCA) in San Salvador. He also became the founder and director of the University Institute of Public Opinion and was a member of the American Psychological Association. During his life he lived and studied in South America, Europe, and the United States, always, however, returning to El Salvador. The sociopolitical climate in El Salvador during Martín-Baró's life was filled with turmoil, as the majority of citizens lived in abject poverty and worked on farms or in factories that generated wealth for a small class of the powerful elite. A civil war ravaged El Salvador from 1980 to 1992, throughout which, 70,000 citizens lost their lives (Mason, 1999) and 30% of El Salvador's population was displaced (Brockett, 1994). Described

by Goodman et al. (2010) as "an academic with leftist leanings" (p. 593) as well as a Jesuit priest, Martín-Baró found himself working in an overtly hostile environment in which fliers saying "Be a patriot, kill a priest" (p. 593) were distributed on the streets of San Salvador. Many people in the Catholic church, under the leadership of Archbishop Oscar Romero and the influence of liberation theology, rallied around the cause of the poor and marginalized who were systematically oppressed by the corrupt military government. The Catholic church sided with the campesinos (i.e., agricultural workers without land ownership), women, children, and workers. Taking the side of the poor, however, was not without significant risk. Archbishop Romero was assassinated in 1980 after calling for soldiers to disobey orders that violated human rights (Goodman et al., 2010, p. 594). For Martín-Baró, being a Catholic leader serving in solidarity with poor or rural communities now meant being an enemy of the military and, therefore, the nation. Martín-Baró had a prescient sense that he would be killed for his work, as he stated to an American colleague, "In your country it's publish or perish. In ours, it's publish and perish" (Aron & Corne, 1996, p. 2). In fact, six attempts were made on his life. On November 16, 1989, 30 men dressed in the military fatigues of the U.S.-trained Atlactl Battalion entered his campus living quarters and killed Martín-Baró along with five other priests. He was 47 years old. (Goodman et al., 2010, p. 594).

Martín-Baró spent his career in psychology developing a liberation psychology based on his Latin American context. Liberation psychology is based partly on the tenets of liberation theology, a reading of the Christian tradition, which emerged out of Latin America in the 1960-1970's. According to Goodman et al. (2010), the most basic premise of the liberation theories is the pursuit of justice, equality, and dignity - or, liberation - for oppressed and impoverished peoples everywhere (p.594). Martín-Baró conceptualized liberation as occurring through

concientización, a transformative process through which humans engage in a "gradual decoding of the world" and its oppressive structures, which leads to the development of a critical consciousness that opens up new possibilities for action. Stated another way, *concientización* is developing a "critical consciousness" (Martín-Baró, 1994, p. 187). Burton and Kagan (2005) conceptualize *concientización* as

> seeing reality as it is, which allows for the possibility of new knowledge, and as one engages in a truthful understanding of self and social context, the embedded origins or roots of the present reality are exposed and it becomes possible to reshape the future. (p. 68)

In the context of Martín-Baró's El Salvador, seeing reality for what it was included exposing the "social lie" (Martín-Baró, 1994, p. 188) promulgated by the dominant Salvadoran government. The lie, for example, that civil war was the will of the people (Goodman et al., 2010, p. 595). Martín-Baró exposed this social lie as false by polling the people about their attitudes towards the civil war. A parallel with the "social lie"' can be drawn with class-based microaggressions and how they relate to the dominant cultural myth of the American Dream. Upon closer examination, this myth does not reflect the lived reality of most people in the United States. Millions of people may hold that this myth is true, but the stark contrast between the haves and have-nots reveals a different reality. Exploring the research principles of liberation psychology and considering how they could be applied to social work may be a worthwhile endeavor with respect to the study of microaggressions and bringing invisible phenomena to light.

As stated above, a central tenet to liberation psychology and its research methods is *concientización*, that is, developing a "critical consciousness" (Martín-Baró, 1994, p. 187). Prilleltensky (1994) posits that psychology can assist in Martín-Baró's concept of *concientización* by studying the process of resistance to the system that dominates. He outlines the components of a "counter-hegemony" project, such as denunciation, exchange of information, triggering action, reactance and annunciation (Prilleltensky, 1994, pp. 196-199). Each of these components can be understood as acts to counter the dominant cultural narratives by making visible the lived realities that fall outside of the purported "norm." In each stage, according to Prilleltensky (1994), psychology can offer theory and research to support the process. One of Martín-Baró's strategies to bring about *concientización* to the Salvadoran people was to use social psychology research methods in a way that countered the military government's controlling propaganda. In the service of that goal, Martín-Baró asked ordinary citizens what they thought about political topics of the day through simple polling procedures and, then, he published the results without getting approval from the Salvadoran government (Aron & Corne, 1994). (Martín-Baró had received permission from the government to conduct public opinion polls, provided he shared the results with government officials prior to publishing.) (Aron & Corne, 1994). Regarding the psychological impact of dominant cultural narratives and controlling propaganda on ordinary people, Martín-Baró hypothesized that

> by hearing only distortions of "public opinion," Salvadoreños became isolated from each other. People assumed that they were alone in disagreeing with the government's political stance and actions, and that they alone were experiencing dissonance, confusion, and oppression as a result of the news they read and heard. (Goodman et al., 2010, p. 595)

Martín-Baró believed that the media reports were fabrications of the truth, which attempted to demonstrate homogeneity and unanimity of public opinion and he used the public opinion polls to reveal this misinformation (Goodman et al., 2010). Martín-Baró collected data in five studies between 1981 and 1984. The sample populations varied, but different groups included university students, urban professionals, high school students, and a stratified sample of the general population. The results of the polls showed that peaceful negotiations were consistently favored over continued military intervention" (Martin Baro 1985/1996 as cited in Goodman et al., 2010, p. 595). Such results directly contradicted the media's earlier portrayal of the "will of the people" and the government's position on the civil war was called into question once the results of the study were made public. Thus, in the language of Prilleltensky's (1994) stages of counter-hegemony, an exchange of information and a public announcement ("annunciation") of the information that had previously been invisible took place. By simply asking and reflecting their own words, Martín-Baró offered *concientización* to the Salvadorian public.

To ensure that his findings would meaningfully and accurately represent the perspectives of his participants, and thus, be liberating, Martín-Baró adhered to four specifications when conducting research: 1) systematization, 2) representation, 3) wholeness, and 4) dialectics (Martín-Baró 1985/1996 as cited in Goodman et al., 2010, p.596). Regarding systemization, Martín-Baró believed that social psychological research must be conducted in a systematic way, ideally with multiple time points and comprehensive questionnaires. A high degree of systemization allows researches to observe changing opinions and ideologies over time and decreases the possibility that the questions and analysis will be overly influenced by propaganda and social distortions. The characteristic of "representation" is interpreted to mean that liberating

research must be representative of those it is designed to serve. If research is to accurately convey the experiences of any group, representative sampling is of utmost importance. Goodman et al. (2010) point out that even an introductory class on research methods will touch on the topic of representative sampling. Yet, what makes Martín-Baró s point about representative sampling so unique and salient is the reality that systematic oppression results in the virtual disappearance of large subsets of the population. All too frequently, people who are marginalized and oppressed end up being invisible to the major structures of a society, including academic research. It is the goal of liberation psychology to expose such injustices by depicting the whole of reality, and especially, the reality of those on the margins. The third characteristic that Martín-Baró pursued in research was "wholeness." This meant that true social psychology not only reported research findings, but also addressed how the findings were related to contextual factors, how various findings connect to each other, and identifying the historical and social structures that gave roots to the observed results. This person-in-context is intended to make research holistic in nature. Whole research is grounded in theory, culturally informed, and takes seriously the investigators' obligation to not only relay information but to understand it. Finally, the fourth essential component of a liberating social psychology research program is its dialectic nature, by which Martín-Baró meant that research must be debated and discussed in front of and with ordinary citizens so that they too would have the opportunity to reflect on whether findings accurately represent their lived experiences or whether findings align with the dominant sociopolitical discourse. Rather than the more traditional style of academic research in which scientists carry on a conversation of theories amongst themselves and privilege only traditional methodologically-obtained results as the "pinnacle of knowledge," research methods leave the "ivory tower" and engage with ordinary people within the context of their lives.

Martín-Baró's public opinion research is one example of the way psychological tools can be used to achieve the liberation of a group of poor, rural citizens. Goodman et al. (2010) propose that this type of justice-promoting research, while grounded in liberation psychology and the Latin American context, should be a universal task for the ethical psychologist (p. 597). Martín-Baró sought not only to infuse social psychology with the ethics and actions justice requires, he also called for the liberation of psychology itself from western-centric, power-laden theories that served to uphold structures of enslavement and marginalization (p.597). The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM),* for example, could be perceived as western-centric, power-laden tool that is used in the service of maintaining dominant power structures by pathologizing individuals rather than examining oppressive social systems. The field of microaggression research is already incorporating liberatory research principles by using qualitative approaches that ask people to share their subjective experience and reality. Through surveys and interviews, microaggression researchers are attempting to make the invisible visible. If social work researchers are to formally incorporate a liberation psychology framework into their research, which I propose they consider doing, research methods should integrate the following research paradigm shifts: 1) a new object of study, 2) a new epistemology, and 3) a new praxis (Marín, 1991, p. 532). By pursuing a new object of study, Martín-Baró meant that researchers must take seriously the realities of those being studied, in other words, "a psychology *of the* people and not psychology *about* people" (Marin, 1991, p. 532). Psychologists (or social workers) are challenged to enter into the lives and narratives of the communities they serve and to see the human faces and human suffering behind the statistics and manuscripts. This approach would require the researcher to ask different questions, questions that specifically target solutions to the most desperate needs of the community instead of questions focused on

individual, psychological problems (Goodman et al., 2010). The second shift, towards a new

epistemology, would explicitly locate research psychologists within their historical context. In

other words, the researcher's "historical lookout point" (Goodman et al., 2010, p. 598), i.e., the

cultural lens through which they see the world, is explicitly identified and acknowledged.

Ideally, this allows for an open and honest examination of one's own position in relation to the

research goals (Goodman et al., 2010). As Goodman et al. (2010) ask, "does checking 'Hispanic'

on a demographic form accurately convey the historical power distinctions between a first

generation immigrant to the United States who is a survivor of the civil war in Guatemala and a

person who descended from a family who has owned vineyards in California for decades?" (p.

598). Martín-Baró (1985/1996b) wrote that "only by identifying the historical lookout points of

both ourselves and those we serve can psychologists achieve an adequate understanding of the

most profound problems that burden the majority of the population today" (p.46). The third shift

in psychological research is a change in praxis, "wherein psychology moves beyond the lecture

hall and the observation room to bring about human well-being" (Goodman et al., 2010, p. 598).

Martín-Baró argued that psychology is a moral project (Burton & Kagan, 2005) and that if

psychologists do not enter into the dynamics of oppression and liberation they cannot make a

meaningful contribution to the real problems that distort mental health in modern society (Aron

& Corne, 1996). According to Martín-Baró and the tenets of liberation psychology,

psychological (or, social work) interventions, be they research, clinical practice, or otherwise

"should not be centered on *where* the work is done, but rather *by whom*; nor should it be looking

at *how* something is done, so much as *for whose benefit*" (Martín-Baró, 1994, p. 45). By

adopting a liberation framework for conducting research, social workers can minimize the

likelihood of engaging in research practices in which they are complicit with maintaining the

status quo and unintentionally allowing social injustice to go unchallenged. Drawing on the personal reflection of conducting clinical assessments in Chapter 1, one could argue that the standard practice of assessments is *about* clients rather than *with* clients. Perhaps social workers should ask *for whose benefit* are assessment questions being asked. It may be that the answer confirms the notion that the assessment is for the benefit of the client. Without asking the question, however, social work may unwittingly be maintaining an unjust status quo. Bringing a critical consciousness, or *concientización,* to how assessments are conceptualized could help to ensure that social workers are respecting the dignity and worth of their clients, challenging social injustice, and ethically serving marginalized populations. Goodman et al. (2010) propose that psychologists engaged in research ask of themselves,

> Do we have the eyes to see the realities that our society overlooks or hides? Does our research reflect the realities of oppression and social, economic, and political injustice? Is it inclusive of those who are frequently excluded from society? (p. 599)

If researchers choose not to do this, research will continue to put forth the reality of white, middle class college students, who make up the majority of studies in social psychology today (Pancer, 1997). Martín-Baró (1994) himself said this:

> The choice is between accompanying and not accompanying the poor and oppressed majorities in their effort to emerge into history, in their struggle to constitute themselves as a new people in a new land. This is not a question of whether to abandon psychology; it is a question of constructing a society where the welfare of the few is not built on the wretchedness of the many, where the fulfillment of some does not require that others be

deprived, where the interests of the minority do not demand the dehumanization of all. (p. 46)

In thinking about the connections I see between social work and liberation psychology, I am drawn to images of early social work practice, in which social workers went into impoverished communities to live and work. While the early roots of social work are worthy of the critique that social workers were paternalistic and imposed their values on those they tried to help, the ideal of service to people in need remains a noble one. In addition, I don't believe that social work has necessarily escaped its complicity in endorsing dominant cultural values, despite contemporary social work's emphasis on cultural competence and social diversity. With regard to conducting research, it would be easy to fall into the trap of creating a well-intentioned study that inadvertently treats the subject as "other." Liberation psychology is not a panacea, but it does offer some very clear guidelines regarding how one should design and conduct research in order to maintain a commitment to serving those in need. Developing one's own critical consciousness has the potential to help increase awareness of one's own social location, reduce the harmful effects of implicit bias, and uphold the ethical mandates of social work's professional code.

CHAPTER VI

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this literature review was to explore and describe the field of microaggression research, bring attention to the existence of class-based microaggressions, and consider contemporary theoretical approaches to research and practice that could be applied to the field of social work. Social work, as a profession, is uniquely positioned to address and work towards eradicating class-based discrimination due to the field's ethical obligations to help people in need, address social problems, and challenge social injustice. Social work's focus on the context of person-in-environment requires that therapeutic interventions take social and environmental factors into account. By incorporating the tenets of relational-cultural theory and liberation psychology into research and practice, social workers have the opportunity to approach their interventions critically and holistically while remaining firmly rooted in social work principles. Both of the theoretical frameworks described in this literature review are strongly aligned with the social work principles of recognizing the central importance of human relationships and challenging social injustice.

Microaggressions are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership (Sue et al., 2007). Microaggressions may communicate to targeted people that they do not belong with the majority group, they are lesser human beings, and they deserve inferior treatment. Social class is one dimension of identity that has been a microaggressive target, the manifestations of which can

be seen in social exclusion, class discrimination, etc. Citing Rainwater (1970) again, "the central existential fact of life for the lower class is that their members are not included in the collectivity that makes up the 'real' society of the 'real' people" (p. 10). Allowing this invisible phenomenon to go unchallenged is incompatible with the professional values of social work.

Exploring the subtle and often invisible forms of discrimination can be challenging. Just as I understand my life experience to be true and real, so does someone else understand their life experience to be true and real. As social workers, we are taught to adopt a non-judgmental stance, honor cultural and human diversity, engage in curious inquiry, and critically examine our own belief systems. When considering class-based discrimination in the form of microaggressions, the microaggression literature reveals that people have felt snubbed, discriminated against, looked down upon, etc. for their membership in a socially devalued group and that these experiences cause them psychological distress (Sue, 2010). Being the target of a class-based microaggression is a true, lived experience for many people. Therefore, social workers have an obligation to listen to this reality and ask themselves how they are addressing social injustice in their practice, research, publications, etc. Many helping professionals are asking this question, thus the growing interest in therapeutic models and frameworks that strive to prioritize the value of mutually empowering human relationships and integrate a tangible social justice perspective. Relational-cultural theory and liberation psychology, which are grounded in relational, person-in-environment, and social justice ideals, have the potential to provide a roadmap for social workers to conceptualize their role and practice in a way that privileges the realities of those who have experienced marginalization.

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