Don't Tread on Me—When Social Work Academics Get Defensive

Yarneccia D. Dyson, Elisa M. Martin, Laura Hunt Trull, and Karen Myers

Abstract: In the fall of 2018, we set out to study how mentoring is implemented in social work education and to offer best practice recommendations for administrators. However, an incident during our research shifted our focus. This article briefly reviews mentoring literature to frame our reflections, leading to two key findings. First, mentoring is crucial during difficult times, and these relationships should be established before they are urgently needed. Second, experienced professionals can hinder growth when they fail to engage in self-reflection and personal development. We recommend that administrators (1) support new faculty in building mentoring relationships at multiple levels—formal, informal, and peer-based, both within and outside academia, (2) allocate time and resources to sustain mentoring, and (3) embrace their role as formal mentors, critically examining their biases and addressing their own racist actions. This is vital as social work continues to evolve toward inclusive excellence.

***Keywords*:** mentoring, professionalism, microaggressions, anti-racism, implicit bias

Introduction

As members of a profession committed to promoting social justice and ameliorating various harms across all practice levels for individuals, groups, communities, and organizations, it is inherently important that we ensure this commitment is extended within the social work education programs tasked with matriculating new practitioners. While much of the teaching, scholarship, and service efforts that occur within academic settings serve as training foundations for students, up until the historical crises related to the multiple pandemics of 2020, very little discussion focused on how social injustices show up within colleges, schools, and departments of social work; social work organizations and committees; and email distribution lists and other technological modes of communication. This has placed an unequal balance of responsibilities between students and professors—students are expected to uphold the core values of the profession and advance ethical standards related to promoting social justice, etc., and professors who fail to do so are not held accountable. The purpose of this paper is to describe the experience of four social work colleagues who were notably identified as "Emerging Leaders" while in the early career stages of their assistant professor years located in departments of social work. While this experience occurred in 2018, the outcomes and subsequent aftereffects continue to reiterate the need for anti-oppressive practice training and anti-racist efforts within social work education as a whole.

We, these Emerging Leaders who organically birthed peer mentoring–style relationships with each other, decided to initiate a larger scale study among the baccalaureate social work community for the purpose of obtaining peer mentoring data across the United States. The ultimate goal of the proposed project was to use the data and findings to formalize the creation of an actual peer mentoring/network expanding community of academicians. When the research was launched through multiple email distribution lists, the experience proved to be the opposite of the intended goals. The subsequent responses resulted in some social work faculty, mostly older white men and white women, responding with microaggressions, microinvalidations, and other social justice harms.

The Importance of Mentoring

Mentoring has historically been defined as a more experienced colleague providing guidance and support to a less experienced colleague during times of decision and change (Taibbi, 1983). It extends over time and involves a process that includes teaching, advice, and support, as well as the maintenance of a relationship among colleagues (Saletnik, 2018). Mentorship, in the context of social work education, may offer new instructors connections for meeting colleagues, orientation to norms, or other types of professional support (Savage et al., 2004) as well as build a sense of community surrounding the education and training of future social work practitioners.

There are some social work programs who are re-interpreting and realigning the traditional model of mentoring to a revised peer mentorship framework where communities of colleagues support each other with little regard to level of experience, rank/status, length of time university-employed (Schonwetter & Nazarko, 2009). Having experienced supportive peer mentoring, we as researchers sought to study the ways in which mentoring had been operationalized in social work education and to make recommendations for administrators on best practices for incorporating mentoring into their faculty experience. What we found and our process is outlined in this article, as the study illuminated a lesson far deeper on how social work educators need and provide support.

Mentoring in Social Work Education

Supervision in the social work profession is viewed as a cornerstone for ethical and competent practice (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2021). The NASW and the Association of Social Work Boards (2013) published a document outlining best practices for social work supervision and stated that "supervision is an essential and integral part of the training and continuing education required for the skillful development of professional social workers" (p. 5). The Council on Social Work Education emphasizes the importance of supervision in the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (2022), linking it to competency 1: "Demonstrate Ethical And Professional Behavior" (p. 8) and making supervision a requirement for students during their field education experience. However, despite the importance of supervision in the profession, it is notably absent in higher education overall and social work specifically. A search using Google Scholar on "faculty and supervision" does not turn up any results related to *faculty* being supervised.

The discussion of mentoring has been around for years, and good mentoring has the ability to give mentees an advantage over their un-mentored colleagues. Research has demonstrated that being in a mentoring relationship can increase productivity, enhance professional skills, expand networks, and establish confidence within one's academic identity (Johnson, 2016). The social work profession has been critiqued for the lack of attention to and support of mentoring as an element of professional practice (Wilson et al., 2002).

Wilson and colleagues (2002) published an article examining the mentoring experiences of new social work faculty. They interviewed 19 new faculty who described a mentoring experience with one memorable mentor. Respondents spoke about formal and informal mentoring, formal being assigned by someone in their school, and informal being the result of seeking out a mentor independently or being approached by a senior faculty. Even with a mix of assigned versus organic mentor connections, respondents strongly supported informal mentorships.

Allen and colleagues (2018) conducted a qualitative study that explored how African American social work faculty within predominantly white institutions overcame barriers in order to achieve research productivity. A universal theme that emerged from this study among their participants was the importance of mentorship and support. The authors summarized responses: "on the one hand, having good mentors was expressed as a protective shield and, on the other hand, not having mentors was expressed as a critical challenge/barrier" (p. 312). For African Americans and other minorities in the professoriate, a well-established support system with mentors is inherent to strategically navigating a space that has historically not embraced them (Rasheem et al., 2018). Other universal themes that were revealed from the findings included collaboration, time, and strategic planning.

Women of color in social work education embody a unique positionality as double minorities with lived experiences and traits that, when supported, have offered meaningful contributions to the academy (Vakalahi et al., 2007). However, these characteristics are often ignored or minimized which result in a lack of or no support to this community. This also applies for those who identify as Black women who also experience this intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) due to their historically oppressed social identities. This has resulted in a repeated history of navigating the terrain with minimal support and unacknowledged contributions.

Finding current examples of mentoring/peer-mentoring programs in social work programs is challenging. One that did appear in the searches is by Brady and Spencer (2018) examining a pilot program for new social work instructors called TEAM, the Teaching Excellence and Academic Mentorship program at a Research I school. The program was designed to provide peer mentorship, support, and resources to all new instructors in their first year regardless of status (i.e., part time, faculty, or doctoral students). The goal was to build a positive perception of and culture around teaching which would help increase teaching quality and instructor retention. The researchers found that the orientation was a successful aspect of the program, creating a welcoming environment for new instructors. However, the TEAM program struggled with connecting new instructors to experienced faculty for ongoing support after the first year. While not 100 percent successful, the program "did open dialogue amongst faculty and administration about the importance of mentorship and teaching at an RI institution" (p. 34).

Peer mentoring that evolves organically has been shown to be more effective than formalized mentoring programs. While peer mentoring has no distinct "expert," peers can help each other strengthen professional skills, achieve goals, and provide professional and personal support (Karam et al., 2012). Karam and colleagues wrote about their experience of coming together as new faculty with a goal to support one another in their new roles using a strengths perspective. The authors speak about the unique circumstances that lead them to collaborate with each other (seven newly hired faculty in a school of social work) and support from senior leadership (this group was listed as one of the committees of the school). While this appears to be a great model, it is not feasible in many programs due to small faculty size, limited turnover, or lack of support.

Higher education comes with the same risks of burnout and workplace incivility as other employment settings. Social work is not immune from this phenomenon despite being a profession guided by values and ethics (Horton, 2016). Kircher and colleagues (2011) presented a paper highlighting the epidemic of bullying within social work departments. Miller and colleagues (2018) identified a range of challenges facing faculty, which included heavy workload, demands of teaching, and bullying. These risks reinforce the importance of mentorship to minimize the negative consequences.

Methods

We as researchers obtained IRB approval from their respective institutions to conduct a mixed-methods study on mentoring with social work educators. We crafted an online survey with open- and closed-ended questions asking about mentoring experiences. In addition to some basic demographic information, participants had the opportunity to describe up to three distinct mentoring experiences that included the purpose, what was most and least useful, if mentoring was voluntary or required, and method of contact. Participants were also asked what good vs. bad mentoring looked like, what they needed for mentoring, and if they had access to mentoring to meet those needs. A description and link to the survey was distributed by email to the Masters and Baccalaureate email distribution lists two times, by different members of our research team, along with two other email distribution lists. It was during this process of sending out our survey that all hell broke loose, which derailed our data collection and raised even greater concerns about collegiality within social work education. In the end there were only 41 usable responses, and we realized our paper may be better focused on our experience than the data itself.

The Fallout

As stated above, two different members of the research team emailed out the invitation to participate in the research. One emailed the Baccalaureate email distribution list, and the other emailed the Masters list as well as email distribution lists for “Black Social Work Educators” and “Educators of Color.” All of the announcements were exactly the same, with the exception of the member announcing them.

The researcher who shared the announcement to the Masters email distribution list was publicly instructed by the moderator to include the name of the institutional review board contact person. The researcher who announced it to the Baccalaureate listserv was not asked to make changes. The researcher who was asked for more information identifies as a first-generation Black and woman and the person who was not asked for more information identifies as white and woman. It is important to note that all announcements were, in fact, missing this information in the text of the announcement, though it was included in the attachment letter seeking participants. It was felt by the research team, as well as respondents on the email distribution list, that this was a clear example of a microaggression and unconscious bias on behalf of the moderator, a retired white male faculty member—implying that the Black researcher was less legitimate/competent. Similarly, it is important to reinforce that microaggressions are not about intent, but the outcome; this reality is often interwoven within social work education programs. The Black researcher replied to the request by providing the information while also directly pointing out that the moderator only requested said information from the Black researcher and not the white one.

Thus began a bombardment of responses, both publicly and privately, where some respondents (mostly white) were defensive of the moderator's actions and accusatory of the Black researcher. One of the authors, who identifies as white, had a colleague come into her office and state:

> I see from reading the listserv that your friend is upset, but she needs to be careful about the WAY she is confronting this—these people who she is calling out are well-known and beloved [white, male] social work educators.

This statement implied that there is a right (white) way to be upset about microaggressions and a wrong (Black) way to be upset and to call out the microaggressions of those in power is somehow more risky or offensive. There were also several responses in support of the research team and while some were public, many were shared in individual emails—perhaps recognizing the risk of showing solidarity. In fact, there were at least five different faculty members across the United States who directly emailed the Black researcher expressing their solidarity while also apologizing for not speaking their solidarity in the open and verbalized fearing retaliation by their departments. These instances further reinforce the cognitive dissonance that can occur within social work education and how educators do not "walk" their social justice "talk."

Moreover, some respondents publicly refused to participate in the research study because the Black researcher called out this microaggression, which is problematic, given the core principles of the social work profession. Other respondents, most of which were white women, publicly responded defending the actions of the moderator while directly and indirectly admonishing the research team as a whole and the Black researcher in particular. As a result of this unanticipated turn of events, there was poor turnout in responses to the survey, which was intended to explore peer mentoring and support experiences among Baccalaureate social work educators.

One person sent the research team a message directly critiquing the research methods, informing the team not to be overly sensitive and reactive to the feedback as it was unhelpful. This same person then sent an email to the full email list sharing that they suggested we do qualitative interviews. Somehow emailing us directly was not sufficient, and it felt like the author was reporting back to the email list that they had set us straight. On the other hand, three people reached out to the Black researcher asking for permission to utilize the interactions of the mail distribution list, with names redacted, as a case study class assignment that would serve as a clear depiction of how oppressive practices can occur within the exact profession built upon principles that are designed not to perpetuate them.

Any email that expressed support for the research and/or the event that was unfolding quickly received equally vitriolic responses. The author of one such email of support pointed out that you could see from the signature line of the person who got called out that she was in leadership roles in various groups that focused on African Americans specifically and diversity in general. This author pointed out the hypocrisy that was taking place of social workers not living up to their values and responding to a fellow academic in a way that they would never presume to engage with a client.

The incident was so well known that it was publicly called a "brouhaha" when the moderator called out another researcher for not including IRB information. The incident was also blamed for membership exodus on the email distribution list due to the level of animosity that resulted from the fallout of the initial email exchange. There was a recognition in the email sharing the information about departing members for the need to "reflect upon and bring our values to this discussion." In the end, nothing changed with the list; it returned to business as usual.

Discussion

The experience described led to two major issues to discuss which were not part of the original research. First, there arose the importance of mentoring through difficult times and having those mentoring relationships established before they are explicitly needed. This manifested itself in peer support among the research team, as they were able to consult each other, share drafts of responses, and ultimately issue a statement to the email distribution list together. On a larger level, this support system also provided valuable contributions to balancing and prioritizing goals while navigating the terrain of the Academy. Previously existing mentors, on the part of the Black woman researcher who experienced the microaggressions, were also a source of support both privately and publicly and provided both personal advice and public admonishment of the microaggressions. This was done in a way to vocally address the real time occurrence of microaggressive behaviors while also creating a "teachable moment" for other educators who were not aware of how these acts can easily happen.

Secondly, and perhaps more important, arose a lesson on how seasoned professionals can miss an opportunity to translate social work knowledge into practice through mentoring when they do not engage in reflective practices or do their own work to grow. The effects of structural racism and implicit biases which contributed to social injustices that are experienced by people who have historically marginalized social identities can also be found within a profession that was designed to uphold ethical standards and expectations to dismantle all forms of oppression. While we know that these occurrences have always happened, as evidenced in this research which occurred in 2018, the multiple pandemics of 2020 amplified and reiterated the necessary work to be done regarding anti-racism, anti-Black racism, and anti-oppressive practices in social work education, more now than ever.

Social work faculty are not above white supremacy and perpetrating microaggressions. While we encourage students to develop their own cultural humility, we also need to continually work on undoing racism in our own lives and practice. And when we are called on our faults, we must not first jump to defense, but pause and reflect on the fact that there may be unconscious bias motivating our actions or words. It is even more important to take a stand within our own profession so that we may be leaders in the changemaking that must take place in our world in pursuit of social justice. This is especially important as we work to prepare the next generation of social workers who will need this lens to acknowledge and address socially unjust behaviors.

Social work educators are bound by the NASW Code of Ethics (2021) and therefore have professional expectations about their behavior. One could argue their familiarity and embodiment of the values and ethics of the profession should be greater than the average practitioner because they are in a position as educators, ensuring those graduating into the profession are knowledgeable and prepared to implement the code in their future practice. Considering the Code of Ethics within the context of the authors' experience, several concerns can be raised. First, multiple values/ethical principles were disregarded by members of the email distribution list, including social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, and integrity (NASW, 2021). The standard of cultural competence expects social workers to engage in "critical self-reflection (understanding their own bias and engaging in self-correction), recognizing clients as experts in their own culture" (1.05(c)). The Code explicitly outlines the responsibility social workers have toward colleagues, stating "social workers should avoid unwarranted negative criticism of colleagues in verbal, written, and electronic communications with clients or with other professionals" (2.01(b)). In addition, regarding responsibilities to social work as a profession, it is stated that "social workers should contribute to the knowledge base of social work and share with colleagues their knowledge related to practice, research, and ethics" (5.01(d)). These important components of the Code were noticeably absent in the experience of these authors with the above-described experience.

Practices

The attempt to study mentoring taught us some lessons on mentoring that have implications for social work administrators, though it was not through the traditional methods of survey results. In a positive way, established formal, informal, and peer mentoring relationships were well-utilized by all of us as the research team members. In times of trial, we leaned on each other and outside sources of mentoring for support and guidance. Had these relationships not previously been in place, there would be a void of support. Administrators should assist new faculty in developing mentoring relationships on multiple levels—formal, informal, and peer. They should help new faculty connect with a peer group and a formal mentor and assist them in seeking out informal mentors inside or outside of academia. Administrators should provide the time and resources in order to support the mentoring relationships whether by access to technology for conferencing, time away for a lunch or coffee break, or even hosting retreats for the mentors.

In a less positive way, members of the social work email distribution lists failed to identify their roles as peer and informal mentors of other members of the lists, who also happened to be junior faculty. They responded poorly to being called on their implicit bias, racism, and patronizing manner—several members took opportunities to gaslight and act aggressively toward a list member specifically, and the research project as a whole, in response to their own shortcomings. If social work education is truly committed to advancing anti-racism, anti-Black racism, and oppressive practices within accredited programs, then administrators must work with their faculty as well as examine themselves in undoing their own racist actions and refraining from perpetuating or defending the microaggressions of others. Administrators must see their role as formal mentors to other faculty within their own institution and in the larger social work education community and pause to critically reflect on their own biases. It is also very important that they recognize the power and influence they have as key decision makers of their programs in effecting changes that result in more inclusive and equitable environments for their students, faculty, and staff. This is also very important to ensure that social work education programs maintain a workforce of educators and colleagues who are committed to advancing inclusive excellence in the programs. Johnson (2016) starts his book by stating, "deliberate and thoughtful mentoring is one of the *most* [emphasis added] important and enduring roles for the higher education faculty member" (p. 3). In order to *practice what they teach*, social work administrators must be willing to continue to humbly engage and learn from others at the same time they serve as mentors in the spirit of reflexive praxis and practice.

We leave you with questions one of the reviewers of this manuscript posed to us, which we now pose to you. What if supervision for faculty was a standard practice in social work programs? How are social work faculty challenged to maintain their cultural competence and commitment to lifelong learning as expected in the Code of Ethics (2021)? We hope you consider these questions and pose them to your peers as we work towards fully embodying and enacting the Code of Ethics we are charged with as social workers.

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***About the Authors*:** Yarneccia D. Dyson, PhD, MSW (she/her) is Professor, Executive Director, and Head, School of Social Work, North Carolina State University Greensboro, Greensboro, NC (yddyson@uncg.edu); Elisa M. Martin, PhD, MSW (she/her), is Associate Professor, Social Work Program, Siena College, Loudonville, NY (emartin@siena.edu); Laura Hunt Trull, PhD, MSW (she/her) is Associate Professor of Social Work, Quillen College of Medicine, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN (trulllh@etsu.edu); Karen Myers, JD/MSW (she/her) is Adjunct Professor, Social Work Department, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA (myers2kl@jmu.edu).