

# Between the Academy and Queerness: Microaggressions in Social Work Education

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## Abstract

Three social work scholars explore their experiences of microaggressions in academia using queer theory as a lens to disrupt, deconstruct, and disorder the dominant heteronormative discourse. Qualitative analysis of autoethnography narratives resulted in seven themes describing experiences of microaggressions in social work education. Themes illuminated were as follows: (1) queer isolation, (2) throwing shade, (3) queer insult, (4) biphobia: not queer (straight) enough, (5) too queer, (6) queer backlash, and (7) revolving closet door. Concept mapping was used to explore each of these areas as they relate to the values of social work. Recommendations for social work education and research are presented.

## Keywords

autoethnography, gender expressions, heterosexism, qualitative, queer theory, research categories, sexual orientation and LGBT issues

With the passing of marriage equality, some may argue that we have arrived in regard to inclusive environments for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) community. There seemingly has been a cultural shift toward a positive recognition of LGBTQ people. Yet, scholars report homophobia within schools of social work (Dentato et al., 2016; Papadaki, 2016). Martin and colleagues (2009) further support these findings in a report detailing how social work programs failed to adequately assess student competency around LGBT issues, lacked LGBT content in educational material, lacked LGBT youth-specific field placements, and do not have faculty members with sufficient awareness of LGBT issues. Moreover, professional discourse on tolerance versus acceptance continues to be a subject of discussion on the listserv, *Caucus of LGBT Faculty and Students in Social Work* (Elze, 2015).

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The determined, fiery, innovative, and courageous response of the queer community and its allies has been powerful. Historically, the profession of social work has served as a catalyst for this shift. Lesbian social workers were instrumental in shaping the profession (Fredriksen-Goldsen, Kindhorst, Kemp, & Walters, 2009), and contemporary social work scholars continue to lead by imparting wisdom (Scherrer, 2013) and raising consciousness of LGBTQ issues (Pelts, 2014). Some would argue that the academy has risen to the challenge of embracing the LGBTQ community through varied efforts such as implementing queer studies programs, sponsoring queer student groups, and hiring openly LGBTQ faculty. Yet, scholars (Hicks & Jeyasingham, 2016; Gezinski, 2009) have noted a glaring omission of queer content in social work educational curricula. McPhail (2004) challenged social work, stating “largely missing from the mainstream social work literature are the perspectives of postmodern/queer theorists” (p. 3). Surely social work can claim to be a leader in this march toward social justice; our professional organizations have a strong stand on inclusivity. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), the group that oversees social work education accreditation in the United States, mandates the inclusion of content and curriculum related to diversity (2015). The National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2008) ethical standards mandate competence in interventions and promote social justice and empowerment among marginalized groups, including LGBTQ.

As part of their commitment to these professional values, schools of social work often engage in active solicitation of LGBTQ students and faculty. These new scholars are appreciated for diversifying the professional community and enriching the learning environment of their respective institutions; however, they may experience a social work faculty and program that is not prepared to fully embrace them as queer academics. In fact, schools of social work may be unaware of the countless microaggressions that queer academics endure as a part of the systemic heteronormativity within their programs (Messenger, 2009). This includes what Johnson (2014) describes as a “buffer of sorts” (p. 749), whereby students with homophobic values are not challenged by faculty like students who express racist values. However, this implicit ideology not only is the foundation for inequality and is fuel for microaggressions but also contributes to systemic and individual discrimination based on queerness.

In order for schools of social work to continue to lead social change in the area of LGBTQ rights, they must deconstruct the dominant discourse around queerness and engage in what Smith (2013) refers to as “decolonizing queer pedagogy” with a goal to “unsettle these deeply held assumptions about the recognition of identities and social justice” (p. 468). Social workers must critically unpack their privileged understanding of queer scholars by bringing to the forefront their journey within higher education. Schools of social work are positioned to take initiatives to ensure that queer students and faculty are more than welcomed.

In this article, we provide a review of the literature related to microaggressions and queer theory followed by the results of an autoethnographic study. We conclude with a discussion and recommendations for education and research. This article focuses on our experience as cisgender, gay men and as a cisgender bisexual woman. We have chosen to use the word “queer” as an umbrella term for the LGBTQ community. Queer is “inclusive of non-normative sexual orientations and gender identities and expressions” (Mule, 2016, p. 18). We use the terms queer and LGBTQ interchangeably. Queer is not necessarily a label that all people in the LGBTQ community would use; some may view the term as offensive, inappropriate, or not inclusive. The term “queer,” historically rooted as an insult, has been reclaimed by some as a term of solidarity. We honor the political and cultural struggles associated with the term “queer” and reclaim it as an assertion of pride and positive identity, personally and collectively. In addition, we recognize that the acronym LGBTQ is limited. We use it to capture diverse gender and sexual identities and expressions outside heterosexuality and/or cisgenderism, inclusive of two-spirit, gender-queer, and questioning persons.

## Literature Review

### *Microaggressions*

In the most recent decade, there has been a growing trend in academic research around subtle types of discrimination toward marginalized groups. This “new face of discrimination” (Nadal, 2013), microaggressions, is defined as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group” (Sue, 2010, p. 5). Because of their subtle nature, microaggressions typically result in a subjective experience that is often less discernible by those external to the event (Nadal, 2013; Sue et al., 2007). For example, hearing someone use the phrase “That’s so gay!” in reference to a silly gesture can communicate negative perceptions about LGB people. While perhaps unintended, the connotation in this message is that queer people are unpleasant or silly. Woodford, Howell, Silverschanz, and Yu (2012) found that hearing the phrase “That’s so gay!” can interfere with learning and personal growth among college students. Important to note, microaggressions are cyclical in nature. Microaggressions create structural oppression but are also created by structural oppression. Furthermore, chronic experiences of microaggressions has even been associated with posttraumatic stress symptoms which can affect overall psychological well-being (Robinson & Rubin, 2016).

Microaggressions are defined within three subtypes: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations (Sue, 2010). Microassaults are associated with traditional forms of discrimination and are typically a conscious act. Microassaults are “explicit derogations characterized primarily by a verbal, nonverbal, or environmental attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory claims” (Sue, 2010, p. 29), such as calling a person a “faggot” or “queer.” Microinsults and microinvalidations differ in that they are both typically unconscious acts. A microinsult can be a verbal or nonverbal communication that relays a hidden message of an insulting nature toward the target person (Nadal, 2013). For example, assuming a queer faculty member is heterosexual can communicate a dominant heterosexual perspective. Lastly, microinvalidations are characterized as “communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality” of the target person (Sue et al., 2007, p. 274). A microinvalidation occurs when a person describes an experience of discrimination to an individual outside of the experience and they are told that they are being overly sensitive or complaining too much. Microinvalidations are the most damaging because they deny the reality of the person’s subjective and negative experience.

Discrimination based on sexual orientation and heterosexism has been explored within social work pedagogy and research but has often been limited to interpersonal relations among social work students, relations between faculty and students, and client–therapeutic relationships (Brownlee et al., 2005; Fish, 2008; Gates, 2011; Hylton, 2005; McCave, Shepard, & Winter, 2014). Similar to a vast majority of the research in social work about discrimination based on sexual orientation, these articles do not specifically reference the term microaggressions resulting in a dearth of literature on the experiences of sexual orientation discrimination, including microaggressions, in academia among queer faculty (Johnson, 2014). Johnson (2014) was the only article to specifically address queer social work faculty experiences of microaggressions in academia. Understanding microaggressions and its impact on overall well-being should be a focus within social work and more importantly in social work academia.

There is literature to support exploring homophobic attitudes within the social work academy (Ben-Ari, 2001; Chonody, Woodford, Brennan, Newman, & Wang, 2014; Dentato et al., 2016; Papadaki, 2016; Woodford, Brennan, Gutierrez, & Luke, 2013). Ben-Ari (2001) found that social work faculty in Israel expressed an overall low-grade homophobia. Dentato and colleagues (2016)

found that some participants remained closeted due to perceived hostility from students and faculty. Microaggressions can negatively impact the social work academic environment for the student, the faculty, and the client. According to Ross-Sheriff (2012), “there is a significant role for the social work profession to research and disseminate findings in order to raise social and political consciousness of microaggressions” (p. 235). This insight, “can create much needed momentum to propel those within the social work academy” (McCave et al., 2014, p. 422). Given the paucity of attention paid to queer scholars and microaggressions at the departmental level, our study is timely in its efforts to make these explorations.

## *Queer Theory*

Queer theory is used to examine our experiences of microaggressions in social work education. Queer theory spans a significant body of literature with many dimensions; thus, it merits mention that the most salient to our project is the deconstruction or questioning norms and discourses component of queer theory. Queer theory helped us move from the dominant heteronormative discourse that shrouded and silenced our experiences to the radical and politicized idea to disrupt, deconstruct, and disorder the social work education hegemony (Mule, 2016). Situated in postmodernism, queer theory emphasizes sexual and gender fluidity avoiding identity politics as well as sexual and gender labels preferring a society free of such labels (Jagose, 1996; Sullivan, 2003). Teresa de Lauretis is often credited with using the term “Queer Theory” in 1990 as a counterpoint to LG studies and a constricted classification of gay sexuality as deviance or preference. According to Turner (2000), queer theory’s philosophical underpinnings were provided by key scholars such as Judith Butler (1993) who described gender and sexual identity as nonnatural, as “performative”; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985) who described queer thinking as “criss-crossing” (p. xviii) identity, gender, and sexuality; and Foucault (1982) who described humans as “vehicles of power” (p. 221) capable of resistance. Jagose (2009) notes that the fine line of separation between gender and sexuality is key to distinguishing between feminist and queer theory.

We propose that social work academic environments such as classrooms, faculty meetings, and field practicums should be concerned with using power and privilege responsibly. Queer theory, like feminist theory, provides a lens by which a critical audit of these spaces can happen. Others (Jagose, 2009) have also noted the connection between queer and feminist theory stating that before queer theory became “the most recognizable name for anti-identitarian, anti-normative critique” (p. 160), feminist theory had already started an anti-foundationalist movement. McPhail (2004) expands this discussion further highlighting the importance for richer models of gender that consider transgender and gender-variant peoples’ lived experiences.

Supplementing our feminist history with queer theory allows social workers to answer the call by Gross (1988) “to purposefully and systematically tak[e] apart and reexam[in]e the basic assumptions of our theory and craft” (p. 8). By offering this personal, internalized experience, the authors join in solidarity with other queer scholars, situated in a feminist consciousness and dedicated to sexual equality. Queer theory, like feminist theory, allows us to “question norms, hegemonic perspectives, and socially constructed discourses” (Mule, 2016, p. 23).

Social workers engaged in self-reflection challenge their part in systemic oppression preparing themselves for transformative social action. However, as Ortega and Busch-Armendariz (2013) state, “critical analysis of the dynamics of power and privilege moves us toward environments of equity and respect, but it is not the end point of the journey” (p. 6). Defining the “end point” may be impossible but we hope to spur social work into “troubling and challenging heteronormative and cisgendered precepts of the social order” (Mule, 2016, p. 26). Recognizing that sexual justice work is social justice work (Turner, 2016) and that they are inextricably a work-in-progress social workers should strive for the demarginalization of queer scholars within schools of social work.

Queering social work education encourages personal reflections of dominant ways of thinking and promotes discussion around queerness (MacKinnon, 2011). Queering (Heasley & Crane, 2016) refers to disrupting the dominant gender and sexual binaries that prescribe traditional expectations of masculine or feminine and heterosexual or homosexual roles. Graduates of social work programs report a lack of competence in working with queer clients (Fredrikson-Goldsen, Luke, Gutierrez, & Woodford, 2011). Pelts, Rolbiecki, and Albright's (2014) content analysis of key social work journals indicated that nonheterosexual literature is glaringly absent within social work publications.

## Problem Statement

Microaggressions present in social work education negatively impact the experiences of queer scholars and students considering the academy as a career. If not addressed in social work education, the negative impacts of microaggressions can influence the delivery of professional social work and beyond. To begin to fill the gap in the literature surrounding this topic, we set out to explore the question: Qualitatively, what are the experiences related to microaggressions of queer-identified, emerging scholars in social work academe?

## Method

### Design

Queer theory guided this qualitative study by allowing the authors to engage in what Mule (2016) describes as the "disordering and re-ordering of the current social order to be more inclusive and diversified" (p. 18). Autoethnography approaches were employed to collect data. This approach was selected because it aligns well with queer theory and the aims of this study. Richards and Morse (2013) argue that autoethnography is often used when the researcher seeks to understand milestone events in their own lives. Further, autoethnography is posited to be particularly helpful when the researchers identify with a group that has been marginalized by society (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) define autoethnography as: an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience. This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act . . . autoethnography is both process and product. (p. 273)

The authors are a collection of social scientists seeking to explore their own cultural and social experiences related to identifying as queer in the social work academy. For this study, we employed a coconstructive autoethnographic model (Ellis et al., 2011); each of us wrote about our experiences of queerness in the academy and we then shared our stories with each other and shared our reactions to each other stories. Applying the principals of autoethnography provided a systematic way to introspectively explore our personal thoughts and feelings in response to our experiences in the academy. It required a high level of awareness and a commitment from each of us to look individually and collectively at our motives behind our feelings and the contradictions in feelings that surfaced. Thematic analysis and concept mapping were used to analyze the data; these approaches provided structure to organize the data, identify themes, define themes, and identify relationships between themes.

### Participants

Turner is a junior scholar in the social work academy and identifies as a Caucasian, cisgender, openly gay man. Pelts is a doctoral candidate and full-time visiting instructor and identifies as a Caucasian, cisgender, openly gay man. Thompson is fourth-year doctoral student who identifies as a biracial, cisgender, queer female in a heterosexual relationship. Our identities as first-generation

college students spurred our original collaboration (Turner, Pelts, & Thompson, 2016) and have expanded beyond this original project. A first-person report of who we are is provided.

*Turner.* I am an out gay man and junior scholar in a school of social work. I am aware of my privilege within this writing group, as a nonstudent; I am afforded more latitude in my critique of the academy. However, I often feel like I straddle the fence of authenticity and silencing my voice. At this stage of my life, I no longer view it a viable option to live or practice in the closet. I embrace a position to challenge heteronormative assumptions but also struggle with my own remnants of internal homophobia.

*Pelts.* I am a doctoral candidate completing my dissertation and a full-time visiting instructor. I am entering the academy after a career in social services where I worked as a clinician and program administrator. I am an out gay man. My motivation to pursue a doctorate degree stems from my conviction to address social injustices that manifest in service delivery. I approach social injustices as an opening to educate. Researching matters related to injustices that impact education and social work practice is my passion. I experienced microaggressions in the academy and I also found allies who served as my mentors and welcomed me.

*Thompson.* As a fourth-year doctoral student, I am in a weird space regarding my academic position in both my professional and personal sphere. I have almost 10 years of clinical experience in crisis, substance abuse, and mental health. I also taught as an adjunct lecturer prior to enrolling in my doctoral studies. I am a biracial, cisgender, female in a heterosexual relationship. There is always this air of uncertainty on who I invite into my space because I tend to lose people when I disclose my queerness. I am entering the academy in efforts to further discourse on social injustices experienced by queer people of color.

### **Data Collection**

Following the autoethnographic approach, we audio recorded our stories related to our experiences in academia, our reactions to our own stories, and our reactions to each other's stories over a period of 5 months. We also maintained written notes capturing key points, quotes, feelings, and narrative descriptions of our personal experiences. During these meetings, our reflections illuminated themes that were captured and labeled. We revisited these themes with each member contributing thoughts and personal stories in relation to the theme. These recordings and the collective written meeting notes comprised the data sources for this inquiry.

### **Analysis**

Multiple rounds of qualitative analysis were conducted to identify, refine, and define themes and explore how themes connected. First, thematic analysis, well-suited for exploring autoethnographic data (Richards & Morse, 2013), was applied. Because we used autoethnography, the reflexive practice of explicit and self-awareness of thoughts and feelings were employed throughout the process. During this process, other potential themes were identified and researchers revisited their stories through the lens of newly emerging themes to explore how emerging narratives offered additional insight.

To further understand the results of the thematic analysis and the relationships between themes, concept mapping was applied. It was selected because it pairs well with thematic analysis to concisely and visually illustrate relationships while maintaining the rich meanings that emerged

(Yin, 2015). Concept mapping also allowed us to explore, organize, and present the themes as they relate to the three types of microaggressions.

## Results

The three microaggression categories provided a framework for the seven themes. Within microinsult emerged: (1) queer isolation, (2) throwing shade, and (3) queer insult; microassault was depicted through the themes (4) biphobia: not queer (straight) enough, (5) too queer, and (6) queer backlash; and the last theme (7) revolving closet door showcased microinvalidation. How these themes manifested in social work academia and how they are interconnected are explored.

### *Microinsult*

*Queer isolation.* Queer isolation can be partly understood as merely the independent nature of faculty. However, as emerged from this analysis, heterosexual faculty are constantly reinforced of their majority status and may not require the support of others at the same level as queer scholars due to this privileged status. Queer members may be forced to seek community outside of their immediate social work collegial circle, reaching across campus to find a network of queer interdepartment colleagues or engaging with scholars outside of their university to make queer connections. This is what Turner did as he learned about Pelts' work.

Thompson noted that her department had no doctoral program faculty conducting research in queer-related issues:

I lucked out to have a great advisor . . . a strong advocate for the student. He does not try to force you to conduct research related to his center . . . I appreciated the fact that he gave me that green light to look at what was important to me.

While she was provided contacts outside her department, she experienced many challenges with maintaining those connections. Having found a dissertation chair that was a supportive ally, Pelts felt like he needed to confirm that his topic was "okay" with his heterosexual committee members.

*Throwing shade.* The phrase *throwing shade* is borrowed from black and Latinx drag queens (Livingston et al., 1992). Throwing shade refers to an indirect insult through a condescending voice or disapproving gaze. As in, unknowingly academic colleagues often *shade* queer research hinting that it should be avoided or it is not as valuable as other research. Being told that queer research "is a career killer" served as the impetus for one of the author's research agenda. It was noted that while a part of a group research project, one of the members asked that their name not be put on submitted manuscripts related to queer research. Another member noted that there were seemingly discriminatory practices once a departmental support staff member learned their research project included queer topic matter.

*Queer insult.* In a general dialogue among the authors, it came to light that many practices within academia can be insulting and off the radar of our colleagues. For example, using practicum sites that have homophobic practices, or policies that blatantly discriminate against queer employees or clientele, is the antithesis of inclusivity. Justifying maintaining ongoing relationships with these facilities convey a message that queer scholars are secondary in the school.

## Microassault

**Biphobia.** Biphobia is a term associated with negative attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors toward and about bisexual people (Bostwick & Hequembourg, 2014; Scherrer, 2013). There is a negativity that surrounds bisexuality that often prevents bisexuals from living safely outside of the closet. In evaluating phobias and attitudes toward LGBT people among MSW students, Logie, Logie, and Bridge (2007) found that students reported greater phobias toward bisexual and transgender populations as compared with LG. Thompson described her experiences as never being queer enough for the LGBT community and never being straight enough for the heterosexual community; “I navigate my personal and professional life rather cautiously. It is often easier to remain silent and only respond when directly asked. But even during these times, safety is an issue.” This speaks to the importance of exploring biphobia within academia.

**Too queer.** Turner shared that it is disappointing when student evaluations from undergraduate and graduate courses criticize the amount of time that he spent lecturing on the LGBTQ community or providing *too many* “queer exemplars.” It felt as if the queer content was scrutinized more than traditional examples such as child welfare. “It was as if I and my gay-focused practice were not valued. My queer identity was being asked to wait outside of the classroom. What else do I have to pull from other than my experience as queer social worker?” The implication by the students that the “queer” needs to be dialed back or that it is not a legitimate subject is indicative of the student’s own pending work on inclusivity. Turner strives to create a nurturing space for students and as a novice faculty often defaulted to allowing homophobic views and heteronormative privilege in class as a way to assuage student feedback that he had a “gay agenda.” Years of wrestling with the implications led Turner to appreciate student struggle as part of their learning process. Toning down a queer identity in an effort to placate the privileged comes at a high personal cost. Turner shared

Learning is often uncomfortable. I would shut down a racist, sexist, ableist, or misogynist comment in a heartbeat, so why would I allow, let alone encourage, heterosexist or homophobic views in my classroom? I cannot allow my own complicity in these microaggressions, it is an attack on everything I stand for as a social worker. It is an attack on me.

**Queer backlash.** Queer backlash was a recurring theme. Backlash is not always explicit but takes the form of shaming. As students and nontenured faculty, our differing positions afforded us differing truths. We had many conversations about feeling vulnerable in the writing of this article. Aware that these may be misguided self-perceptions on the depth of potential backlash, we still felt it important to raise the issue that many queer scholars take on a vigilance of self-monitoring to avoid perceived or real backlash from the majority. This is exhausting and the antithesis of scholarly inquiry. So how do you provide an accurate audit of a profession when you view your position as dependent on those in power?

## Microinvalidation

**Revolving closet door.** Finally, what does it feel like to go in and out of the closet, as if managing a revolving closet door? We summarized that often our sexual orientation feels like it needs to be clarified or announced in the presence of heteronormativity. Because a queer identity may not be visible, there is a constant feeling that you need to reintroduce yourself, making the queer part visible. Turner shared, “It can feel like your whole self has not entered the room and you need to make sure that all of you, your queer identity, is seen.” This is highlighted by a discussion Thompson had with a colleague about fostering black youths. Thompson felt the conversation was going great.



“We must have talked for 30 min. We were clearly connecting on this topic.” Each expressed an interest to stay in touch exchanging contact information. However, the tone changed once Thompson outed herself. Furthermore, there was no follow up by the colleague.

## **Discussion**

Through the lens of queer theory, we applied an autoethnographic approach to explore our coconstructed narratives related to our experiences of microaggressions as queer emerging scholars in social work academe? While we believe an ability to express your authentic queer self is essential to good social work, we also recognize that coming out is a luxury not afforded to everyone and as indicated by the results of this study, the social work academy is not immune to microaggressions that negatively impact the experiences of queer scholars. Results are not surprising considering that other scholars have found that homophobia often goes unchallenged within schools of social work (Dentato et al., 2016).

The results of this study contribute to the scholarly literature by bringing to light how microaggressions toward queer scholars manifest in social work academe. Microinsults manifest in many ways. These acts, most often delivered unconsciously (Sue, 2010), left us as queer scholars feeling isolated and sometimes disconnected from other members of the academy. If our research interests were related to LGBTQ, we often found ourselves feeling discounted and further isolated from large or entire segments of the social work academy.

Microassaults are particularly concerning because this form of microaggressions are often delivered consciously (Sue, 2010). Microassaults illuminated in this analysis stemmed from what we as queer scholars described as a lack of understanding and a lack of acceptance related to the degree and spectrum of queerness. In other words, identifying as queer may be acceptable as long as we were not “too gay,” did not stray too far from the heteronormative culture, or stayed within one of the two clearly defined binary categories of sexual orientation. Results suggest that microassaults that impact queer scholars who identify as bisexual may stem from both heterosexual scholars and lesbian/gay scholars.

Microinvalidations, though often delivered unconsciously, can nullify an individual’s thoughts or feelings (Sue, 2010). These experiences of invalidation in combination with microassaults and microinsults often left us reserved, uncertain, and conflicted. During a time when it is important for emerging scholars to connect, we often found ourselves “testing the waters” to assess how safe it was to be our queer selves or attempting to assess whether or not our research would be received by other scholars. We also described our experiences as using our limited energies to continuously push the “revolving door” to bring our authentic selves into the room. Our romantic views of the social work academy, the profession that challenges oppressive actions and embraces inclusivity, imploded as a result of our experiences.

As evidenced by the results of this study, social work academe can be a part of the solution. For example, queer allies are vital and were instrumental in helping each of us maneuver the academy and counter the negative impacts of microaggressions. However, the academy can be part of the problem by tolerating expressions of queer intolerance in the classrooms and tolerating heteronormativity in policies and practices. Information presented here provides several points of discussion for implications for education and research.

## ***Implications for Social Work Education***

As reflected in the thematic analysis, microaggressions that can negatively impact queer scholars can be structural in nature (Mullaly, 2007). Aware that these microaggressions are socially constructed, Sue (2010) suggests that these subtle and intentional or unintentional microassaults,

microinsults, and microinvalidations that interfere with queer scholars' experiences in the social work academy can be interrupted with a thoughtful and purposeful strategy of change. A suggestion would be to use Hankivsky's (2012) intersectionality-based policy analysis (IBPA) framework, a multilevel analysis viewing the intersection of power, privilege, and oppression at micro- and macrolevels. The intersectionality of a queer identity with other identities and the discrimination leveled through racism, ableism, and misogyny to name a few is critical as social workers examine the "interconnectedness of various systems of oppression" (Mehrotra, 2010, p. 417). Additionally, a macro focus might have social work to consider a survey similar to the Human Right Campaign's (HRC) Corporate Equality Index (2017) or GLSEN's National School Climate Survey (2013).

Additionally, as recommended by other scholars (McPhail, 2004), social work may begin to incorporate a deconstruction of gender and sexuality binaries. Johnson (2014) recommended offering regular, structured opportunities for faculty and administrators to engage in supportive dialogue where faculty can openly share and process their experiences of oppression in the academy and strategize about ways to be inclusive of all students, staff, faculty, and administrators. Most recently, the CSWE Council on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression released guidelines for creating affirmative environments for LGBTQ students, staff, and faculty in social work education (Craig et al., 2016).

The normative reference point of heterosexuality that shadows our social work theory, literature, and teaching can perpetuate microaggressions in the social work academy. These microaggressions may be countered and challenged by incorporating queer scholarship into the learning environment (Pelts et al., 2014). Furthermore, adopting a lens of intersectionality (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013) that illustrates appreciation for the layered experiences of queer scholars who identify with multiple marginalized groups is recommended.

### *Implications for Social Work Research*

A common factor of autoethnography, and true for us, was the therapeutic value of exploring and analyzing our individual and collective stories (Ellis et al., 2011). The potential value of this approach was identified in our first meeting. Systematically analyzing our stories through the autoethnography approach furthered the personal value of this work. This research afforded us the opportunity to share our experiences with others in a meaningful way that may inform best practices. In a discipline committed to social justice, the underutilized autoethnography approach may be beneficial in systematically processing the experiences of microaggressions and identifying areas where improvements can be made. The autoethnographic approach may be beneficial in understanding the experiences of other marginalized groups. We encourage social work scholars who identify as queer and scholars that identify with other marginalized groups to utilize the autoethnographic approach to explore their experiences. Sharing the results of an autoethnography can leave researchers vulnerable; the public presentation of the relational self allows for extensive exposure (Ellis et al., 2011). However, the results hold great value which can benefit the collective social work community.

Queer theory offered a valuable lens that social work might consider using more often. This theory, underused in social work, offers a critical and progressive lens in which to disrupt identity and more importantly the assumptions about what is central or foundational within the social work academy (Hicks & Jeyasingham, 2016). As Mule (2016) notes, "the ethos of queer liberation is linked to principles of the social work profession including personal agency" (p. 32).

### **Conclusion**

Due to the nature of the self-reflective autoethnography approach, traditional generalizability is limited. However, informed by queer theory, the three personal accounts presented here may provide

readers an opportunity to appreciate the experiences of others. Autoethnography is typically evaluated by the individual reader, allowing readers to consider the factors that make life different for themselves (e.g., heteronormative privilege) when compared to narrative experiences of the researchers (e.g., queer social work scholars who experience microaggressions). Readers may also find the autoethnography as validating—providing them with a means to better manage their own circumstances (Ellis et al., 2011). Microaggressions are created from and facilitate structural oppression that interferes with the experiences of queer scholars in social work academe. This study adds to the discourse on disrupting heteronormative privilege, specifically within schools of social work. Our hope is to inform colleagues and potential mentors on the nature of the queer experience in the academy and generate a greater understanding about the lived experiences of queer academics. Ideally this information will be used to improve the attractiveness of social work departments to potential queer student candidates, help social work programs to continue efforts welcoming current and new queer faculty, and may lead to schools benefiting from a more diverse social work environment.

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