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~ Message From the Executive Director and Founder~



Welcome to the Spring/Summer 2021 Edition of the *Journal of Educational Research and Interdisciplinary Studies*. It is an honor and privilege to share the Journal of Educational Research and Interdisciplinary Studies [JERIS] with you. The aim is to provide quality educational research and refined educational practices that will afford you as the reader to be empowered as a leader/practitioner as well as serve as an active transformational change agent within your higher educational institutions.

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Jà Hon Vance, Executive Director



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Commentary: Considering Flexibility

Author: Dr. Rinnel Atherton
Institution: Young Harris College



In the last ten years I have had the privilege of teaching in remote, online, and in-person formats in Higher Education. I enjoyed each because there are distinct differences in terms of the experiences my students and I create and undergo. To become more proficient and learn from my colleagues, I attend many trainings and professional development seminars focused on best practices and engage in dialogue particularly as it applies to the online format. There are many elements that contribute to best practices in relation to pedagogical procedures which support positive learning outcomes for students. The current crisis has made it even more crucial since moving to formats that include teaching remotely and/or online. This has necessitated modifying our approach and adding novel pedagogical methods to our toolboxes and skill sets.

In trainings several components of best practices have been emphasized. For example, one crucial element centers on creating a climate and culture that is accommodating. My interpretation of this is that there is a need to create learning environments that support community members experiencing a sense of belonging and perceptions of emotional security which is just as relevant in face-to-face contexts (as supported by Atherton, 2010; Hamm & Faircloth, 2005). Another element is the fundamental need to communicate clear expectations to your students, which center on the faculty's responsibilities and that of the students throughout the learning process. This includes but is not limited to the modes of communication, the turnaround time for both initial and more substantive subsequent responses to email or other communications, how students will be supported, and students' work ethic requirements and responsibilities, to outline a few. There are other aspects of online pedagogical praxes that are covered in trainings and seminars that are crucial to supporting positive adjustment for students that can be addressed which I will not go into in this commentary.

The list of responsibilities has grown measuredly so since I first started ten years ago. However, as I continue to navigate the pedagogical world particularly in remote and online formats, I am finding that I need to exercise a certain measure of flexibility. While it is fundamental to hold students to the outlined expectations in terms of completion of assignments, due dates, and deadlines, I now must consider some of the issues that students are having in the remote and online formats that they have been thrown into currently. There are many times when students and faculty are required to change browsers in order to support the specific online platforms on which they are working, other students may not have the resources for reliable devices or internet service, some students are in different time zones, sometimes there are weather outages, other times students have questions which they may ask late at night and so will not receive a response until the following day, others do not have a supportive work environment at home (which they may not have control over), since the pandemic some students have been called up as essential workers (e.g., college students who may be members of the military reservist), and a myriad other challenges. Thus, as faculty we would be faced with the ethical and moral obligation to make a decision that allows us to provide the type of accommodations that would facilitate student learning, success, and positive adjustment. This demands a certain measure of flexibility on the part of the faculty member that entails creativity, reviewing submissions past the original due date, engaging in dialogue with students that would facilitate their development, support perceptions of emotional security and a sense of belonging, and give insight into how the student can be best supported. Even as faculty members make decisions about the level of or degree of flexibility that can be extended to students, they must keep in mind the learning goals and outcomes for learners.

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A Literature Review:

Incarceration and the Impact of Educational Rehabilitation on Recidivism



Author: Dr. Doris Bullock

Institution: Edward Waters University

The desire to combat recidivism is not a new conversation. However, the topic of recidivism has appeared to continue alongside research on prison reform and desistance. As part of the review of literature on the subject of recidivism, incarceration, and higher education the concept of desistance is included or incorporated into the research. Shadd Maruna (2017), in “Desistance as a Social Movement,” explores the subject of desistance in a very straightforward manner. Created by criminologists, the term “desistance” was rarely spoken of at the turn of the 21st century (Maruna, 2017).

Recidivism is the most common measure of correctional program effectiveness. Measures of recidivism typically include re-arrest, reconviction, resentencing to prison for a new felony-level offense, and a return to prison for a technical violation revocation. Research has shown that a majority of released prisoners recidivate, particularly when measured as a re-arrest, within at least 3 years of release from prison (Langan & Levin, 2002). In their study of more than 400,000 offenders released from prisons in 30 states in 2005, Durose et al. (2014) report that 68% were rearrested over a 5-year follow-up period.

Durose et al. (2014) also found that recidivism rates were higher for men, non-Whites, younger offenders, and those with longer criminal histories, which is consistent with previous research showing that gender, race, age, and criminal history are among the strongest “static” (i.e., factors that cannot change) predictors of reoffending (Gendreau, Little, & Goggin, 1996).

There are dynamic factors (i.e., those that are susceptible to change) that are generally predictive of recidivism. The dynamic factors such as criminogenic needs (attitudes supportive of an antisocial lifestyle, substance abuse, antisocial companions), personal distress (anxiety, depression, schizophrenia), and social

achievement (marital status, level of education, employment) are significantly associated with recidivism risk.

Employment is often considered to be critical in helping offenders successfully transition from prison to the community. Although research suggests that an offender who finds a job is less likely to re-offend (Skaedhamar & Telle, 2012), post-release employment is also important from a cost-benefit perspective. When offenders are working, they are usually paying income taxes, which helps generate revenue for federal and state governments. Whereas offender post-release employment can provide a tangible monetary benefit, research has demonstrated that crime is very costly to society (Cohen & Piquero, 2009).

Work is a buffer against crime and, more narrowly, recidivism (Skardhamar & Telle, 2012). Individuals are less likely to commit crime when they work more often, when work is considered satisfying (Uggen, 1999), when they have employment that is stable (Crutchfield & Pitchford, 1997), and when they perceive themselves as having career potential (Huiras, Uggen, & McMorris, 2000).

More than half the people who are incarcerated in prisons and jails are also parents of minor children. An estimated 2.7 million children in the United States have a parent in prison or jail—one in every 28 children (BJS, 2016). They and other family members can face financial difficulties, housing instability, loss of emotional support and guidance, and social stigma as a consequence of having a loved one in prison. These challenges often have significant impacts on children of incarcerated parents, who have an increased risk of poor school performance, substance addiction, and mental health needs.

Strong family relationships are also an essential part of reentry because people returning to their communities often rely on relatives for help with housing, transportation, and finances, in addition to emotional support. Programs that focus on cultivating these relationships can improve outcomes for both incarcerated people and their families by engaging families in the reentry process and providing them with pre-and post-release services. For parents specifically, these services may include parenting workshops and peer support, financial literacy classes, and organized family visits to correctional facilities (BJS, 2016).

In academic criminology, the concept has had a transformational impact on justice practices, emerging as a mainstream focus that concentrates on the developmental or life-course “recovery movements” (Maruna, 2017, p. 6). As a practice, Maruna (2017) describes desistance as a social movement that expresses the individual’s own desire to refrain from recidivism. This understanding of the literature helps shape the focus of the topic from that of rehabilitation—or programmatic structuring of institutions working to generate change and fix broken people—to recognizing and building individual strengths by recognizing one’s talents and other influences around a person’s life—their life-course (Maruna, 2017).

While Maruna addresses education as a way to increase an individual’s self-esteem and self-worth for self-motivational internal change, Szifris, Fox, and Bradbury (2018) argue for the school of thought in desistance to be a theory of its own. In “A Realist Model of Prison Education, Growth, and Desistance: A New Theory,” Szifris et al. (2018) argue that correctional education and

desistance are a part of the individual person, their growth, and how that personal growth is actually the space where prison reformation and judicial change occurs.

This allows for “a contextualized discussion of *education* in prison for the *person* in prison” (Szifris et al., 2018, p. 42). It is this use of education for personal development that enable educational programming to concentrate not only the education of behavior strategy and change, but rather the “acquisition of skills and knowledge, on broadening the mind, and on developing new interests” (Szifris et al., 2018, p. 42).

Similarly, Michaela Soyer (2013), in “The Imagination of Desistance: A Juxtaposition of the Construction of Incarceration as a Turning Point and the Reality of Recidivism,” uses the notion of turning points in life as a deterrent from a life of crime. According to Soyer (2013), recidivism is an effect of the incarceration itself, especially from a juvenile-justice facility standpoint. The teenagers interviewed could not put into practice their desire to change, a desire that was realized while incarcerated. Additionally, the punitive nature of the system denies a level of creative agency, so the narrative of self-transformation is never realized, leading to recidivism (Soyer, 2013). Thus, much of the research on recidivism and incarceration begins with a behavioral analysis of the prisoners themselves.

While some research treats aspects of desistance as a byproduct of traditional examination on recidivism, other investigations incorporate the issues of race and predictability of criminal recurrence. Like Soyer (2013), Cochran and Mears (2017), in “The Path of Least Resistance: Inmate Compliance and Recidivism,” address a type of behavioral assessment using the life turning point concept to address a larger issue of incarceration versus correction and effects on reentry.

Using a historiography of prisons, Cochran and Mears (2017) give insight into the experience of “correctional” facilities that were “designed with the goal of ‘correcting’ individuals through isolation, deprivation, and hard work” (p. 432), whereas incarceration does the opposite. The authors sought to utilize “signals” from the inmates through the trajectory of prison misconduct to determine the potential to “go straight” (p. 433).

Skeem and Lowenkamp (2016) likewise use a predictive analytic model to the reduction of recidivism. However, in their article, “Risk, Race, and Recidivism: Predictive Bias and Disparate Impact,” Skeem and Lowenkamp seek to qualify not only the claim of reducing mass incarceration, but also the types of punishments that should occur to reduce recidivism according to risk factors associated with the individual.

According to Skeem and Lowenkamp (2016), “One way to begin unwinding mass incarceration without compromising public safety is to use risk assessment instruments in sentencing and corrections” (p. 680). In their study, they attempt not only to address how risk assessment addresses the types and levels of punishment but also how race plays into this process, considering the correlating controversies.

With a distinct difference between mass incarceration and rehabilitation, and spending on prisons increasing threefold since 1980, there is a growing bipartisan desire for criminal justice reform that can occur by shifting funding from incarceration to public schools (Brown & Douglas-Gabriel, 2016; Hawkins, 2017). Hawkins (2017) indicates the disproportionate effect of incarceration

within minority communities, citing “the role of money and for-profit prison services in increasing incarceration rates” (p. 17). However, Hawkins also cites findings from the ACLU and inmate outcomes from Davis (2013) to show not only a 43% lowered odd of inmate recidivism but also a change in mindset to assist others outside of prison via their participation in college admission counseling as a profession.

The role education plays or can play in either reducing mass incarceration from the onset and recidivism of incarcerated individuals is the one consistent theme found within the concept of reducing recidivism. Brady Duke (2018) addresses the need to study prior educational experiences as a means to determine the best course of action for perceived behavioral change and increase desistance. Like Hawkins, Duke determines the need to incorporate demography as a function of who most benefits from correctional education, suggesting that Black men with a high school education or GED would have the greatest benefit. Brett Dignam (2016) determines there is a need to concentrate on the positive aspects of change that can occur during incarceration. Similar to Hawkins and Duke, Dignam uses the lens of race, yet considers how the “tough on crime” and “truth in sentencing” campaigns have led to longer sentences and endemic overcrowding. Like Brown and Douglas-Gabriel, Dignam concludes in the article that “eleven states (including Connecticut) spend more on incarceration than on education” with confinement becoming “increasingly punitive” (p. 1220).

Much of the literature reviewed was related to the types of programs within the concept of what will be used as correctional education. Given this term was found consistently throughout the literature, there was a distinct difference between articles that addressed differences between gender, race, and age. While some researchers such as Soyer (2013) address juvenile justice, others such as Mokoelle (2016) concentrates on the adult male population of 18 years and older. Mokoelle suggests the need for “a transparent and thorough offender intake assessment process” to promote “effective offender intake strategies” (p. 87).

Mokoelle addresses the need to study prior experiences of the inmate to effectively sentence, process, and provide subsequent and appropriate correctional educational programming. However, offender educational opportunities are found through correctional sentence plans (CSP) and are only available for prisoners serving longer than 24 months, creating a problem of recidivism for those with shorter sentencing. Nevertheless, the author suggests collaborations with universities, online education programs, and prepared sentence plans for those serving less than 24 months be methods of addressing correctional education. Though focused on the South African prison population, the need for correctional education is a global phenomenon and mirrors that of the United States, especially in post-apartheid South Africa.

Though the correctional sentence plan (CSP) may be one way the United States can analyze other communities and correctional education, Doran Larson (2015) uses globalization as a way to impact correctional education. Larson (2015) suggests adopting European practices of normalization to U.S. penal practices. A Nordic prison base policy and practice, normalization is the preparation “for assimilation into life outside . . . by making life inside as much like life outside” (p. 10).

In the same vein, Sokoloff and Schenck-Fontaine (2017) address the need for localized and effective transitioning programming for reduced recidivism upon societal reentry. The damaging stigmas that come along with imprisonment after release can have long-term effects that include barriers to employment, health insurance, housing, voting, and other ineligibility, or loss of rights. As previously noted, Larson (2015) and Sokoloff and Schenck-Fontaine (2017) concentrate on reentry into society. This theme is a key staple of much of the literature on recidivism and higher education within the penal system. Bala and Mooney (2019) and Mastrorilli, Matesanz, and Rousseau (2016) both address the issue of reentry, but in particular argue for the case of higher education and the role of Second Chance Pell.

Initiated by an executive order during the Obama administration, Second Chance Pell sought to address the 1994 ineligibility of incarcerated individuals to receive federal funding for higher education. On June 24, 2016, U.S. Department of Education Secretary John King announced the 67 colleges and universities that were selected to participate in the Second Chance Pell Pilot Program (U.S. Department of Education Second Chance Pell Piece, 2016). According to Gray (2018), “both academia and the workplace must do more” (p. 17) to be inclusive of those individuals who otherwise would be overlooked on the job application as well as in higher education due to their criminal history. There is a risk assessment of individuals who can participate, but the program shows an increase in self-esteem, self-worth, and confidence. Yet, these articles show the lack of actual research on the program itself, its direct effect on recidivism except for a correlation to the 2013 meta-analysis funded by the Department of Justice, and RAND Corporation speaking to how correctional education reduces the likelihood to return to prison by 43% (U.S. Department of Education Second Chance Pell Piece, 2016).

Skeem and Lowenkamp (2016) address the notion of securing public safety; however, Bala and Mooney (2019) address individual dignity, family values, and financial support of individuals who are experiencing life after incarceration and higher education can secure such the promise of the rehabilitated individual. However, according to Bala and Mooney (2019), the experiment in Second Chance Pell has not been in existence long enough to yield results on the initiative’s impact on recidivism. Still, allowing college and universities the opportunity to apply for such an Experimental Sites Initiative increasing “access to postsecondary education in correctional facilities, with the government evaluating the academic and life outcomes of those who received postsecondary education” (p. 48) is a move in the right direction to improve safety both inside and outside of prison. Mastrorilli et al. (2016) also studied the impact Second Chance Pell and focused on the correctional mindset of finding something wrong and fixing it. The authors articulate a positive movement toward policy and practice of prison education, “supporting prison education and postsecondary education specifically” (p. 26). Bala and Mooney (2019) document how past research has shown a decrease in recidivism when attached to expansion and funding of postsecondary correctional education programs, and in particular, how study literature, social sciences, and the arts result in positively developing critical thinking, cognition, and mindset change.

While most research addresses the prison system, reform, and reentry into society, another theme within the construct of recidivism, incarceration, and higher education is the benefit of correctional education to the higher education landscape versus the person incarcerated. Jones (2018) insists that due to declining enrollment, a decrease of 230,000 students since spring 2017, higher

education institutions that participate and invest in correctional education can yield beneficial results in a landscape in which many are struggling.

Societal reentry is one theme that finds itself present throughout the recidivism conversation, as the successful desistance of released inmates and reduced recidivism is contingent upon acclimation into society. Wikoff, Linhorst, and Morani (2012) take into account programs like Second Chance Pell that allow formerly incarcerated individuals to participate in reentry programs with a lowered risk of criminal relapse. Given that the number and rate of individuals released from correctional facilities without parole supervision have increased over the last decade, so does the risk factor for ex-offenders to return to prison (Wikoff et al., 2012).

Several community-level factors that affect successful transitions include the availability of housing, substance abuse treatment, health services, and among other mentioned, access to education (Wikoff et al., 2012). Effective transitioning into society without some level of supervision may be rectified by having released inmates attend postsecondary institutions.

Among the research, there appears to be one constant—correctional education needs to continue to evolve. According to Drake and Fumia (2017), “correctional education has been at the cornerstone of prison programming since the rehabilitative era began at the turn of the 19th century” and “was designed to focus on math, literacy, and communication skills training” (p. 549). However, Drake and Fumia question the effectiveness of correctional education.

From the elimination of Pell in 1994, to the Second Chance Act of 2007, and the Second Chance Pell Experimental Program in 2016, there appears the need to understand how correctional education is transitioning to not only accommodate high school equivalency and onsite prison reform but how programs need to be tailored to fit the correctional facility and population. Drake and Fumia provide a foundation for how research on correctional education and its effectiveness can be conducted to ensure not only a set of best practices but also valid concrete evidence on the true successes of such programmatic interests.

This literature review gives a rather comprehensive overview of the types of themes present in the research on recidivism, incarceration, and higher education, not only highlighting the area of focus that clearly define this study as one that addresses the initial results of Second Chance Pell, but also how such programs can benefit institutions of higher education, particularly the Historically Black College and University, and the local community with opportunities for evolution beyond traditional concepts of correctional education.

Recent trends in prisoner education have narrowed educational choice away from college toward job training. One event that facilitated this process was the denial of Pell Grant to inmates. The U.S. Congress created the Basic Educational Opportunity Grant program in 1972 in response to the need for financial assistance for those pursuing postsecondary education. In 1980, the program was given a new title—the Pell Grant program, in recognition of Senator Claiborne Pell of Rhode Island, who was instrumental in its establishment.

The Department of Education announced in June 2016 that 67 colleges and universities had been selected to participate in the new Second Chance Pell pilot program, an experiment announced in

July 2015 to test whether participation in high-quality education programs increases access to financial aid for incarcerated individuals.

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Taking off the Mask



Author: Dr. Quincy Dinnerson, Norfolk State University
Author: Dr. Shanika Lavi Wilson, North Carolina Central University
Author: Dr. Niah White, Spirit Counseling & Consulting, PLLC

Abstract

This article captures the experience of an African American male navigating through the social work education landscape to become a social work practitioner and educator. The writer reveals their experience as an African American male student facing challenges of micro-aggression, racism, and privilege. Both an autoethnography and counter storytelling framed in critical race theory are the methodologies used to narrate this article. The stories are supported by two additional authors that shared in my learning experiences. This work is a contribution to the field of social work as a resource providing a perspective on the value of diversity and cultural competency.

Key words: Autoethnography, social work, African American, male

Introduction

Social work is a diverse profession that focuses on assisting individuals, groups, families, and communities utilizing direct practice, indirect practice, social justice, advocacy, and a host of other skills. According to the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) (2014), Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities are central to social work.ⁱ

While this definition is quite complex, the mission of social work is rooted in the core values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. Bringing these values from theory to implementation is a mandate that leaves much to be desired, especially for an African American male navigating through the world of higher education . This article not only narrates the journey of becoming a social work practitioner and educator, but it also entails the crisis of representation and the isolating experience of being “the only” African American male within foreign and unwelcoming settings.

While many initiatives continue to emerge to increase the presence of Black males in social work, there is still little known about our experiences. Furthermore, the existing research minimizes the way personal identities of African American males shape perception. A recent study shared how isolation, racism, and the social work curriculum are factors that could hinder African American males from completing a graduate degree in social work (Dinnerson, 2019). More research is needed to augment these experiences, and more importantly create change in the dominant/majority system of education that excludes the unique experiences and voices and African American men.

¹ International Federation of Social Workers. (2014). Global definition of social work. Retrieved from <https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work/>

Through the use of autoethnographic vignettes and counter-storytelling, this article highlights the successes and challenges encountered by a Black male student during the process of pursuing a social work degree on the bachelor’s, master’s, and doctorate levels. “Social workers with doctoral degrees are typically professional leaders in practice, policy, research, and scholarship, in addition to or in lieu of holding academic positions as social work educators” (Howard, 2016, p. S148). While this account cannot be generalized for all Black male students pursuing a social work degree, this study emphasizes the importance of cultural awareness within the profession of social work. This article concludes with methods to support African American male students within social work programs.

We wear the mask that grins and lies, it hides our cheeks and shades our eyes~ this debt we pay to human guile; with torn and bleeding hearts we smile.

—Paul Laurence Dunbar

Methodology

Autoethnography

Autoethnographic research demonstrates the characteristics of both autobiography and ethnography traditions (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Autoethnographic writers “retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and or possessing a particular cultural identity” (Ellis et al., 2011, para. 8). Moreover, Jones, Adams, and Ellis (2013) argue that autoethnography allows the researcher to disrupt and challenge how traditional research silences the researcher’s voice in the name of “objectivity, control, and predictability” (p. 35). While analyzing their

experiences, autoethnographic writers reflect on the ways others experience similar cultural occurrences. Furthermore, autoethnographic writers can further problematize their experiences while simultaneously gaining deeper insights by incorporating existing literature into their stories.

Central to the autoethnographic style and within this article is the use of counter-storytelling (Khan, 2016). As the “lone” African American male within my personal educational experience the need for counter storytelling is crucial. The use of autoethnography, along with counter-storytelling, provides the opportunity to not only engage in the therapeutic aspects of writing but to analyze and critique how race plays into narratives (Khan, 2016). Narration or storytelling provides space for self-reflexivity and enables the readers—Blacks, in particular—to be able to personally relate to the events and circumstances (Khan, 2016). Storytelling is an important art and transmission of history in the African American community. Through storytelling, enslaved people were able to keep family history and memories alive. These stories are central in the life experiences of the primary author, as evidenced by the culmination of several stories from the lead author’s grandmother that are deeply enriched in faith, family, and history.

Critical Race Methodology

This paper employs critical race methodology (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Critical race methodology derives from critical race theory (CRT), which explores the centrality of race in various aspects of life, including education and law (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Moreover, Lynn and Parker (2006) argued that CRT provides a theoretical foundation for researchers to conceptualize how race and racism influence research and society. Critical race methodology in education seeks to confront, question, and redefine conventional “research paradigms, texts, and theories used to explain the experience of people of color” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26). Through the use of counter-storytelling, critical race methodology challenges “objective” and “neutral” master narratives of storytelling typically used to marginalize, typecast, and oppress people of color (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Critical race methodology aligns with the author’s view of race as a central construct in examining and understanding the world.

Furthermore, stories are critical to providing deep insight into the ways people of color methodically navigate their environments. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) describe three different forms of counter stories: personal stories, other people’s stories, and composite stories. For this article, personal stories are used from a Black male’s experiences as a social work student. Personal stories are used to expose experiences combating injustice and racism, while also incorporating the voices of individuals who served significant “roles” within the primary author’s story. Both critical race methodology and autoethnographic methodologies are useful, as both methods allow the researcher to treat research as a means to advocate for social justice (Ellis et al., 2011; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Social justice, as one of the core values of social work, is an excellent characteristic to help navigate this article. Furthermore, both methods provide an analytic lens to share stories and experiences as a Black male student in a manner that challenges the disparity of the disproportionate numbers of African American males in social work.

Data Collection and Analysis

In the tradition of autoethnographic research, the primary researcher is the subject under study. As a result, this article uses personal narratives to explore the experiences. At the time of the writing of this article, the primary researcher served as a junior social work faculty member at a southeastern historically Black college or university (HBCU). An electronic reflection journal was constructed from 2019 to 2020 to provide useful data for this study. During this period, the primary

researcher wrote monthly entries. Journal reflections included interactions between the primary researcher, the primary researcher's classmates, and staff during the primary researcher's graduate school tenure.

Furthermore, pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the individuals and institutions mentioned in the primary researcher's account. These narrative journal entries and other data archives (e.g., past emails, teaching documents, etc.) provided the foundation for this analysis. Journals were primarily used throughout the educational experience as a coping tool to navigate what was many times a hostile environment; these same journals now serve as contextual documents for this research. The primary researcher contemplated employing various methodologies to share his experiences and stresses that accounts from this article may not be generalizable for all Black male social work students. However, the primary researcher hopes that readers gain insight into some of the successes, triumphs, trials, and tribulations of being a Black male social work student. The next section of this paper presents personal narratives using a layered approach that "focus[es] on the author's experience alongside data, abstract analysis, and relevant literature" (Ellis et al., 2011, para. 20). Specifically, autoethnographic vignettes were used, and relevant literature was weaved throughout. The section that follows presents four vignettes that provide insight into the primary researcher's experiences as a Black male social work student.

Sacred Small Town

Growing up in a small rural town with just one stoplight and a population of a little over 1,000 people in the southeastern part of North Carolina laid the foundation for all future experiences. Being raised in a low-income area presented several challenges, such as limited resources and activities for children to participate in and enjoy. Living in a rural area also made it hard to build friendships due to the physical distance between the homes of classmates or other children. Luckily, being raised on a large family estate provided live-in friendships with family. Special days were laced with visits from cousins who traveled from New Jersey, Maryland, and larger cities in North Carolina, such as Charlotte, Raleigh, and Fayetteville. The value of storytelling was gained at a young age as exposure was gained listening to older cousins' stories of their travels. This, accompanied by family trips to larger cities, ignited a curiosity for "more" and a desire to leave the security of the small town.

Inspired to do something with life instead of "standing under the big tree in town drinking my life away," as an 11th-grade chemistry teacher used to say so colorfully, participation in 4-H became a useful escape. Combining farming skills gained early in life and experience raising almost every farm animal known to man, "a liking" was taken, as my grandmother would say, to farming. This skill and love of agriculture produced an interest in becoming a veterinarian, making participation in 4-H a perfect fit.

Before 4-H, time was spent as a Cub Scout and Boy Scout. The discovery of Boy Scouts made an early impact following a take-home flyer given in Kindergarten; Boy Scouts were believed to provide great father-son activity, garnering an immediate sign-up. Through Boy Scouts, survival skills and other fun activities for outdoors were gained. However, Boy Scouts was short-lived due to the cost and schedule conflicts that required travel for meetings on Sundays, which interfered

with church duties of singing in the choir or being an usher. 4-H quickly replaced boy scouts when a youth leader at church started a 4-H chapter. Through 4-H, skills in leadership, service, and communication were developed. Success in competitions (chicken, goat, and pig contests) solidified these skills and resulted in success locally, regionally, and nationally. Finding “my place” proved to be a task that shadowed me in multiple environments beyond adolescent social activities.

Subsequently, during this time, a love for presenting and public speaking was also developed. This differed, from what was the norm of my small town: blend in, don’t embarrass your family, and earn a living to support yourself. A special incentive to further this love and skill of public speaking was the revenue 4-H provided from competing. By middle and high school, leadership, communication, creativity, and citizenship skills were cultivated and embraced. Middle school also came with involvement in sports such as basketball, football, and little league baseball, which meant more time away from the farm. Participation in clubs and activities shifted in high school from not just membership, but also possession of leadership (officer) positions. Clubs and activities with travel were especially alluring. By the completion of high school, a plethora of experiences were developed, including roles as basketball and football manager, distance runner on the track and field team, member of the Beta Club, yearbook staff, DECA, and the United Black Student Society (UBSS) choir, and step team member.

Growing up, the impact of racial differences were not significant, until high school. The racial makeup of the sacred small rural town consisted of mostly Black, Native American, and White. During high school, “friends” from elementary school started to distance themselves; these experiences marked the stain of what it felt like to be “different.” Even 4-H interactions with White counterparts began to change. However, those feelings of unease were balanced through time with cousins and close friends who were African American. Due to the lack of opportunities for African American children, local churches and a few churches in a nearby bordering South Carolina town developed the Carolina Youth Action Association (CYAA), which provided activities for children to participate in during the summer. Through the association, the drastic differences between smaller under-resourced communities and larger towns were apparent. CYAA also provided exposure to higher education. This was especially valuable, given that before CYAA, no representation or information about college, the SAT, or the process of attending college existed. Those experiences through CYAA ignited a lasting spark that needed to be fed through the pursuit of higher education.

Despite this spark, there was little support from school counselors for minority students preparing for college. Without community resources the pathway to college was bleak for me. Luckily, through 4-H and the church, there were opportunities to attend college tours, workshops on the FASFA, and SAT prep. The opportunity to attend a black college tour sponsored through the church made all of the isolation and disappointment from high school counselors a faint memory. This tour provided a sense of worth and identity (similar to what was felt when around family) and created exposure to the research apprenticeship program (RAP) at North Carolina A&T State University during my junior year of high school; that program was life changing. Through that program, summer residence on a college campus was provided, along with the opportunity to attend classes; meetings two needs: travel away from my hometown and the opportunity to feed the flame growing within me. The culture of the HBCU environment provided validation and led

to a broader perspective of life. Participation in this program solidified a commitment to attend North Carolina A&T State University, and by late January 2004, an acceptance was confirmed.

Unforgettable Undergraduate

Returning to North Carolina A&T State University was different this time around. Students covered the campus like ants on a log, running with boxes and suitcases, and it was apparent that a little boy from a small country town had arrived. As a new student and “ant” once again the task of “finding my place” arose.

After setting up the dorm room and reluctant “goodbyes” to parents, walking across campus with a few guys from the dorm was the next feat. This walk and shared camaraderie were encouraging and reinforced the importance of not abandoning the dream to be the first in the family to complete a college degree. This camaraderie although provided by a changing cast of characters was central to navigating each new challenge encountered. The walk across campus reinforced why I chose A&T, and the campus life spoke to the history of our forefathers and founders. At A&T, professors poured into students, and we soaked it ALL up.

Throughout college, leadership remained important; this was reflected through participation as the vice president of the social work club, a resident assistant for 2 years, fraternity member, and becoming a Ronald E. McNair Scholar. My growing confidence led me to believe that my potential needed to extend beyond the university. The Ronald E. McNair program created exposure to research and graduate education. Two summers of paid on-campus research were completed through this program, as well as unlocking new adventures and experiences such as flying on a plane for the first time and attending research conferences. As the plane jolted into the air (that’s what it felt like) and landed with a smooth sail a new truth was revealed “the takeoff may be rough, but the landing is smooth”. This truth carried me as glass ceilings were shattered (despite rough starts) and new achievements were gained.

The McNair program opened up so many doors, and as trips to return home occurred, it was apparent that in some ways, the sacred small town no longer “fit.” Through this program, information and preparation for graduate education were also gained. Overall, the professors and staff at North Carolina A&T mentored, guided, and nurtured our learning. There was no handholding, and at times our feelings or tears did not matter. These experiences are appreciated and were proven especially valuable after arriving at the next destination on the journey—graduate school. North Carolina A&T State University had set the foundation for learning.

Growing in Graduate School

Attending graduate school at a “Big Ten” midwestern university as a minority was an enormous undertaking. The confidence gained in undergraduate was with me, however a staple that was needed: community was missing. In graduate school, being a Black male was a concern. Although this was not my first time encountering the challenges of being Black; the mark of being different still had a sting. However, this time, there were educational tools and skills in the arsenal to fight what proved to be a new battle. Not being able to connect with anything in the community culturally was a hardship within itself, finding a barbershop was equivalent to looking for a needle

in a haystack. A lack of representation from faculty and students felt very isolating; accompanied with regional differences as a black man from the south imported into a sterile, blistering cold Midwestern predominantly White environment. One evening during a walk to the public library with a friend who identified as an African American female, a group of White males threw an orange at us and called us “niggers.” We did not know what to do, so we followed our natural instinct: fight. The reaction between us involved running towards the building in anger, followed by the guys disappearing into their apartments.

At the time, we were younger, ill-equipped, and unsure of what to do. Even thinking about the incident now still brings up unsettling feelings, and in similar situations my first reaction is to fight. The community impact was only one part of the learning environment. The classroom had challenges, as well. Peers would ask questions such as, “How many times did it take to apply to the program to get in?” The microaggressions or the sidebar racism did not go away. Microaggressions are “everyday verbal and nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, insults whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership” (Sue, 2010, p. 3). There were several instances in which a single identity as a Black male was viewed as representing “all” Black males. Classmates frequently posed stereotypical questions and comments, including assuming the family background was a single-parent household. Sue and colleagues (2007) describe microaggressions as the most harmful form of prejudice.

Some faculty were inclusive in their teaching, and others were not. This was disappointing and a far cry from the shared or at least sense of commonality held with professors from North Carolina A&T. Paulo Friere (1970), in his seminal work, argues for teaching that is not depository but transformative. Teaching that is depository, known as the “banking concept of education,” is marked by the teacher as the narrator leading the student through rote memorization (Friere, 1970). The teacher communicates and makes deposits, and the student receives, memorizes, and repeats. Adverse effects from this include that the more students work to store “deposits,” the less critical consciousness develops (Friere, 1970). Authentic thinking, critical in social work education, does not take place in isolation, but only in communication. It is recommended that social work educators, program directors, and accreditation bodies consider the integration and emphasis of social work education that endorses classrooms guided by conversation to produce transformation.

In many classes, African American families were depicted in a negative light—in poverty, on welfare, and raised by single mothers. Microaggressions have the lifelong insidious effect of silencing, invalidating, and humiliating the identity and voices of the oppressed. Although their lethality is less obvious, they nevertheless grind down and wear out the victims (Sue, 2010, p. 66). The implicit curriculum for most instructors was not culturally sensitive. The cohort for first-year students contained a total of 5 African American students, and we tended to try to schedule classes together for support and to minimize feeling alone. In this particular class, we separated due to our schedules. During one classroom conversation, a peer felt uncomfortable and targeted by the faculty member to defend why it is not okay for a White social worker to use the word “nigger.” As a duo, we met with the faculty member after class, and an attempt to express an opinion turned into me being labeled as “disruptive” and “aggressive.” This was an example of a microaggression-triggering trauma for both of us. “Microaggressions trigger intrusive memories of traumatic racially related incidents. Many microaggressions are experienced as traumatic events. The same

principles used to care for survivors of abusive trauma should be adapted to treat and intervene the effects of racial microaggressions” (Hall & Fields, 2015, p. 12). Luckily our voice was heard by the Dean of the school for a different resolution.

Even though we were able to get things corrected by the administration, the event damaged our self-esteem and impacted the confidence in our abilities as scholars. Students compromising self-identity is not fair, and it is also draining, as it involves a concept known as shifting.

Another incident involved a group project in a community organizing class. In the project, we had to present our community project and submit a paper. The papers could be the same, but each member had to submit an individual paper. The group divided the paper into different sections, and the members typed their own title page. We submitted our papers together after we presented the project. At the end of the fall semester, we were excited because we felt that we had executed a wonderful project. Every group member’s paper reflected the grade of an “A” except one paper. The one paper submitted by the Black male in the group had a grade of “B+.” Waiting after class with group members to speak to the professor was unnerving. It is common for students to have helpful interactions with faculty; however, students from underrepresented populations report limited and fewer collegial interactions with faculty (Gardner, 2007; Golde & Dore, 2001; Lewis et al., 2004). The professor advised meeting during his office hours, in which a direct answer about the grade differential was never given, and a vague reference to an error in formatting justified the grade. The overall result was that the grade was not changed, and we advanced to the next semester. Several emotions emerged during this experience, including “not wanting to ruffle any feathers.” The result was choosing to “pick the battles fought” and progress to the next semester.

Dauntless Doctoral Experience

After years of experience in the field of social work, the next step was entering the world of academia to pursue a doctorate in social work. “Social workers with doctoral degrees are typically professional leaders in practice, policy, research, and scholarship in addition to or in lieu of holding academic positions as social work educators” (Howard, 2016, p. S148). This moment was both exciting and terrifying. The vulnerability of the moment quickly faded and was traded with survival skills—time to put the mask on again.

Orientation for the program rolled out the bells and whistles to welcome the new cohort; it was both exciting and overwhelming. “The doctorate in social work provides a comparable playing ground of elitism during processes of policy promulgation, research studies, or other undertakings with multi- or interdisciplinary teams of higher degree professionals” (Howard, 2016, p. S149). A quick scan during orientation revealed that some members of the cohort were already familiar with one another, and groups began to form due to individuals who traveled from the same area or met in the practice world. There was not a group representative of young Black men. Feelings of isolation rushed in, and the icebreaker game meant to bring cohort members together revealed differences among the cohort. Additionally, some of the icebreaker questions were culturally insensitive, as colleagues used the icebreaker questions to measure how much an individual knew and if they were “deserving” of program admission.

The social distancing continued right into the classroom and created further isolation through a curriculum that did not speak to African American pioneers in social work. Often, I assumed the role of spokesman while matriculating through courses to speak out about African American issues and validate the existence of Historically Black Colleges and Universities. This role created a duality of emotions: pride for knowing and representing my history and sadness because my history seemingly was not valued by others.

A course within the final semester of the doctoral program brought about the toughest challenge. My excitement for being near the end was met with another uphill battle. It was the last research class with a rumored hardnose professor who identified as a White woman and claimed to be very liberal in her thinking; another example of theory that did not match in practice (actions) That theory was tested with a Black man in the course. From the first day of class, sharp cold looks were given after speaking or attempting to answer questions. Despite the unwelcomed behavior, participation continued, and there was a resolve to persevere and obtain what was most important—an education. Noticing a deficit in the mastery of the material and refusing to suffer in silence, a meeting was scheduled with the professor during her office hours. There were concerns regarding the instructor’s disposition toward students of color, and being a Black male heightened these concerns. As a Black male and the professor being a White woman, there were several precautions to take. These precautions are even taken to this day as an African American faculty member. The strategy involved going to her office hours during peak times when the hallways had traffic and body positioning in the doorway so both parties could be seen in full view by others walking by. All of these precautions were necessary and taken for personal protection.

Every office visit followed this process, along with bringing a colleague. During a final meeting before submitting the final course assignment, the instructor’s feedback indicated the assignment was well written, and encouragement was given to assist other colleagues. The final draft was submitted with excitement to move toward and prepare the last chapter of the dissertation. We received our documents back, and sighs of relief were heard across the room, except for the document returned to the singular Black male student. The grade on the paper returned was the grade of a “C,” which is not acceptable for a graduate student. The program required no C’s and maintaining a grade point average in the B range. This grade meant not moving forward with the dissertation. So many emotions surfaced, including shock, anger, and sadness. Wondering what I did “wrong” and comments from a colleague who stated, “I know you should have gotten an A,” a cool head and quick thinking was needed. Following our usual process, I arranged a visit with a colleague to the professor’s office. Walking to the office, silent mental reminders to “speak softly” and “keep hands to the side” were at the forefront. Poor relationships with faculty have been associated with less than favorable outcomes, leading some students to drop out of their doctoral programs (Golde, 2000). Upon arriving at the office, the professor was asked to discuss the provided grade. The reply received was “schedule a time.” A thank you was given, and after leaving, rapid research of the university and departmental policies began. A meeting was held the next day, and the instructor was not willing to review the document a second time. An appeal was written, and letters were sent to the diversity chair and the Dean requesting a review. All of the designated university steps were followed. All of it seemed unfair as the burden of proof and mastery of the assignment fell upon the student. That instructor was absent at the graduation and the hooding ceremony. The victory of graduation was sweet but stained with memories of unfair

treatment and battles lost that should have been won. Prayers, peers, and family supports were the ultimate navigator for this situation.

Social Work Educational Experience Summary

Summarizing years of experience as a BSW, MSW, and DSW social worker, the following types of microaggressions were experienced and are represented in Table 1. Table 2 shows the responses to the microaggressions.

Table 1: Microaggressions Experienced

Microaggression	Description	Quotes
Race	Classmates would often question my race because my skin tone was lighter	<p>“What are you mixed with?”</p> <p>“Which one of your parents are White?”</p> <p>“Are you Asian?”</p> <p>“Were you adopted?”</p>
Hair	Often I would change my hair wearing many styles from a low-cut Caesar with waves, Afro, curly, braids, or twists, which led to questions and hands in my hair without receiving permission, like I belonged at a petting zoo.	<p>“May I touch your hair?”</p> <p>“You look urban”</p> <p>“You changed”</p> <p>“May I?”</p> <p>“Is this real?”</p>
Language/ dialect	Being from a small country town, the expectation for speech is unrefined language with broken syllables and split adjectives. Often I would receive comments of shock from others involving oral presentation skills.	<p>“Wow you present well”</p> <p>“You can present”</p> <p>“You surprised me”</p> <p>“You speak so well”</p>
Background/ history	Often I was identified as the “representative “to speak for Black issues as if I am the representation for all Black men. It was also assumed that I grew up poor, without a Father, and on welfare.	<p>“Can you add to this case about a client that grew up with no father?”</p> <p>“Who is that gentleman you have with you?”</p> <p>“How was is it growing up in your area?”</p>

Challenges to my education	Many peers were unfamiliar with HBCUs and had no desire to learn, but there was an expectation to know and recognize the schools they attended. Peers would wonder and challenge my HBCU undergraduate experience as if it were “less than.” Peers would also challenge and question the validity of my graduate school admission.	<p>“How many times did you apply to get in?”</p> <p>“What was the name of your school again?”</p> <p>“Where is that school located again?”</p> <p>“You’re on scholarship, right?”</p> <p>“You know this is a rigorous program.”</p> <p>“Were you able to get the books?”</p>
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Table 2: Strategies in Response to Microaggressions

Strategy	Examples
Stories of strength	Often I would reflect on the stories that my grandmother told me as a young boy to keep focused because I could not afford to blow up and walk around in anger. I had to push through for others.
Prayer	I would recite the Lord’s prayer for focus and guidance
Friendship	I would confide in trusted friends for encouragement. My friends would create a safe space for me to remove my mask and be free
Mentorship	Guidance from my mentors kept me focused and driven to keep fighting
Family	The thought of my family motivated me because I wanted to be an inspiration to family members, letting them know they can achieve.

Findings

Microaggressions have a severe effect on individuals who experience them—including me. If microaggressions are left uncovered, it can lead to health risks for African Americans. A meta-analysis revealed that perceived racism is associated with psychological problems and moderate depression (Hall & Fields, 2015; Pieterse, Todd, Neville, & Carter, 2012). There is increasing evidence that the stress of racism as a social determinant of health fosters cardiovascular disease (CVD) over time (Hall & Fields, 2015; Jackson, McGibbon, & Waldron, 2013). Black people have

the lowest life expectancy (men are lowest) compared with all other persons of color (Clark, 2006; Gravlee, 2009; Hall & Fields, 2015; Hardy, 2007; Smedley, Stith, & Nelson, 2002). A systematic review (Dolezsar, McGrath, Herzig, & Miller, 2014) demonstrated that perceived racism was associated especially with nighttime ambulatory hypertension in Black men (Hall & Fields, 2015). Disparities in mental and physical health risks range from cancer to CVD and diabetes to depression and traumatic stress (Hall & Fields, 2015). Further exploration of behavioral coping, perceived racism, and health effects is needed (Hall & Fields, 2015; Mwendwa et al., 2011). A participant in the Hall and Fields (2015) study stated that microaggressions were a killer. The participant's words were so powerful; the participant stated,

It's a killer, it is killing us . . . It becomes stressful and we all know stress can have many different effects. Stressful because you constantly thinking about what's taken place, whether it is that day, that week, you're thinking about it, and it affects you personally. It affects how you perceive things in the world. It still falls back on the person. Whether that is becoming angry at society about how it has been laid out or [how racism is] communicated to BPs. It's not healthy at all. It's not healthy at all. It's not healthy. (Hall & Fields, 2015, p. 13)

It is clear from this statement, and the previously mentioned health risks, that microaggressions toward Black men in social work cannot continue to be ignored. Faculty members and administrators at Bachelor of Social Work (BSW), Master of Social Work (MSW), and Doctorate of Social Work (DSW/Ph.D.) departments, schools, and programs must create and provide culturally aware and culturally sensitive faculty and student trainings, courses, and course work such as case study assignments that address the topic of microaggressions. Failure to do so will directly violate the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics (2017) values—dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence.

Intersectionality refers to how multiple intersecting experiences contribute to one's sense of self, perspectives, and aspirations (Jani, Pierce, Ortiz, & Sowbel, 2011). Intersectionality is both a theory and method that targets how privilege and oppression intersect, and the complex ways those intersections situate social identities (Baca Zinn & Thornton Dill, 1996; Bubar, Cespedes, & Bundy-Fazioli, 2016). As such, the experiences matriculating through the educational arena are defined by the primary researcher's race, gender, socioeconomic status, and rural origins. These combined identities expand the lenses of the worldview and broaden experiences. This is the opposite of the binary lens that education holds within various institutions.

Study Strengths and Limitations

This research article presents limitations and strengths, just like many research projects. One limitation is that autoethnography has been criticized because of the reliance on self as the primary source of data (Holt, 2003). Another limitation of the research is that the article captures only one story from an African American male's perspective. On the contrary, it is a strength that this article is illustrated by an African American male, therefore capturing the true experience. The perspective of the African American male voice is clear because it is self-told based on his experience.

Implications for Social Work Practice

Based on our NASW Code of Ethics, the value of social justice is that it is crucial to discuss diverse issues. Based on the importance of social justice, social workers challenge social injustice. Social workers pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people. Social workers' social change efforts are focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice. These activities seek to promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity. Social workers strive to ensure access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in decision-making for all people (NASW, 2017).

NASW stated, "We must acknowledge that the social work profession is nearly 70% White. This means that not only do we as a profession function in a system of White supremacy, we also, largely and collectively, benefit from White privilege." The authors of this current article, one African American male social worker and two African American female social workers, believe it is imperative to increase the number of social workers of color and Black social workers to reflect and support our diverse client base.

Having more literature written by African American males would help diffuse the mystery of African American men in social work. Social work educators should be more inclusive of men of color in lessons, include males when teaching about African American families, and look for more strategies, techniques, or interventions to support the success of African American men in social work (Dinnerson, 2019). Finally, having a required diversity course as a part of the social work curriculum versus an elective would be impactful for all social workers, particularly those working with diverse populations. Special considerations for the implementation of cultural competence within social work curriculum and courses should include the following: (a) a balanced and realistic picture of racial/ethnic minorities, (b) reading of literature written by or for persons of color, and (c) asking racial questions in a sensitive way (Sue et al., 1998).

Furthermore, social work programs, undergraduate and graduate, should embrace characteristics of multiculturally competent organizations, including (a) value of diversity, (b) capacity for self-assessment or cultural auditing, and (c) understanding of dynamics of difference (Sue et al., 1998).

Conclusion

The process of writing this article was liberating. Telling personal experiences, from a perspective of triumph was fulfilling. It is critical for the Black voice to be heard in the profession of social work and to practice what we (social workers) preach—embracing the value of social justice. My hope for the future is that stories of unheard voices, minority voices within a dominant culture be heard. Seeing, reading, and hearing about the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd have been heartbreaking and demonstrate the need for continual storytelling, advocacy, and advancement of social justice. It is distressing that in 2020 we are still experiencing the same injustices as elder family members. As Black social workers and HBCU social work

educators and alumni, we must add to the scholarly literature on the African American male voice within social work.

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