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# “Is She Scared of Me?”: Exploring the Experiences Of Students of Color in Social Work Practicum

*Author(s)*

Krystal Dozier, PhD  
University of North Alabama

Allison M. Curington, MSW  
University of Alabama

Andrea Bell, MSW  
University of Alabama

Brenda D. Smith, PhD  
University of Alabama

## **Abstract**

Social work practicum education can involve additional challenges for students of color. This study explored the practicum experiences of Black students and other students of color. The study involved four focus groups of MSW and BSW practicum students ( $N = 15$ ) in a Southeastern state. Focus group transcripts were analyzed using an iterative, inductive coding process. Themes identified in the participants' practicum experiences included direct and indirect experiences with racism, witnessing clients experience racism, tokenism, and varying support from supervisors. The study results can inform social work educators' responses to students of color and help foster success for all students.

*Keywords:* social work practicum; students of color; racism; tokenism; supervision

The circular process of student learning through classroom instruction, demonstration of practice behaviors in practicum, and processing in seminars supports the development of critical thinking and social work competencies (Olson-Morrison et al., 2019). The practicum experience requires students to do more than integrate classroom instruction. Students must also understand how to navigate real-world experiences

while working to attain competence (Olson-Morrison et al., 2019). Because practicum is central to social work education, and the stated aims of social work education include the advancement of racial equity (Council on Social Work Education, 2022), the profession needs more research addressing the experiences of Black, Indigenous, or Other People of Color (BIPOC) students in practicum placements.

Social work educators must understand the specific experiences of BIPOC students to ensure that practicum agencies, supervisors, and experiences are not continued sources of marginalization (Beasley et al., 2022; Cox & Singh, 2024). This study explored the social work practicum experiences of Black students and other students of color. We aimed to inform practicum coordinators and social work educators of challenges faced by BIPOC students so that effective supports can be developed. The study addressed these questions: What are the experiences of Black and other students of color in social work practicum education? What are students’ perceptions of how race/ethnicity shaped their practicum education experience?

## Background

### Common Student Experiences in Practicum

Students entering practicum typically experience a multitude of feelings including nervousness about how they will perform, anxiety about being able to respond to clients, and overall excitement about learning to practice in a social work setting (Razack, 2001; Wayne et. al, 2010). Varying emotions can be related to challenges in adapting to workplace culture, being scrutinized, and having one’s practice evaluated by supervisors and other professionals (Harrison & Ip, 2013). During practicum, social work students at both the bachelor’s and master’s levels can gain hands-on experience working with clients from diverse backgrounds. Through these experiences students can be exposed to various forms of oppression, including racism (Razack, 2001; Wayne et al., 2010, Yee, 2016). As students work to develop competencies to confront racism and marginalization faced by clients, the experiences of BIPOC students can be especially challenging and complicated if they are also targets of racism in practicum settings. It is important that practicum placements support the learning experiences of all students, provide culturally competent support to students from historically oppressed groups, and promote experiences that support antiracist and equity-focused practice (Cox & Singh, 2024; Johnson et al., 2021; Swick, et al., 2021).

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) make explicit that social work programs are expected to prepare students for antiracist practice and that faculty are expected to “model antiracist and antioppressive practice” (CSWE, 2022, p. 16). As social work programs seek to address racism and other inequities across social work education, more attention has turned to

the practicum (Beasley et al., 2022; Ford et al., 2022; Hemy et al., 2016; Higgins, 2017; Rehn & Kalman, 2018). To understand and address inequities and inclusiveness in social work practicum, the experiences of students of color are critical (Beadlescomb, 2019; Beasley et al., 2022; Harrison & Ip, 2013; Zunz & Oil, 2009).

## **Experiences of Students of Color in Practicum**

### *Racism*

Social work students of color have experienced overt and covert racism, microaggressions, and discrimination in practicum placements (Johnson et al., 2021; Lerner & Kim, 2024; Srikanthan, 2019). These experiences have been initiated by agency clients, colleagues, and supervisors (Brown et al., 2019; Fairtlough et al., 2014). Noting power differentials, fear of the impact of racism on future employment or recommendation letters, and the important role of practicum for future career prospects, BIPOC students have felt they were in precarious situations when determining what to do when experiencing racism firsthand (Johnson et al., 2021; Razack, 2001). When such experiences have occurred, BIPOC students have experienced increased feelings of isolation, especially if the experiences were deflected and/or minimized (Johnson et al., 2021; Lerner & Kim, 2024). Students have had similar feelings when they have witnessed racism and/or discrimination directed at Black clients and other clients of color (Cox & Singh, 2024).

### *Tokenism and Representational Burden*

Tokenism, a practice originally defined by Rosabeth Kanter regarding the representation of women in the workplace, is the practice of including members of a marginalized community in a workplace or other group to satisfy expectations of diversity (CultureAlly, n.d.; Kanter, 1977). A similar concept, representational burden, occurs when people with a racial/ethnic minority identity feel that their words and actions are perceived to reflect an entire racial/ethnic group (Steel & Paier, 2022). BIPOC students in practicum have experienced feelings of tokenism or representational burden when they are the only person of color on staff (Masocha, 2015; Razack, 2001). In such instances, students have felt uncomfortable, unaware of how to seek support, or isolated if they did not have a confidant to speak with (Lilly et al., 2023; Razack, 2001).

Tokenism can occur in a variety of ways. For example, a student may be placed in a specific agency due to the assumption that they are able to relate to clients' lived experiences, which can place students in a marginalized role. Johnson and colleagues (2021) noted that many students of color felt tokenized when they encountered an assumption that students of color could better relate to clients of color due to their

demographics. Students have experienced representational burden when, rather than prioritizing students' interests, students were placed in agencies that were looking for specific racial/ethnic identities (Brown et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2021). Although diversity initiatives can be beneficial to agencies, students, and clients, the effects of tokenism and representational burden can be harmful (Fairtlough et al., 2014; Johnson et al., 2021).

## **Social Justice Education Framework**

The social justice education (SJE) framework provides a lens for more clearly seeing oppressive structures, for interrogating power differences, and for inspiring action (Hackman, 2005). In describing the SJE, Hackman underscored the importance of empowering social work students to understand, question, and challenge systems of power and privilege that support social inequality and oppression, whether they manifest within institutions, culturally, or interpersonally. The SJE framework suggests that educators provide students tools to see the effects of oppression and alternatives to it, and ways they can act to create change. Although Hackman (2005) did not highlight racism in her discussion of injustice and oppression, the framework applies well to considerations of racism.

Inspired by the SJE, this study provided BIPOC social work students an opportunity to describe their experiences of racism in practicum placements. The study can further demonstrate utilization of the SJE through discussion of study findings with social work faculty and students. As social justice is a major underpinning of the social work profession, the SJE can serve as a guide for social work educators to work with students to describe their experiences with racism, reflect on the social and historical contexts of their experiences, and begin to engage with others in action for change.

## **Aims of the Study**

This study sought to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of BIPOC BSW and MSW students completing a practicum placement. The study had two primary aims: 1) to explore the practicum education experiences of Black students and other students of color; and 2) to generate suggestions for effective student supports that practicum coordinators could implement to support BIPOC students in practicum placements. In keeping with the tenets of the SJE, the researchers aimed to provide BIPOC BSW and MSW students an opportunity to describe their practicum placement lived experiences.

## Methods

### Study Design

This exploratory qualitative study involved four focus groups conducted over a six-month period from November 2020 to April 2021. Separate focus groups were held for BSW and MSW students. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all focus groups were conducted via Zoom. The study protocol was approved by the host institution's Institutional Review Board.

### Participants

Eligible study participants were BSW and MSW students in a Southeastern US research-intensive (R1) university who were in the final semester of their practicum placement and who identified as students of color. At the time, the racial/ethnic composition of students enrolled in the social work school was approximately 60% white, 30% Black, 2% Latinx, and 8% other/unknown. Hence, of about 600 students enrolled in practicum, and of 300 of those near completion, about 100 students were eligible to participate in the focus groups.

To recruit study participants, the research team disseminated a flyer in the school of social work's online weekly student newsletter, telephoned BSW and MSW students in the final semester of practicum placement, and sent emails directly to practicum placement students. No incentives were offered to participants. Four focus groups were conducted, involving 15 participants total. Each student participated only once. The groups ranged in size from two to seven. Participants included both on-campus and distance students. Of the participants, three were BSW students and twelve were MSW students. Thirteen of the participants identified as Black, one identified as Latina, and one identified as both Black and Filipino. Thirteen of the participants identified as women and two participants identified as men. All participants were completing placements in the Southern US.

### Data Collection

At the start of each focus group, the facilitator displayed and read aloud an informed consent form. Participants gave oral consent to participation and recording. The facilitator used a semi-structured interview protocol to guide the focus groups (see Appendix). Participants were able to speak about various aspects of their practicum placement experiences (e.g., experiences with supervisors, clients, and colleagues; experiences of racism/discrimination; personal reflections on practicum procedures). The groups lasted from 50 to 90 minutes, with an average length of about 70 minutes. All of the groups were facilitated by one Black social work PhD student. The facilitator

was not involved in any other way with the participants' practicum experience or social work education. The focus groups were recorded and transcribed.

## **Data Analysis**

The data were coded by members of the research team, which included two social work faculty members and one social work PhD student. In general, the coding followed an iterative, inductive coding process (Saldaña, 2009). Working with Microsoft Word transcripts, each of the researchers coded the same transcript independently, then met to discuss the codes and themes, reaching consensus. After the initial transcript was coded, two researchers reviewed and coded subsequent transcripts. The research team met again to discuss codes and emerging themes.

## **Results**

Several themes emerged from the data analysis process. These included direct and indirect experiences of racism and/or discrimination, advocating for clients who experienced racism, tokenism and representational burden, and varying levels of support from supervisors.

### **Direct Experiences of Racism and/or Discrimination**

During the focus groups, student participants shared direct experiences with racism and/or discrimination. These experiences of racism came from agency colleagues, clients, and/or other social work interns. Participant 7 recounted experiences of tension and negative attitudes from White clients who were hesitant to receive services because the clients did not want to take food supplies from a Black woman. Participant 7 noted:

Sometimes I can just feel that attitude and tenseness when there is a White family that I am serving, you know? It's kind of like sometimes I almost feel like they just don't even want to take it from me, but they're just in this position now where they need this assistance.

Additionally, Participant 7 shared that some White clients would display negative attitudes as roles of power were reversed. The participant observed, "You know I've kind of felt the, 'I'm the White woman, and you're the Black woman' and the, you know, that kind of, 'I don't want this food, but I guess I'll take it from you.'" Participant 7 went on describe how the supervisor and other people in the agency discussed how to address similar situations in the future. Supervisors and colleagues emphasized the need to "look over the incidents" because there was a need to continue to serve all clients despite their personal thoughts and behaviors.

The social work students had attended training on professionalism in practicum (i.e., time management, safety, appropriate dress, how to approach clients). These tips and suggestions promoted the adoption of a social work professional identity, and students assumed that following these professionalism tips would aid them in the process of building rapport with clients and colleagues. Yet, for students of color in the study, "checking all the boxes" was not always followed by a positive reception from clients. Participant 5 said, "I went on a home visit and I kind of got some, like, racial, like a racial thing happened to me." Even as Participant 5 recalled the incident it was evident that there was still a degree of confusion as to why the incident occurred. In reference to a client, Participant 5 went on to say, "And it was kind of confusing because she, like, tried to hide behind the door as I walked to the door, and it was kind of confusing because, like, 'Is she scared of me?' But what did I do?" Even with the confusion, Participant 5 noted some "boxes" or criteria that students attempt to demonstrate to merit recognition as professional:

Like, I was dressed nice. I looked nice. You know what I am saying? But I don't know, she didn't accept me as well. ...She was nice at first when she was talking to my supervisor, but when I came up there it wasn't the same reaction.

Participants described varying experiences with agency colleagues and staff. For example, both Participants 5 and 8 felt they were placed in a good environment. Participant 5 described the practicum agency as friendly: "Like, everybody always walks in and says, 'Hey how are you doing or have a good day' and, you know, smiles at you." Participant 8 also felt "fortunate" to have a progressive placement that was very social justice forward in its identity, "I've been super fortunate in that, like, my organization that I am interning with is, like, super forward thinking and, like, believes in the same things I do." Although Participants 5 and 8 highlighted good interactions with agency colleagues, often times agency colleagues could be the source of racism and/or discriminatory acts against social work interns. For instance, Participant 6 noted that a colleague would make offhanded comments in regard to politics, immigration, the presidential election, and a former president in derogatory terms. On the first day, the participant described a disturbing encounter:

One particular nurse, like, I remember my first day at the field agency, and she was like, 'Oh, I'm surprised Obama didn't get assassinated.' And I'm like, 'What in the world?' You know? So, I'm, like, I needed to do a change of placement. You know? ... And she kept making statements when I was around, like, 'The redneck is about to come out of me.' You know? And I'm in [location], so it's different, you know? It's worse down this way. ... And I would go to my field supervisor and she was, like, 'Yes, ... she said that. I don't know if she is aware of what she's saying. It is just kind of like her culture.'

To express concern about comments like these, Participant 6 would meet with their supervisor to explain their discomfort. In other agencies, however, students noted how

agency staff shied away from discussing political topics that could create discomfort. For example, Participant 12 reflected on how they witnessed colleagues who wore Donald Trump paraphernalia as an unspoken reflection of the person’s beliefs:

So, during the [2020] election we mainly didn’t try to talk about it because we didn’t know – we did have Trump supporters because they would actually wear ... the hats, wear the T-shirts. So, we tried to be neutral. But, like, one of the staff members would bring it up and it’d be like a whole heated conversation.

In these situations, social work interns had to decide how to navigate relationships, discuss concerns with placement supervisors, and have further discussions with the practicum office.

In addition to contending with actions from clients and colleagues, some participants described contending with peers whose privilege seemed to limit their understanding of marginalization and oppression. Participants perceived some peers to be inconsiderate when discussing race and racism in a way that seemed to flaunt their privilege. Participant 1 shared,

Because she is Caucasian, and so she knowingly sometimes comes from a place of privilege. [When she flaunts her status], it gives kind of a negative vibe to me, and I know [also to] my other fellow class member who identifies as a person of color.

The social work interns in the study described a desire to reflect on how privilege can cloud worldviews and values and shape interactions in the larger society. Referring to a White peer, Participant 1 went on to say about herself and another BIPOC intern,

We both sometimes kind of feel like she talks from a place of not really being aware how it could affect us when she talks about her privilege and her not having to grow up with racial tension or anything like that.

Even after reacting to concerning comments by saying things such as “Hmm, I don’t know, I didn’t really like the way you said that,” Participant 1 reported that their peer did not change, “And then she says that she’ll try to fix it, and then it doesn’t really happen.”

Lastly, Participant 13 described experiences with their supervisor as a source of racial bias in their placement. Participant 13 recalled how they felt the supervisor “checked me out for a good 30 minutes.” For Participant 13 the experience of bias came in the form of being treated as if they were incapable of understanding or comprehending complex aspects of working in a hospital setting:

Because I realized at first, you know, there were certain topics ... she would steer away from. She wouldn’t talk to me about ... Medicare, you know, the different types of insurance. She basically at first tried to, I guess, baby me in a sense. I guess assuming that I didn’t know what she was talking about.



Participant 13 said that they "played" as if they did not know anything because that is how they felt they were being perceived by their practicum supervisor, though Participant 13 also said that the relationship with the supervisor got better as comfort levels rose. Nonetheless, experiences of perceived bias were indicative of experiences in which participants felt that they must continue to prove themselves to supervisors, clients, and peers.

When having direct experiences of racism in placement settings, whether they received supervisor support or not, participants described the thought processes that helped them cope. Participant 5 described it as not internalizing it when interacting with clients:

It's kind of in that sort of situation, you more or less have to take it and roll with it. Don't internalize it. I have to understand that it is their ignorance, that it's their thought process. I can't attempt to educate them. I can still continue to serve them. I'm aware of that. And I understand that. But I'm in this type of situation where it's really drive-through service. ... I just kind of like [say], "Okay, yes, ma'am, whatever," and keep it moving.

### **Witnessing Clients Experiencing Racism and/or Discrimination**

While participants shared direct experiences with racism and/or discrimination, they also shared indirect experiences of racism and/or discrimination as they saw how clients were treated. For example, Participant 6 observed that Black clients were disproportionately stereotyped and not listened to when being served in an interdisciplinary setting. Students observed stereotypes in the way that agency clients were diagnosed or described:

One psychiatrist said that the patient was manic, you know, because she was loud. And I'm like, "Well how does that necessarily mean that?" I mean, I guess we all manic because, you know, we all can get louder at times. So, I think it's just a lot of stereotyping.

Participant 6 also noticed that Black clients were commonly described by coworkers as having a low IQ:

I've noticed, like all of the African American admissions, their intelligence level is always low IQ. You know? And so I just had a hard time. I just feel like there's not a lot of fairness when it comes to assessment.

In reflecting on these indirect experiences, Participants 4 and 6 noted how misdiagnoses affected clients and how they saw themselves. Participant 4 reflected, "They got [labeled as] low IQ and things that are not factual, I mean, I am sure that is harmful to them. You know? Just reading that information about themselves." Participant 6 shared similar concerns about racial bias in assessments: "So those

assessments, they do hold weight and that is a label on you. And it does follow you and it does bar you from certain places, you know.”

Focus group participants described the challenge of working to respond appropriately when they saw clients experience racism. Participant 6 observed, “There has been a couple of times [when] I have to kind of like, glue my mouth shut. Because I’m like, ‘Oh, no ... That’s not right.’” Participant 13 described similar experiences in her placement. Without going into great detail about what she had seen, Participant 13 commented, “It was very troubling to hear, you know, the nurses and the direct care staff talk about some of their Black patients, and almost as if they weren’t culturally aware.” In witnessing these indirect experiences of racism and discrimination in agency practice, participants felt it was their responsibility to advocate and create awareness of disparities in practice, as described in the next section.

### **Desire to Advocate for Clients of Color**

Focus group participants shared experiences of their perceived need to advocate for Black clients and other clients of color as a result of witnessing racism and/or discrimination within their placements. In relation to the stereotyping of Black clients, Participant 6 observed:

So, I feel like a lot of that practice is still kind of going on, you know? And so I see myself as the one that is kind of bringing more light to the unit in terms of, you know, culture when it relates to African Americans. So, I feel sometimes I’m liked and sometimes I am not.

Participant 6’s sense of being sometimes liked and sometimes not liked when addressing harmful stereotypes about clients was notable because other social work interns find themselves in similar predicaments. Even when advocating, Participant 6 shared personal feelings when hearing comments:

I mean it’s scary, you know, you’re angry. And at the same time, you’re scared for these people. And I feel like as a social worker, you know, that’s our job to step up, you know and advocate for those individuals.

Participant 6 identified personal actions taken to get the supervisor engaged in addressing a colleague’s comments. For instance, in response to a nurse coworker expressing surprise that former President Obama had not been assassinated and conveying that her internal “redneck” would come out, Participant 6 sought support:

And then there’s been times to where she [the field supervisor] went to the director and said “Hey, you know this is what’s going on, you know, and you need to address this. This is not appropriate.” Oh, and she [the field supervisor] even went to that particular nurse and sat her down, you know, and said something to her.

Although Participant 6 described herself as the most vocal person at her placement, both Participants 10 and 14 shared experiences of providing additional insight into clients' experiences that their colleagues may not have considered. For example, when a colleague made a comment about a client selling food stamps, Participant 10 recalled having to “school” a colleague about reasons, whether right or wrong, that clients might sell their food stamps:

I was explaining, you know, if somebody gets, let's say \$1,400 in food stamps, they got two small children, and they not really buying a lot of food, you know you can get cash for the food stamps versus, you know food stamps is not cash.

Although Participant 10 did not agree with the practice, she was helping her colleague see why it could occur. The participant further explained, “So they get to use that cash for other things that they might need, they might [not] get help with clothing.” By reframing a commonly-judged practice, Participant 10 felt that they were educating colleagues about a systemic issue that could affect aid to low-income families.

Participant 14 recalled helping her supervisor understand a community event at which free electronic items were distributed (e.g., tablets, remote control cars, drones, etc.). As the crowd grew it became chaotic, as many reached to gain access to the boxed items. Participant 14 and other colleagues of color “dialed down the crowd and got [it] organized” as the supervisor struggled and became overwhelmed. This interaction led to a conversation about how White people interact within communities of color. Participant 14 explained how intersecting personal identities bring certain strengths. In her case, she believed that her low-income, Black identity fostered understanding of how to interact effectively with people with similar identities:

We did a brief conversation about, like, how I've handled people in low-income, you know, communities, and being African American myself, and I'm from a low-income community. And I also know the dialect. I know what can offend people and what doesn't.

Additionally, Participant 14 reassured her supervisor that even with the mistrust with the community, people will respond with trust based on how they are talked to:

With White people coming in, and they still go and kind of deep down inside probably look at you or think sideways because you are a White woman, but they will trust you a little bit more based on how you talk to them and treat them.

These reflections of advocating within the placement showed that focus group participants found opportunities to address stereotypes, educate colleagues, and be the voices for clients as they provided insight into experiences that may be unfamiliar to practicum supervisors or agency colleagues.

## Tokenism or Representational Burden

Tokenism or representational burden can occur in practicum settings due to the perceived ability of the students to connect with or relate to clients with a similar racial or ethnic background (Brown et al. 2019; Johnson et al., 2021, Razack, 2001). In the focus groups, some participants described feeling that they were tokenized in their agencies, as they were required to speak with Black clients and/or their families. Others felt representational burden when they were expected to be the voice for an entire group. These experiences were especially difficult when there were no other social work interns of color at a placement. Participant 13 conveyed her frustration at being the only Black person in her organization: "If we're being honest, social work in the hospital setting is a Caucasian woman type job ... And I was slightly angered to be the only Black social work intern in the entire hospital." The same participant described how being the only Black person on staff could be challenging even when interacting with Black patients:

So oftentimes I would get sent into those rooms with [Black] patients and I would talk to them. And even then, they were kind of like standoffish because they're like, "Okay, you don't sound Black, and you're also from this area." So, it took me a minute to kind of like, I guess, earn their rapport and be able to, like, communicate with them in a way that I can help them.

Participant 1 felt empowered by being able to use their voice, but also felt that they could not be used as the voice to speak for all people of color. Participant 1 stated, "Because I'm the only person of color interning in my office right now, I would say that a lot of my co-interns try to make me ... they kind of single me out in a sense. They want me to, I guess, speak on certain things, and get MY (emphasized) perspective on certain things."

Participant 1 faced questions such as, "From a person of color standpoint, how does it make you feel?" The student observed that addressing questions like these created strain at times. The student noted that, as for many people of color, it can be a daunting task to speak for everyone, "and you know after a while I got really tired of speaking on behalf of all the people of color just because it's there. It's tiring, you know?" As another example, although Participant 3 appreciated how their Latina perspective was valued when working with a Latina client, they observed that no one person can represent all cultural perspectives:

And the admin, like, looked at me ... for guidance on a cultural aspect, if that makes sense. And, you know, in a way, I'm glad. At the same time, I'm like, it's also not my responsibility to teach you about other cultures, you know? I think sometimes we put too much pressure on people to represent a group and that's just not realistic at all.

Participant 3 went further to explain to interns who were being asked about their cultural expertise, “We each make up a tiny portion of said group, right? And I think that’s really the only time I feel like I’ve been, like, singled out again.” Participant 3 explained that they did not see this experience only as negative: “It wasn’t like, outright, like a negative thing.” The student reflected on how interns of color cannot speak for an entire group of people or for agency clients, as there is diversity within every specific community.

### **Varying Support from Supervisors**

Communication was one of the most prominent topics discussed in the focus groups, and participants described varying qualities of communication with their practicum supervisors, especially on topics related to race or racism. Participants shared how they sought advice from supervisors on dealing with uncomfortable client interactions. When working with clients who hold racist views or are reluctant to accept assistance from social work interns, or when taking calls from disgruntled constituents, having a supervisor to debrief with allowed participants to voice their concerns and discuss their feelings.

Sometimes supervisors did little to assuage the students’ discomfort. For example, Participant 5 described a time when a debrief was necessary after observing a client’s behavior during a home visit. Participant 5 recalled the client “hid behind the door and kept staring instead of smiling.” These behaviors created a “weird experience” for Participant 5. After the visit, Participant 5 spoke with their supervisor to understand what they did wrong. Downplaying the incident, the supervisor stated that the client’s behavior was common in the community where they were working:

So, we debriefed about it when we got back in the car. And [my supervisor] was like, “Yeah, there are some people out here in [location] that have like, racial thoughts.” And they call it some kind of group. It’s some kind of group out there that, like, doesn’t really support, you know, Blacks or whatever. I don’t know what she called the group, though. But it was some kind of racial group that they have out there. So, everyone’s not really accepting of the Black community out there in [location]. So, I understood. But at that time, I was just so confused. Like, that was my first time ever like running into a situation like that.

Similarly, Participant 1 found that after answering phone calls they would sometimes want to debrief with the supervisor, as the callers would often use racial epithets aimed at Congressional leaders. Participant 1’s supervisor conveyed that such calls were part of the job and the student should simply let it go and move on: “She kind of gave me a few pointers. But she was all just like in that mindset of like, ‘just hang up the phone.’”

A commonly expressed desire of focus group participants was having the opportunity to discuss the role of diversity in social work practice. When supervisors had a strong awareness of the benefits of diversity and a willingness to discuss racial/ethnic differences, it made a difference for many participants. For example, Participant 14 stated that their supervisor was open to learning more about race: "And she wants to know how she can be better, you know, she's told me straight out her mouth 'I want to know how to be a better White woman because I know I am privileged.'" Participant 6 found a connection with their supervisor, who is Japanese, due to a shared interest in the oppression of minoritized communities. This shared interest led to discussions about how people of color are treated in the medical field. Participant 6 noted, "I like how she is very inclusive when it comes to, you know, making sure that ... African Americans are getting the same services as our counterparts." Moreover, Participant 6 received a book from their supervisor about African Americans. "She bought a book online [and] says, 'Hey I want you to read this.' And it was about, like, African Americans and about a certain time period." This further connected Participant 6 to the supervisor as they explored injustices experienced by persons of color. Several participants felt that having a supervisor who was also a person of color could help when encountering racism. For example, Participant 20 said,

My field supervisor is an African American woman. And I actually like that because it's a common ground, you know? We've kind of walked the same walk, have faced the same struggles. And there's, I think there's an understanding and an acceptance there that may not be there with someone else.

## Discussion

### Summary

This study was conducted to investigate experiences and perceptions of BIPOC social work students in social work practicum placements. Focus groups with BSW and MSW students who were close to completing practicum generated the study findings. The focus group conversations centered on the lived experiences of students of color in a Southeastern state. The students described direct and indirect experiences of racism in practicum. Students described instances of racism from coworkers and clients. Students also described instances in which they witnessed clients experience racism. Most focus group participants reported feeling supported by their practicum supervisors, though some described challenges and supervisors' reluctance to engage fully with experiences of racism. Focus group participants conveyed a desire to advocate for clients who experienced racial bias in their agencies. The participants (most of whom identified as Black) conveyed that they felt a special responsibility to work with Black clients. They also wanted to educate their supervisors about how to work more effectively with Black clients. Participants described how they tried to take racism in stride. They wanted to keep moving forward, to avoid "internalizing" it.

Other recent studies have focused on the experiences of BIPOC social work students in practicum placements (de Bie et al., 2021; Gair et al., 2015; Gooding & Mehrotra, 2021; Lerner & Kim, 2024). This study contributes to existing literature by focusing on the practicum experiences of BIPOC students in a Southeastern U.S. state with a history of racism and civil rights activism. Overarching themes of racism, discrimination, tokenism, and varying support from supervisors identified in this study have also been described by other studies. For example, indigenous social work students in New Zealand, Canada, and Australia described direct experiences of interpersonal racism in practicum (Pallas et al., 2022; Srikanthan, 2019). This study's results are also consistent with first-hand accounts from U.S. students of their experiences of racism, tokenism, and microaggressions in social work programs, including in practicum (Lerner & Kim, 2024; Lilly et al., 2023; Tang Yan et al., 2022). As with this study's findings, social work interns in other studies have underscored the benefits of having persons of color as supervisors, having opportunities to discuss the impact of culture in serving diverse clients, and being able to speak about race and racism openly (Gooding & Mehrotra, 2021; Lerner & Kim, 2024). Similar to the findings highlighted in this study, others have found that the race/ethnicity of the practicum supervisor had an impact on students' experiences, and an opportunity to debrief after troubling interactions helped to create a safe place for exploration of culture and race within the practicum (Gair et al., 2015; Gooding & Mehrotra, 2021). Other studies reporting on experiences of social work students of color have found that BIPOC social work students feel judged and unsupported by White student colleagues (Lerner & Kim, 2024; Lilly et al., 2023). Participants in this study shared similar concerns, even though this study's question guide did not specifically probe for those feelings or experiences.

Findings from this study and others highlight a need for social work programs to prepare students of color for the practicum experience. Students from this study and others have sought tools for self-advocacy and for responding to racism and discrimination in practicum settings (Cox & Singh, 2024). Some researchers have proposed an antiracist learning plan for practicum students (Ford et al., 2022). Others have proposed innovative ways to teach field educators about racism (McCormick et al., 2019). Overall, research on this topic underscores the continued need to adopt antioppressive, antiracist and inclusion initiatives both inside social work programs in institutions of higher education and in social work agencies.

## **Limitations**

This study is not without limitations. The first pertains to the study participants. Because the study recruited volunteers, and only a small percentage of eligible students of color participated, we do not know how the experiences of our participants compare to that of students of color generally, at the host institution or more

broadly. It could be that students with concerns about their experiences in practicum placements were more likely to participate. Hence, findings cannot be generalized. Second, due to the demographics of the host university student population, the study focused primarily on the experiences of Black students. Only two of the study’s BIPOC participants did not identify as Black. The study did not have an opportunity to investigate the experiences of students of color broadly, or to probe whether students from different racial/ethnic backgrounds had different experiences in their placements. Third, although the research team of two White faculty members and one Black PhD student worked to check biases and question interpretations through discussion of codes and emerging themes, researcher expectations and bias may have influenced how the focus group transcripts were coded and which aspects were highlighted in the results. Finally, due to our concern about protecting confidentiality among focus group members, we did not conduct second interviews, member checking, or other means of establishing trustworthiness, which are commonly found in other studies using qualitative methods.

## **Implications**

### *Implications for Practice and Social Work Education*

The study findings illustrate that social work students of color who are entering practicum should be made aware that they could experience racism from clients, other staff in the practicum setting, and even supervisors. Students should receive instructions on where and how to report instances of racism, and how to find allies and sources of support. In addition, the findings suggest that all students entering practicum should receive bystander training in what to do if they witness another student or a client experience interpersonal racism.

Beyond awareness, of course, is the importance of ongoing advocacy to expose the kinds of interpersonal racism described by participants in this study and to move “from symbolic to structural change” (Apgar & Nienow, 2024, p. 164). Social work students of color should not need to brace themselves for being targets of racism in practicum placements. Whereas “safe spaces” to process and find support and solidarity with others may be an intermediate response, the ultimate aim must be higher. Social work educators should embrace the profession’s ostensible aims of advancing antiracist practice and addressing structural racism.

### *Training for Practicum Supervisors*

The findings also offer insights and information to inform training of practicum supervisors. Supervisors should understand the concepts of implicit bias and unintentional racism. They should be aware of ways that practicum settings can



reproduce and allow racist practices. They should be aware of ways to support students of color who experience racism in practicum. In particular, they should be aware of the potential harm that could ensue if students’ experiences of racism are downplayed or hidden. As underscored by others, supervisors should have resources on hand to support students in practicum settings (Oduro et al., 2024).

### *Social Work Classrooms*

Among the most important of the study implications are those relating to content throughout social work curricula, including content in social work classrooms, whether they be on campus or online. Addressing racism in practicum cannot be left solely to the practicum office, practicum supervisors, and students. All social work faculty can be aware of the risk of student experiences of racism and tokenism in practicum. Faculty can ensure that courses include content to prepare students to understand and interrogate historical and political contexts of racism in social work practice settings. Faculty can also be prepared to support students who experience racism in practicum by offering resources and connections to sources of support. Many social work courses are grounded in a social justice framework, much like the one guiding this study. Hence, beyond support and healing, social work classrooms can advance students’ abilities to understand racist structures and give students tools to confront organizational leaders and advocate for structural change (Smith & Resendez, 2024; Swick et al., 2021). Examples of students’ experiences with racism in practicum could be elicited in social work classroom discussions to help illustrate the ongoing need to implement socially just practices within social work programs and practicum agencies and with social work instructors and supervisors.

### *Implications for Future Research*

Social work classrooms often include extensive discussions of institutional and structural racism and their effects on social work clients. Classes may also discuss clients’ experiences of interpersonal racism. These study findings suggest that we need to know more about the experiences of social work students with interpersonal racism. The findings raise questions of whether experiences of interpersonal racism heighten or diminish concerns about institutional racism. The findings also suggest that students of color have great feelings of empathy and a desire to protect clients who are Black, Indigenous, or other Persons of Color from racist experiences. Future studies should further investigate such feelings and experiences.

This study’s findings reflect the experiences of social work students with practicum placements in a Southeastern state with a prominent history of racism in policies and practices. The findings raise a question of whether social work students have similar experiences in other regions of the country. Future research should investigate how

social work students in various regions experience racism in practicum.

Participants in this study were nearly all Black students. The experiences of Black students are important and more can be learned about them. In addition, the findings raise questions about students of other racial and ethnic identities. Future research should investigate how racism and tokenism in practicum are similar and different for students from different racial and ethnic groups.

### **Conclusion**

Social work practicum education programs have a responsibility to promote equity and inclusion, and to identify and remedy sources of student oppression and marginalization. Promoting the inclusive representation and voice of marginalized students is inherent in social work's core values. This study revealed that, while completing practicum, Black and other social work students of color had direct experiences of interpersonal racism and tokenism, and witnessed Black clients experience interpersonal racism. The study results can be used to inform social work practicum programs in the development of supports for BIPOC students as they prepare for and complete their placements. Findings can also inform practicum supervisors and social work students of color to help foster safety and well-being for the students and their clients.

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## Appendix

### Focus Group Question Guide

1. Briefly describe your field placement experience.  
*Probe:* What emotions did you feel when you first started your placement?
2. Describe your relationships with your field agency supervisor.  
*Probe:* Do you feel confident that you can discuss any concerns related to your experience with your supervisor?
3. Describe relationships that you've had with clients in your placement.
4. Have you ever felt that you were treated differently by the supervisor, clients, or other staff members because of your race or ethnicity?  
*Probe:* Can you think of a time where you felt singled out in the placement due to your race or your ethnicity?
5. What would you say to field administrators as they prepare to send students of color to work in settings where they may experience discrimination?
6. What are your recommendations to students of color in the social work program who are preparing for the practicum?
7. What would you have wanted to be done differently prior to starting your placement?
8. What would you have wanted to be done differently during the placement?
9. Is there anything that you've thought about as we've gone through the questions and as you've been able to reflect and process that you want to add before we conclude?