Out of the Shadows and into the Classroom

Preparing Counselors-In-Training for Microaggressions from Clients

Counseling skills instruction in graduate counselor education programs prepares students to apply basic and advanced counseling techniques. While multicultural counseling skills are typically emphasized, discussions around addressing client initiated microaggressions towards counselors are notably absent. Microcounseling interventions ([MCIs] Branco & Jones, 2021) are adapted counseling skills that correspond with Sue et al.'s (2019) microintervention framework. In this teaching brief, we offer MCI instructional strategies that may be utilized across multiple counselor education courses.

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Counselors-in-training (CIT) gain counseling theory and clinical skills training as part of their standard curriculum. Specifically, accredited programs require a counseling practice course where students are exposed to basic and advanced counseling skills and experiential activities such as role plays to practice emerging skills (Council of Accreditation for Counseling and Related Programs [CACREP], 2024). Multicultural skill sets, such as broaching in counseling (Day-Vines et al., 2021), can be included in the counseling practice course to support students of all identities to expand their cultural responsivity (CACREP, 2024). Despite research documenting minoritized student and counselor experiences of client initiated microaggressions towards them (Branco & Bayne, 2020; Gonzalez Vera et al., 2024; Sackett et al., 2023), limited knowledge exists on how to prepare students for these circumstances. Preparation can include, "…the effects of stereotypes, overt and covert discrimination, racism, power, oppression, privilege, marginalization, microaggressions, and violence on counselors and clients" (p. 36), which is a requirement of CACREP's (2024) standards in the social and cultural identities course. In this teaching brief, we offer information on microcounseling interventions (MCIs) and corresponding instructional strategies to support CIT preparedness to ethically negotiate microaggressions towards themselves, colleagues, and/or clinical supervisors.

Literature Review and Rationale

Many minoritized counselors and mental health clinicians have experienced microaggressions by clients towards them in isolation and oftentimes without support (Branco & Bayne, 2020; Choe et al., 2024; Constantine et al., 2008; Hernandez et al., 2010; Tinsley-Jones, 2001). Ample evidence exists to illuminate the harm incurred to minoritized mental health practitioners who are targets of client microaggressions to include psychological, emotional, and physical disturbances (Ahn et al., 2020; Branco & Bayne; 2020; González Vera et al., 2024). Microaggressions from clients challenge even experienced clinicians who struggle to determine if and how to respond. Thus, such scenarios pose significant concerns for emergent mental health trainees.

For example, González Vera (2024) and colleagues explored the lived experiences of 10 clinicians in training of color. Their findings revealed participants' experiences of discrimination mostly from White clients, strategies they applied to respond to microaggressions, and how the experiences personally impacted them. The latter category centered on emotional and behavioral responses that impacted their self-efficacy as clinicians in training and amplified their anxiety as new trainees. Some participants reported that their attempts to seek support

from supervisors and other clinicians in training either yielded minimal guidance or exacerbated the harm by dismissal or invalidation. Ultimately, participants noted the growth aspect of their experiences, including learning how to prepare to respond to future client microaggressions; yet such growth was reportedly garnered at the cost of clinicians in training mental health.

Additional research findings shed light on the microaggressive experiences of CITs in general (Smith et al., 2017; Vaishnav, 2021) and from clients specifically (Sackett et al., 2023). Sackett and colleagues' study (2023) shared the compelling experiences of CITs impacted by client microaggressions. Participants in their study described their surprise, discomfort, and uncertainty on how or if to respond to client microaggressions. Many described seeking out supervisory guidance to address the microaggression from their clinical site supervisors; however they notably did not share their client microaggression experiences with university supervisors. One participant reported that they attempted to do so and found their university supervisor's response to be invalidating. The researchers emphasized the importance of counselor educators and supervisors preparing and supporting CITs to navigate client microaggressions when the counselor themself is the target. Yet counselor educator scholars have identified that training and supervision practices predominantly cater to White identifying CITs at the expense of equitable training for minoritized CITs (Branco & Bayne, 2020; Haskins et al., 2015; Haskins & Singh, 2015).

KNOWLEDGE GAP AND SOLUTIONS

Sue et al. (2019) described a microintervention framework for bystanders and targets to directly address microaggressions and macroaggressions. Microintervention strategies to address individual microaggressive perpetuators include: 1) "Make the 'invisible' visible" (p. 135), 2) "Disable the microaggression" (p. 135), 3) "Educate the offender" (p. 135), and 4) "Seek external intervention" (p. 135). Each microintervention aims to validate, support, and ally with the target of the microaggression. Microcounseling interventions ([MCIs] Branco & Jones, 2021) are basic and advanced counseling skills that correspond with the first three options in Sue et al.'s microintervention framework (2019). Branco and Jones (2021) suggested the fourth option of seeking support to align with CIT supervision and or consultation from supervisors, counselor educators, colleagues, and peer CITs. The MCI framework offers possibilities for CITs to intentionally consider the microintervention category that may be most appropriate for the client microaggressive scenario. Or they may seek support in clinical supervision and case consultation to develop an appropriate course of action. Table 1 outlines Sue et al.'s (2019) microintervention framework with corresponding microcounseling intervention skills (Branco & Jones, 2021).

Table 1 *Microintervention and Microcounseling Intervention Strategies*

Microintervention Strategy*	Examples*	Corresponding Microcounseling Interventions (MCI)**
Make the invisible "visible"	-Undermine the metacommunication	-Reflection of content, Summary
	-Make the metacommunication explicit	-Reflection of content, Restatement, Closed/open ended question
	-Challenge the stereotype	
	-Broaden the ascribed trait to a universal human behavior	-Confrontation
	-Ask for clarification	-Information sharing, Psychoeducation
		-Closed/open ended question
Disarm the microaggression	-Express disagreement	-Confrontation, self-disclosure
	-State values & set limits	- Ethics (2014)
	-Describe what is happening	-Immediacy
	-Use an exclamation	-Immediacy, Silence
	-Use non-verbal communication	-Non-verbal active listening
	-Interrupt and redirect	-Paraphrase, Summary, Redirect
Educate the offender	-Point out the commonality	-Information sharing, psychoeducation
	-Appeal to the offender's values and principles	-Reflection of meaning
	-Differentiate between intent and impact	-Information sharing, psychoeducation
	-Promote empath	-Empathic response
	-Point to how they benefit	-Information sharing, Psychoeducation
Seek external intervention	-Alert authorities	-Alert clinical or university supervisor
	-Report the act	
	-Seek therapy/counseling	-Seek university sponsored or private counseling/therapy
	-Seek support through spirituality/religion/community	-Seek community support
	-Set up a buddy system	-Consultation with peers and colleagues
	-Attend support groups	-Attend university-based practicum and internship supervision

*Sue et al., 2019, p. 135

**Branco & Jones, 2021

Instructional Strategies for Counselor Educators

The following instructional strategies are meant to be scaffolded activities to best support student learning and skill acquisition. The activities can be utilized in courses about counseling practice and/or multicultural counseling (CACREP, 2024). The instructional strategies can be enacted both in online and in person modalities.

MCI IDENTIFICATION AND SKILL PAIRING

Researchers who have explored client microaggressions towards counselors recommend instructors and supervisors to include role play activities to support CIT preparedness in response to microaggressions (Anh et al., 2020; Branco & Jones, 2021; González Vera et al., 2024; Sackett et al., 2024). The instructors ought to initiate the role play activity by scaffolding the skills practice. Counselor educators may prepare CITs for MCI role play practice by implementing an identification and counseling skill pairing activity, described next. Using this strategy allows CITs to develop familiarity with the microintervention framework and possible corresponding MCI options.

Preparation
- Generate a large or small group discussion to identify potential client microaggression examples (e.g., microinsults, microinvalidations per Sue & Sue, 2007).
- Instructors and CITs may elect to use artificial intelligence (AI) generated microaggression examples if needed.
- Create a table with the collective group generated microaggression examples.

Implementation
- Next, CITs work in pairs or small groups to select a microintervention in response to each microaggression (e.g., "Make the invisible visible"; "Disable the microaggression"; "Educate the offender"; or "Seek external intervention" (Sue et al., 2019, p. 135).
- Once a microintervention category is selected; CITs generate possible microcounseling intervention responses and add them to the table.
- The instructor facilitates a large group discussion on each group's MCI selection with emphasis on the rationale behind the MCI choice.
- The instructor also engages in exploration surrounding the experience itself of examining microaggressions. Example instructor prompts include, "what emotional or physical responses came up for you during this activity?" and "what strategies like

grounding or self-care activities can support you during this activity?" Responses can be shared with the large group or not dependent on CIT comfort level. Instructors can also assign a post activity individual reflection with similar prompt questions where CITs may privately share their responses to the activity.

Pre practice

- CITs draft potential counseling script responses based on their MCI selection.
- The instructor facilitates a large group grounding activity (i.e. square breathing, five senses) to support CITs to prepare for the role play.

MCI Role Plays

Once CITs complete the MCI mapping activity, they are ready for the MCI role play experiential. CITs can practice responding to client-initiated microaggressions using the MCI script responses developed in the mapping activity or they may improvise new MCI responses.

Preparation

The instructor creates or uses AI-generated case vignettes featuring microaggressions directed at counselors using the microaggression examples developed in MCI mapping activity. Next, the instructor assigns the counselor, client, and observer roles to groups of at least three CIT participants. Depending on time parameters, the role plays can be from five to 10 minutes in length. A minimum of three rounds of role play practice is needed to allow for each CIT to have an opportunity to portray the counselor, client, and observer.

MCI practice

In small groups, participants enact the scenarios based on their assigned roles. The observer takes detailed notes of the MCIs utilized in the role play. During the role play enactments, the instructor rotates among groups to observe and provide live supervision as needed. The instructor also reminds CITs to rotate their roles to experience each perspective.

Debrief

After the allotted role play time, the observers provide feedback on the MCIs and other counseling skills identified in the role play. The counselor and client role players also share how they experienced the role play including any discomfort portraying the microaggressive client or the targeted counselor. After all CITs have rotated through the three roles, the instructor can facilitate a larger group discussion sharing experiences and personal reactions to the MCI role play experientials. Like the pre-practice preparation, the instructor may offer the following prompts to facilitation the large group discussion, "What was it like to portray (the client, the CIT)?", "What emotions or bodily sensations arose during the activity?", and "How might the activity help prepare you for similar scenarios with actual clients?" In addition, instructors may close out the lesson with another grounding, breathing, or expressive activity to support CIT regulation and model wellness practices CITs may employ in practicum, internship, and post graduate clinical practice in response to microaggressions.

Table 2 *Example AI Generated Case Scenarios with Corresponding MCIs*

AI Generated Case Scenario*	Identified Microaggression	Microintervention**	Corresponding Microcounseling Intervention
Client statement to non-binary counselor, "I am really stressed. But, uh, before we go further, can I ask you something? I've never met someone who uses 'they/them' pronouns before. Isn't it confusing for people?"	Micro invalidation of non-binary pronouns	Make the "invisible" visible & Educate the offender	"Your question reflects a common misunderstanding about non-binary people. Using 'they/them' pronouns is a way for me to express my identity and feel comfortable" (Information sharing, Self-disclosure)
Client statement to an Asian identifying counselor, "It's just been one thing after another, and I feel like I can't catch a break. But, uh, I was actually wondering, do you think you really get what it's like for me? I mean, you must have had it easy, right? Asians are always so smart and successful."	Racial microinsult based on stereotypes	Educate the offender & Make the "invisible" visible	"It's important for us to have a space where we can talk openly and respectfully about your experiences" (Information sharing, empathic response) "What you just said is a stereotype that can be quite hurtful" (Confrontation, Information sharing)
Client statement to a counselor who uses a wheelchair for a spinal cord injury, "My partner doesn't seem to understand my depression, and it's causing a lot of arguments. But honestly, how do you manage to give advice on relationships when you must have so many limitations yourself?"	Ableism microinsult based on stigma	Disarm the microaggression & Educate the offender	"I hear that you're struggling with feeling understood and supported in your relationship, and that's very challenging" (Reflection of content and feeling). "What you just mentioned reflects a common misconception about differently abled people. It's important to recognize that everyone, regardless of their physical abilities, has valuable insights and experiences to share. Let's focus on your feelings and how we can work through the issues you're facing" (Information sharing, encourager)
Client statement to a Black identifying counselor, "it's a bit weird being here, you know? I mean, I was surprised when I saw that my therapist was… well, someone like you."	Microaggression based on racial discrimination	Make the "invisible" visible	"Help me understand what you mean by 'someone like me"? (Open ended question)

*Open AI, 2024
**Sue et al., 2019

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

A common CIT concern is how to a) ensure ethical practice when navigating client microaggression experiences, b) maintain the therapeutic alliance, and c) avoid any potential client harm (Ali et al., 2005; Anh et al., 2020; Branco & Bayne, 2020; Lee et al., 2005). Historically, practitioner experiences of client microaggressions were labeled as counter transference, hence, eliminating any further action in session with the client or in clinical supervision as unnecessary (Ali et al., 2005; Branco & Bayne, 2020; Lee et al., 2005). Such guidance maintained the status quo of practitioner silence and isolation. We posit that ethical guidelines can be adhered to without sacrificing support for the targeted CIT or counselor. Therefore, we recommend that ethical considerations are included in the MCI role play debrief and discussion. Instructors and clinical supervisors may facilitate an ethical decision-making model review with robust discussion in large and small groups. CITs will be encouraged to cite relevant American Counseling Association (2014) ethical codes that both promote client care as well as protect counselor wellness.

Artificial Intelligence. Instructor utilization of AI for case scenario generation adheres to ACA recommendations to, "…employ AI to create simulations or role-play exercises that reflect a broad spectrum of cultural contexts and client scenarios" (n.d.), and "Use AI to develop case studies that cover a wide range of human experiences, ensuring these materials are inclusive of different cultures, identities, and life situations" (n.d.). However, caution should be taken to verify that AI generated case studies are not biased, harmful, perpetuating stereotypes, or otherwise inaccurate.

Role Plays. Instructor precautions must also be taken to normalize CIT discomfort in portraying a role play client identity that differs from their own. To address this concern instructors may encourage CITs to employ cultural humility and empathy to assume the perspective of the portrayed client, much like they will do with real life clients. Cultural humility and sensitivity allow for curiosity without stereotyping (Schmidt, 2025).

REFLEXIVITY AND INTERPERSONAL AWARENESS

CIT experiences of client microaggressions can be psychologically, emotionally, and physically disturbing particularly as they enter the emergent stages of learning how to be a professional counselor (Branco & Bayne, 2020; Sackett et al., 2023). Branco and Jones (2021) encouraged instructors and supervisors to consider multiple strategies to address CIT reflexivity and interpersonal awareness to include Kocet and Herlihy's concept of ethical bracketing (2014) where CITs can express their feelings and reactions to client microaggressions outside of session to limit any in session infiltration that could impede on the relationship. In addition, Branco and Jones (2021) recommended reflexive journaling prompts adapted from Guiffrida et al.'s (2019) work on navigating discriminatory clients. Prompts included, "When are other times you have experienced this kind of microaggression/racism?"; "How do/did you respond to such microaggressive/racist encounters in a non-clinical environment?"; and "What and/or who supported you in previous/similar microaggressive racist encounters?" (Branco & Jones,

2021, p. 292). Finally, we acknowledge the sensitive and painful nature of the topic and how, if left unattended or unaddressed, could incur unintentional harm to CITs in the classroom. For these reasons, instructors and supervisors must cultivate brave space (Arao & Clemens, 2013) classroom environments, facilitate discussions on CIT positionalities and intersecting identities per the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (Ratts et al., 2016). We also recommend that instructors seek resources from supervisors, colleagues, and community to maintain their own wellness, particularly if instructors and supervisors themselves have been targets of client microaggressions or discrimination.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

Instructors and clinical supervisors may immerse themselves in the literature that shares the experiences of microaggressions and discrimination that minoritized counselors may experience to build contextual understanding of the phenomenon. Likewise, they may review Sue et al.'s (2019) microintervention strategies in its entirety to glean additional instructional ideas, guidance, and resources. Additionally, Branco and Jones's (2021) work on microcounseling interventions and how to apply a full ethical decision-making model to address microaggressions in counseling sessions (Branco & Jones, 2023) could also be of benefit to instructors, supervisors, and CITs. Finally, supplemental resources that directly address racial trauma can support CITs, instructors, and supervisors to learn how to assess for racial trauma and or heal from their own experiences of racial trauma. To that end, Branco(2023) recommends the *UConn Racial/ Ethnic Stress and Trauma Survey* ([UnRESTS] Williams et al., 2018) to assess for experiences of racial trauma and discrimination; and the racial trauma workbook, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (Menakem, 2017), with the corresponding Cultural Somatic Institute e-course (https://culturalsomaticsuniversity. thinkific.com/courses/cultural-somatics-free-5-session-ecourse).

Instructional Strategy Evaluation

CITs could assess their preparedness to address client microaggressions in post-class reflections shared with the instructor. MCI role-plays may be recorded or observed in live supervision sessions to identify the MCIs utilized. Instructor and clinical supervisor training on the MCI strategies could also engage in journal reflections or brief surveys to assess their experiences and perceived readiness to support CITs to both learn about and acquire the MCI framework. CITs in practicum and internship courses could describe how they utilized the MCI framework to address client microaggressions at their sites during case presentations. Similarly, counselor educators and clinical supervisors could offer how MCI instruction prepared CITs to manage client microaggressions. They may also gauge if MCI instruction supported increased CIT disclosure in supervision of microaggressive client situations.

ASSESSMENT METHODS

Student knowledge acquisition may be assessed via individual reflection posts and quizzes. Instructors can issue a case vignette where CITs must develop MCI responses and provide rationale for their MCI choice. MCI clinical skills assessment is embedded in the scaffolding role play strategy with instructor observation and feedback. Further evaluation can be garnered by assigning role-play videos to assess CITs ability to identify an approach from the microintervention framework and employ an MCI in the mock session.

Discussion and Implications

The microcounseling intervention framework offers training and supervision strategies for minoritized CITs to prepare for microaggressions from clients in clinical situations. The scaffolded assignment and the subsequent discussions offer CITs the opportunity to intentionally practice counseling skills that can address microaggressive clients. Moreover, the instructional strategies support robust facilitated discussions about how ethical guidelines can be applied to preserve the counseling relationship and the CITs mental health. For far too long, minoritized CITs and practicing counselors have managed client initiated microaggressions in silence and without support. The MCI framework and instructional strategies are one remedy to the isolation experienced by CITs. They also provide instructors and clinical supervisors opportunities to demonstrate their willingness and capacity to support CITs with microaggressions from client. Ultimately, MCI instruction supports a more inclusive and welcoming classroom environment for minoritized CITs specifically and all CITs in general.

LIMITATIONS

While the microcounseling interventions framework can offer multiple possibilities for instructional strategies to address client microaggressions, evidence of its efficacy does not yet exist. Therefore, future research gathering evidence to support the MCI framework is warranted. An additional limitation includes counselor educator and supervisor willingness and comfort level to engage in discussion and training involving the sensitive, and at times disturbing, topic of client microaggressions towards CITs. Those instructors and supervisors who are not in a consciousness level that acknowledges such scenarios exist and merit additional training and support would be challenged to effectively prepare CITs for responding to client microaggressions.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

The MCI framework offers instructors and supervisors guidance to include instructional strategies that address the needs of minoritized and all CITs in counselor education. MCIs utilize

microintervention approaches (Sue et al., 2019) to address counselor directed microaggressions from clients and capitalize on basic and advanced counseling skills that are required learning in CACREP-accredited programs. Future researchers may enact further investigative inquiry on how well MCIs support and prepare CITs to address microaggressions and discriminatory client actions.

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