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# Disrupting Settler Colonial Microaggressions: Implications for Social Work

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## Abstract

The Council on Social Work Education made significant changes in 2022 to integrate anti-racist practices in social work education. However, this change in the social work education accreditation standards still neglects the persistent harms of settler colonialism. The unintended consequence of neglecting settler colonialism is ongoing violence of gendered, heteronormative, and colonial power relations (Arvin et al., 2013) against Indigenous women and 2SQ people. This Indigenous research project seeks to call attention to harm that is perpetuated when the social work profession does not acknowledge settler colonial logics. A reimagining of the discipline's values is needed by re-centering Indigenous knowledge to create more ethical spaces for future generations that align with anti-oppressive social work practice (Clarke, 2016; Lee & Ferrer, 2014). The research applies the concept of 'slow violence' (Nixon, 2011; Anderson et al., 2018) to microaggressions to mark how the discipline's logics of conquest and settler complicity sustain field and classroom experiences that wittingly or unwittingly condone violence against Indigenous people. This qualitative study on microaggressions centers Kovach's (2010) conversational method, Archibald (2008) and Clarke's (2016) storywork and talking circles with Native women. Native participants in this research included college students, practitioners, and parents, all of whom work as professionals in higher education, social work, K-12 school environments or tribal-related affairs. Two major findings emerged in the data, killing Indigenous futures, and witnessing other Native Women and 2SQ people's storywork as resistance. These findings are discussed as a pathway to pursue liberatory framings for future generations.

Keywords: Microaggression, colonialism, Indigenous storywork, Native women, slow violence

## Introduction

The social work field has established critical guidelines for accreditation and ethical standards emphasizing anti-racist efforts in teaching, research, and practice. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) notes in the

Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) that revised Competency 2 now includes racial justice and Competency 3 now focuses on “anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion in practice” (CSWE, 2022, p. 5). Encouraging these new competencies still fails to attend to settler colonialism’s historic and persistent harms regarding how to address it—both in the field, in the classroom, and within larger structures including education, and law and policy. More recently settler colonialism has emerged as an area of scholarship and it is important to identify specifically, analyze along with its manifestations in the field, and on-going impacts for Native nations. This lack of attention ignores the concerns related to ongoing violence of gendered, heteronormative, and colonial power relations impacting Indigenous students in university classrooms, faculty within social work units, as well as individuals and families in social welfare systems (Lee & Ferrer, 2014; Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2018). We argue that social work must include an analysis of the profession’s participation in the settler colonial project and its on-going complicity with settler logics in the field, among its practitioners, and within the academic classroom.

This research examines how Native women resist violence and racism in classrooms, their everyday lives, and within the social spaces they inhabit. Goeman (2013) contends that, “As Native bodies are constructed as abnormal and criminal, they, too, become spatialized” (p. 33). In considering how settler colonialism is embedded in the distinctive forms of microaggressions aimed at Native women, we reveal how racial microaggressions levelled at Indigenous women distort their complexity as well as their claims for a recognizable humanity. Microaggressions against Indigenous women reinforce the logics of settler colonialism in everyday interactions that justifies violence against them. Thus, it important to understand the logics of how and why violence is condoned against Native women and connected to land as Wolfe (2006) notes, “the primary motive for the logic of elimination is not race but access to territory. Territoriality is settler colonialism’s specific, irreducible element” (p. 388). Goeman (2013) adds to this argument by addressing gender specifically and states, “Colonialism is not just about conquering Native lands through mapping new ownerships, but it is also about the

conquest of bodies, particularly women's bodies through sexual violence, and about recreating gendered relationships" (p. 33). We argue that these racialized microaggressions are often embedded within settler colonial imaginings that reinforce the territorialization of space in ways that coexist with the logic of elimination. Containing Native nations within mapped borders of reservations served to limit futures for Indigenous people and legitimize settlers access to larger tracks of lands and resources. How space is territorialized, and Natives eliminated, is critical to understand within these logics particularly since most Americans are unaware. For example, that Native people are killed more than any other ethnic group in encounters with the police (Males, 2014). In this way settler colonialism serves to delegitimize Indigenous people since, "Natives occupy certain spaces of the nation and are criminalized or erased if they step outside what are seen as degenerative spaces" (Goeman, 2013, p. 33).

Native women's bodies represent the spatial threshold of a racial regime leading to restrictive racial classifications that further land dispossession and the logic of elimination. As Patrick Wolfe states, "So far as indigenous people are concerned where they are *is* who they are, and not only by their own reckoning" (2006, p. 388). Native women's bodies represent the barrier to settler's access to territory. "Where they are" and "who they are" historically was characterized as dirty, savage, bestial, and thus "rapable" much like rape of the land (Smith, 2010, p. 55). Settler microaggressions reinforce land dispossession and seek to limit the future of Native nations. Survival for Native women has always involved "resistance and storytelling passed through generations" where "survival is dynamic, not passive" (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014, p. xiii). Thus, this work emphasizes how Indigenous women, Two-spirit and queer (2SQ) identified people in this study witness each other's storywork through a re-centering of Indigenous ways of being (Archibald, 2008; Clarke, 2016) that create more ethical spaces for future generations (Clarke, 2016; Lee & Ferrer, 2014).

## Literature Review

Sue et al. (2007) initially defined microaggressions as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults towards persons of color” (p. 27). More recently the scope of microaggressions has expanded to include conscious and subconscious acts (Nadal, 2008; Sue, 2010) that work to maintain cultural, social, and political imperialism emblematic of the settler colonial state. Theorizing microaggressions within a settler colonial framework marks how social work’s logics of conquest and settler complicity combine to sustain social work field and classroom experiences that wittingly or unwittingly condone violence against Indigenous people. Senter and Ling (2017) conducted a study where a tribal community set up a gaming operation that significantly improved the social and economic status of the community. Despite the significance of these changed circumstances, their findings indicate no marked difference in White people’s attitudes where instead “racism remains in the form of overt hostility and micro-assaults” (Senter & Ling, 2017, p. 76). Furthermore, Clark et al.’s study using settler colonialism theory considered how “sociopolitical dominance is pervasive when targeting American Indians because the dominant, popular narrative of American nationalism marginalizes and delegitimizes living American Indians” (2011, p. 47). One of the few studies that highlighted gender differences for Native youth, Jones and Galliher (2014) noted negative “ascriptions of intelligence” (p. 7) associated with young Native women and their reported stronger bicultural identification with white culture. Racial microaggressions experienced by Natives, coupled with gender identity, positions Native women to identify as White to avoid discrimination and jeopardizes a positive sense of self (Jones & Galliher, 2014). Clark et al. (2014) note that unique microaggressions uncovered suggested Aboriginal people are “extinct or disappearing” (p. 121) which further targets undergraduates.

Education remains one of the main institutions where students experience microaggression that perpetuates the racialization of Natives (Grande,

2004), where settler colonialism is not addressed (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014) and that produces situations where Native kids “aren’t dropping out they’re being pushed out” (Johnston-Goodstar & Rohold, 2017, p. 30). Impacts from discrimination are linked with negative outcomes that include poorer psychological health (Duran et al., 1998; Galliher et al., 2011; Major et al., 2003; Rozin et al., 1999; Torres et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2011). There is also evidence that microaggressions may be even more harmful (Solórzano et al., 2000) given the confusing, subtle, historical, and persistent manner Natives experience institutionalized discrimination via government programs and this country’s history with Native nations often “aimed at genocide and cultural annihilation” (Jones & Galliher, 2014, p. 1). There is a plethora of scholarly work published on microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007) however very little of this literature considers the intersectional ways in which Natives are targeted and even less that considers social work, Native women, and 2SQ people specifically.

Research about the structures of settler colonialism in social work is scarce within the United States. Many scholars writing about social work and Indigenous populations neglect to consider social work’s own settler colonial roots except perhaps teams of international scholars, for example, from Canada and Australia. Indigenous studies can offer comprehensive settler colonial theory to understand the systemic racialization of Indigenous peoples when examining microaggressions (Clark et al., 2011; Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2018; Lee & Ferrer, 2014).

Students in the U.S. have also called for the social work profession to more explicitly include “settler colonialism and anti-racist pedagogies” in the competencies of the educational policy and accreditation standards (Vandre, 2020, para. 1). The Associate Dean, Karina Walters, at the University of Washington addressed the relationship between anti-racism and settler colonialism at a CSWE townhall (Pace, 2021) and more recently in the following statements, “We have to think deeply about how structural racism is a mechanism of U.S. settler colonialism. If we undo racism, we still do not undo U.S. settler colonialism” (personal communication, July 14, 2022). Indigenous social work scholars in conversations with other professionals

could lead efforts to carefully include a decolonial analysis. Fortier and Hon-Sing Wong (2018) recommend that efforts to decolonize the profession must be guided by Indigenous peoples for there to be meaningful change and conversation. These scholars highlight the importance of listening to and being in conversation with Indigenous people to help transform how social work is taught and practiced. As a result, an intersectional analysis becomes important to dismantle settler colonial logics to reveal moments of settler complicity.

## Research Methodology

Guided by a framework that includes Indigenous methodologies and Indigenous feminisms, this study provides a felt analysis of the collective experiences of Native women today. We also acknowledge that the stories Native women narrate across temporal and spatial histories indicate universal threats against Indigenous women and 2SQ people when they resist settler colonial violence. Million (2013) discusses the “unchecked violence” that occurs to Native women as an “affective aspect of the discipline that goes unmarked in histories and literatures of colonization” (p. 34), and that does not get acknowledged or marked within social work classrooms and amongst social work faculty. Amnesty International documents the failure of both the U.S. in *Maze of Injustice* (2007) and Canada in *Stolen Sisters* (2004) to investigate, protect, or seek justice for Indigenous peoples. This “deep-seated disrespect” (Million, 2013, p. 34) and indifference to disappeared, murdered, and raped Indigenous women, girls, and 2SQ peoples is a documented history of both the United States and Canada (Amnesty International, 2004, 2007; Deer, 2015; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014; Million, 2013; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2003, 2018). This current study traces the unacknowledged violent legacies of colonialism and continual unchecked, unnamed settler microaggressions within college classrooms, amongst higher education faculty settings, and everyday social worker and other professional interactions that serves to target Native women and 2SQ people.



In theorizing felt theory, Million (2009) explains, “a felt analysis is one that creates a context for a more complex ‘telling,’ one that illuminates the deeper meaning of what has occurred within education” (p. 54). Indigenous feminists often articulate a desire to create spaces to speak clearly about the state of gender relations and how the intersections of power and domination have silenced Native voices and shaped Native nations (Goeman & Denetdale, 2009). Million’s felt theory proposes that affect and history become embedded as community knowledge where bearing witness includes both affective and intuitive knowledge as well as how indigenous people have made meaning of, “pain, grief, and hope . . . in our pasts and [regarding our] futures” (p. 57). Million (2013) claims that for Indigenous scholars felt scholarship is gendered as “feminine” and not included as Indigenous knowledge or for that matter any “knowledge at all” (p. 57). Speaking from this position of affect and felt experiences is bold and powerful even when the academy continues to relegate this knowledge to the margins thereby dismissing and silencing the voices of Native women. Since colonial times Native women named colonialism, spoke up to share stories of violence, murder, and sexual assault, and appealed to notions of justice within settler colonial systems of jurisprudence. These “sustained articulations” from the lived experiences of Native women occur across time and “within a dense web of gendered colonialism” (Million, 2009, p. 268) and have largely gone unheard

Slow violence is associated with environmental degradation of the earth over time in ways that obscures on-going settler colonial oppression, extraction, and the colonial connection to climate change (Nixon, 2011; White, 2018). Smith (2005) notes how Native people are rendered “inherently violable through a process of sexual colonization by extension, their lands and territories have become marked as violable as well” (p. 55). This type of slow and unacknowledged violence characterizes the current rhythm of settler colonialism since it, “occurs gradually and out of sight [as a form of] delayed destruction dispersed across time and space” (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). Building on Nixon’s environmental theory of slow violence Native women’s bodies are inherently connected to and associated with Native

lands. The occurrence and persistence of violence directed at Native women over time is like environmental slow violence since it remains largely unrecognized and, when mentioned, still unacknowledged. Whereas environmentalists acknowledge the destruction and slow violence against the earth and ecosystems, the slow violence against Indigenous peoples and of those lands is largely ignored (Nixon, 2011; Xausa, 2020). We maintain that microaggressions operate as a form of slow violence in the lives of Indigenous women and 2SQ people that erodes their sense of safety and well-being and works similar and in tandem to how settler colonialism is overlooked and unacknowledged thus allowed to persist in social work classrooms and in the field.

Native erasure and the logic of elimination relegates Indigenous peoples to the margins, providing the necessary camouflage that hides and cloaks on-going discrimination as a form of slow violence with serious negative consequences for Native health behaviors and related outcomes (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998; Findling et al., 2019; Rosay, 2010; Walters et al., 2011; Whitbeck et al., 2004). Slow interpersonal violence via microaggressions in this colonial context stymies social justice and obscures the complicity of non-Natives and educators in discounting and ignoring violence against Native peoples, which further erodes tribal sovereignty.

### Sample

Cisgendered Native women and 2SQ people from over ten different tribes participated in talking circles and conversations representative of Indigenous methods for inquiry. Purposive sampling was used where a criterion-based selection included participants that identified as Native or 2SQ women, professionals, with some college education currently living in the West and Southwest areas of the United States. Phone calls were initially made to key organizations that employed Native professionals. Follow-up emails and recruitment flyers were sent to interested organizations to post. Interested participants contacted the first author and snowball sampling provided additional interested participants. There were fifteen participants

in this study who came from tribal communities throughout the West, Hawaii, and from urban, suburban, and rural reservation communities. The mean age for participants was 34.3 years. Participants traveled to attend talking circles, travel costs were covered, and each person received an incentive. This study was approved by the Colorado State University institutional review board.

### Data Collection

Recruitment procedures involved collaboration with Native organizations specializing in Indigenous women's issues, higher education, and K-12 professionals in several Western and/or Southwestern states. Two talking circles were held with participants in the Rocky Mountain West and Southwest area of the U.S. and lasted for over 3 hours. Two additional collaborative circles were held where Native community members, scholars, and participants assisted in co-constructing meaning making for data analysis in this study. The first author facilitated all talking circles and conversations. Contemporaneous laptop and handwritten notes were taken throughout the talking circles, conversations, and collaborative circles. All communications except handwritten notes (used for memo writing) were audiotaped and transcribed. Demographic information was not collected to ensure participant confidentiality.

### Data Analysis

Integrating what Kovach (2009) terms "mixed methods" (p. 35) this study combines Western methodologies of grounded theory and Indigenous methodologies accounting for witnessing women's story work (Clarke, 2016). For example, in conducting data analysis aspects of grounded theory were incorporated to include inductive and constant comparative methods for analyzing story data from talking circles and conversations where Native women listened to one another in some settings and shared stories, while co-constructing meaning together as part of data analysis in other settings (Charmaz, 2014). Indigenous knowledges and epistemologies are

understood by scholars as aligning with an interpretive approach (Cajete, 1999; Deloria, 2002; Kovach, 2009). Theorizing in the interpretive tradition is encouraged within a constructivist paradigm (Charmaz, 2010) and “fits” within the narrative aspect of Indigenous epistemologies (Kovach, 2009). Constructivism is the epistemological stance in Charmaz’s (2014) grounded theory approach and is often used to examine issues of power, social justice, and oppression in social contexts. At the same time using a mixed method of this sort means we must acknowledge how incorporating western methods alongside Indigenous methodologies is an area for critical inquiry (Kovach, 2009). Here Kovach suggests researchers consider a stance to decolonize methods even when using a critical paradigm (2009, 2021).

The research team in this study read through focus group transcripts, conducted a line-by-line analysis to create initial codes. Next, more focused coding occurred as categories began to emerge, which involved a decision-making analytical and iterative process (Charmaz, 2006, 2014). Constant comparative methods led to the development of mutually exclusive categories where an iterative process was engaged to accomplish this stage of the analysis (Lincoln & Guba 1985). Categories were then collapsed into two major themes: Killing Indigenous Futures and Witnessing other Native Women and 2SQ people’s Storywork as Resistance.

## Themes

### Killing Indigenous Futures

Native women give birth to Indigenous nationhood, future generations and hold respected roles in tribal nations. When women witness harms to community and family members via microaggressions, racism, sexual assault, child abuse, and systemic violence, they may feel a responsibility to name and stand up against these even when to do so incurs violence against them. The settler colonial construction of Native women historically viewed the *squaw drudge* as a simple beast of burden to the Native man and her counterpart the *squaw slut* as inherently available to non-Native men. These

imagined identities rob Native women of their inherent power, intelligence, multidimensionality, and limits their humanity. The settler penchant for indigenous one dimensionality is an important component in the policing of bodies and limiting futures through settler heteropatriarchy where Indigenous women are either domesticated or exoticized as this participant shares,

It's from what men say about Native women, "You should be in the kitchen. You got to make the bed." You know it's just like there's these different pieces. It's like okay there's only one side of a Native woman and that's to cook and serve you? Then to have it be an extreme with white people they are just like, "Oh you're so pretty. Oh, your hair is so straight. I like your jewelry."

Racialized, gendered microaggressions abound in settler logics of Indigenous women where the usual tropes about Indigeneity keep them docile and controllable. These one-dimensional settler imaginings about Indigeneity astounds one participant who notes:

I saw how other people had this idea of Indian people being stoic, reverent, sacred, ceremonial. Not to say those things aren't important to me but I don't lead my personality with those right. So the idea that I couldn't be funny or I had to be serious because I was a Native person was crazy.

This one-dimensionality limiting who Native women are and what they can become also occurs in the academy as another participant shared,

People like you do not need to be in English' and that I wasn't a writer and she started to talk about my class, my age, and everything about me . . . who I was and then she tried to kind of put herself like, 'I know what it is like to grow up in as a farmer's daughter and what the curriculum is like in lower class areas, they aren't that good.' She assumed who I was and where and how I grew up and kind of said, "I know what it is like and I went to a high school in Phoenix." She said, "You can't retain the information that younger kids can and that things had changed since I went to school." Basically, I went into a deep depression and wanted to withdraw from the university.

Here, the settler makes clear the assumption that Indigenous women are inherently inferior in an educational setting. This move to pathologize a student through the settler's racial imaginary assumes an unspoken authority for arbitering who is and who is not an intellectual. When Native women speak up and present as multidimensional humans their embodiment of a communal truth challenges and calls settler colonial power relations into question resulting in a policing of Indigenous women's bodies and voices as noted by a Native graduate student in an exchange with a white male full professor,

So I was in class, an animal rights seminar and we got off topic talking about like men or gender and the class was silent and the professor turns to me saying 'Do you have anything to say being the feminist of the class?' (Noting I was sitting very far away from him) Actually I do, reflecting back, maybe that was a way to shut me down by calling me out before I did say anything. I said it wasn't just a male/female issue but a White/non-White issue and then he said, 'I have something to tell you, you are White.' I was silent because I didn't quite know what he meant and I was overthinking it . . . like was it White privilege or I looked White. I think he took my silence as acquiesce. I don't know but he asked the class if they saw me as anything but White and the class was silent. And I mean I looked around the room and everyone had their head down. And then finally, well, another student, the only person of color [said], 'Well I see her as a person of color and I also identify as Mexican.' So, I just kind of felt immensely relieved but it is interesting that it came from the only person of color in the room. And it started a big discussion about how they identify. And I told the professor, 'You can't tell people how they identify' once I got my voice back after being fucking stunned. And then he called me prickly and said I was taking a lot of offense to what he said so now I was a prickly "White" feminist. That was the last day of the semester.

The Native student above gets placed in an untenable position where their feminist politics provides the grist for targeting them in the name of speaking up around gender equity but then forecloses their speech because of assumptions of what they say that complicates the settler perspective. The mere mention of race or racism by the student becomes invalidated by an

assault on Indigenous personhood that questions, from a settler perspective, whether the person is “authentically” Indigenous.

Policing women’s and 2SQ peoples’ bodies and silencing their voices was an overarching experience where participants discuss being targeted for their race, gender, and sexual orientation that limit their humanity and future as noted below,

White spaces in general provoke me not to disclose [identity] because I feel outnumbered and cornered. Well, it’s like almost like an attack, ‘oh let’s put all the attention and focus on her and tell her who she is and where her place is.

A participant shares what happens when queer Native woman is visible,

I think it had to do with being a Native woman, that element. I always thought there was an element of being on my guard because something could happen [and] the identity of being queer and Native was unsafe, it didn’t matter if they were white men or Native.

Another participant adds, “I didn’t challenge it [racialized stereotypes] because I didn’t want all the focus on me especially when I am outnumbered.” White spaces in general remind me not to disclose [identity] because I feel outnumbered and cornered. Indeed, surviving these contexts of settler policing of Native women’s and 2SQ peoples’ bodies and voices meant participants had to both anticipate and assess the level of danger they were in and the moves they needed to make to ensure their personhood and integrity. The following statement exemplifies this negotiating of survival in White-settler spaces:

Pick your battles. Sometimes I am vocal, sometimes silent not because I don’t know what to say but I don’t want to get into an argument. Is it worth my time to educate them? If I do say something, if I want to take the time to do it or to defend myself, if they are open to hearing it I don’t say ‘your fucking wrong’ but maybe ‘you shouldn’t say it.’

Many participants described a sense of isolation when negotiating settler colonialism, and one person recounts that, “there is a sense of isolation that

comes from being vocal about race, definitely impacts my quality of life.” As another participant stated, “I think that kind of numbs us to the reality.” The “reality” she notes is one where White spaces are laced with threat. Violent repercussions might occur for those speaking up for Native Nations and inherent tribal sovereignty and serve to silence Indigenous women.

Native women and 2SQ people made decisions not to disclose their identity given the challenges that follow when they do, as mentioned above. Despite this, participants felt the need to challenge misinformation, stereotypes, and the logic of elimination that settlers freely declare and imagine about Native people as noted below,

In graduate school I didn't feel the need to disclose it [Native identity] but there were times when we were discussing working with student populations and the Native voice was left out. And I felt a responsibility because they were always left out. I think people justify leaving Natives out because of the [smaller] numbers. The numbers of Natives are insignificant, so it doesn't get talked about or there aren't a lot of Natives here or in class. It was Black, White, Latino and sometimes Asian, but Natives were always left out.

This participant above discloses their identity to underscore the significance of including and acknowledging Indigenous people which demonstrates how the logic of elimination of the Native is operating within structures and goes unchallenged in higher education.

Settler heteropatriarchy creates a gendered hierarchy imposed on the relations between Native women and men in ways that validate the voices of Native men over those of Native women. As one participant said, “it's like someone else gets to determine your value.” Another example occurs in the following comment by a participant demonstrating how settler imaginaries around gender support the visibility of Indigenous men over that of Indigenous women:

I am thinking of different instance that came from Native men when I was trying to be vocal about my opinion and ideas [in higher education] I had about things that worked before were ignored by them or swept back 'ah ha' and they moved on not even acknowledging me. Here is a



good example, fighting for having Native American tribes listed on an application for college admission and being in a room full of colleagues whose response was not favorable. Ironically, they did it when another Native male gave input. When I say things it's clear and concise and when I fight for something it is met with silence. And when a man says the same thing they say, "Yeah let's do that."

When Native women and 2SQ people speak up with informed perspectives non-Natives, particularly men, become more agitated and empowered to harshly target Natives. However, when Native men speak to the same or similar issue, the chances of being heard increase exponentially and the hostility leading to violence lessens. Even when Native women are heard, they evoke negative emotions from settlers as this participant shares, "these past couple of years I have been so outspoken that people think twice before they speak in front of me." Their presence and speech agitate people. The increased violence and agitation against them add to their sense of vulnerability and is reminiscent of being dehumanized, killed historically, and at risk today for sexual assault. One participant shared, "I did experience domestic violence with him, I don't know if that had anything to do with my Native identity. I could see that he was sometimes jealous about my culture and identity because he didn't have any and he actually said it once." Another participant recognized the fatigue and dehumanization they felt when having to fight back, "You can't get out of bed, it just comes back and you think about it and it is hard to fight. It can ruin your life."

Policing Indigenous women's and 2SQ people's bodies and voices becomes an important part of how settlers reinforce heteropatriarchy to maintain control over Native lands, people, and nations. The voice and power of Native women and 2SQ people emerges more fully in the second major theme on storywork.

### Witnessing Other Native Women and 2SQ People's Storywork as Resistance

There is an isolation that happens when Native women and 2SQ people move through and exist within White spaces. This type of isolation lends itself to internalized oppression where Natives are blamed for their material

conditions which includes violence, racism, sexual assault, homophobia, and settler colonial tropes about them. When they have an opportunity to come together to talk about violence and microaggressions they experience daily/weekly in their lives, an important community and collective dialogue occurs. Goeman, (2013) asserts that Native stories have for generations been “powerful in the struggle against colonialism and empire building—yet they are fragile and need tending” and act as “imaginative geographies [that] will open up new possibilities and inaugurate new and vital meanings . . . in ways that map our futures” (p. 39).

This Indigenous gendered space provides what becomes an unedited space where participants speak up, articulate their truths, reminiscent of people in longer term friendships who trust one another. A sense of agency emerges in a milieu of relationality that is both familiar for some and empowering and affirming for others. Speaking truth is an invocation of ceremony because it engages in an ancestral practice that recalls a traditional pathway to healing. Isolation that participants previously experienced loses its power and fades away as they compare familiar experiences and stories. Despite the gravity of the subject matter, they walk away reaffirmed and reminded that collective dialogue serves as a form of resistance to settler colonial culture.

The importance of talking about microaggressions, trauma, and violence with one another brought about new awareness about their experiences, provided a forum to articulate social justice challenges regarding how pervasive their experiences were, and re-established a sense of relationality with one another. As one participant names it, “I feel very honored to be here share experiences, there is responsibility on me and if I have a little power . . . it’s showing me how to be a scholar.”

Native women and 2SQ people were able to make connections between their individual experiences and larger structural challenges which one person describes as, “Making connections with the bigger picture and seeing structural policies and layers all around us.” At one point, as participants shared their gratitude about sharing this space with one another, someone said they were “honored” about being in the group because it

“brings out important things and deeper than that it’s our humanity” and another added, “don’t discount the quiet one, that might of been a coping mechanism.” Another participant made a point of expressing how this allowed for “creating a safe space, having a place to de-stress allows the reclaiming of tradition” while still another shared, “I enjoy being able to come into these spaces and talk but I think we need more of this and it also helps me acknowledge what’s going on. I need to de-stress. It’s comforting to know I’m not the only one going through this.” Participants recognized the power and traditional responsibilities they have as stories were shared and relationships were built among one another.

As conversations and relationships deepened, participants also gave truth to their roles as traditional storytellers and the power they have in sharing their stories with one another and with non-Native people. The idea that they were “bringing the past into the present about basically how to deal with this on a daily basis” and asking “how does [their] experience help [them] deal or not” became an important aspect of the group experience. A participant shared,

I feel like it’s something I put myself out to deal with more than my family or friends. I bring it up more in work and there is a cost I think, the cost recently paid is being that ‘angry Indian’ people are counting on me to be the counter point so I’m now always [and] I feel very empowered [to] meet some new women. I feel, it’s just nice to come here and share.

Another participant adds, “I’d like to thank everyone for including me, being erased so fast it’s always a joy to see my name on the list.”

The focus on relational storywork created a level of recognition together about how incidences of violence and racism did not occur in isolation because other Native woman and 2SQ people experience it on a daily or weekly basis. These conversations promoted a level of deconstruction related to how Natives get racialized and targeted, and created an opportunity for validation, a sense of agency, sisterhood, and healing. Native participants felt empowered with one another to push back and insist their

voices be heard, which inherently recenters Native women and 2SQ people's power and resilience as the future of Native Nations is reassured.

## Discussion

This research considers the phenomena of what happens when Indigenous women and 2SQ people enter and speak up about racism (racial microaggressions) in predominantly White spaces to settler men and women. Based on our findings it is imperative that the social work profession extend anti-racism to include Indigenous voices and settler colonialism. These findings speak to the importance of unsettling the White dominant narrative to include Indigenous experiences along with the importance of educating students beyond the White Western academic author. The initial settler response masks what later emerges as the threat of violence as a phenomenon experienced by Indigenous people when they address racial microaggressions against them in predominantly White spaces. Our research found that when confronted, the settler subject seeks to re-establish their control and assert the boundary between themselves and the gendered Indigenous other. Microaggressive behavior is then normalized and repeatedly articulated within a settler colonial framework that seeks to territorialize space and eliminate the Native and any indigenous future.

The impact of microaggressions on Native women as students and professionals demonstrate how settler heteropatriarchy and spatiality map Indigenous women and 2SQ people to settler violence. On one hand, settlers often articulate not ever having known or interacted with Native women or 2SQ people. On the other hand, the deeply embedded logics of settler colonialism reveal the contemporary imagining and consciousness of the settler state. This project revealed the way in which settler colonialism occurs through interactions among people where microaggressions obscure the violence of settler colonial history. Settler permanence in the United States requires methods for continuous and on-going colonial occupation and unquestioned ownership of Indigenous lands. Settler geographies are premised, as Wolfe (2006) suggests, on a *logic of elimination of the Native*. The on-

going presence of Indigenous bodies provokes a tension that indicates, “we as Indigenous peoples are still here,” grounded in the land, thereby upsetting settlers’ routine ways of territorializing space.

The data highlight a sense of empowerment when Native participants come together in indigenous friendships and networks to witness their stories and experiences with settler colonial microaggressions. Poupart (2003) writes about violence against Native communities as it relates to internalized oppression and suggests that storytelling will continue to be a traditional method of healing for Indigenous communities. She states, “through the telling of our experiences and stories in a continual oral tradition and through the preservation of traditional ways, many Indian people resist the dominant culture’s subject position, knowing that we, like our Grandmothers and Grandfathers, have not deserved a history of violence” (p. 88). Within the academy and the workplace, Native women and 2SQ people can enact resistance and uncover community knowledge by sharing affective and personal narratives. This sharing enables an exploration of “the racialized, gendered, and sexual nature of their colonization. In doing so, they transform the debilitating force of an old *shame* into a powerful experience to speak from within their generation (Million, 2013, p. 56). Native people can thus locate their experiences with one another, inform one another and to empower one another to intervene within and resist settler structures. Women and 2SQ people in this study appeared less distressed after conversations where their experiences are felt and located within a community and not in isolation as individuals. Their storywork promotes reclaiming Indigenous ways of witnessing truth telling and a context where histories and colonialism are uncovered.

Resiliency emerged as an important finding when Native participants shared stories with one another. In sweat lodge ceremonies, people share deeply personal experiences and through that ceremony emerges hope and a lifting and lightening of heavy hearts. Native participants in this study emerged from talking circles thankful for the opportunity to be in the presence of other Natives, even when unflinchingly sharing their stories regardless of the intensity of trauma and violence. The circle itself created a

pathway for healing and liberation to resist and fight. A central tenet of Indigenous knowledges is relationality such that in conversations, or in talking circles, what emerges is the importance of participants not being isolated and alone. What is echoed by the people themselves is how they created solidarity and collectively acknowledged different forms of resiliency and resistance. This is what Wilson (2008) refers to in his text, *Research is Ceremony*. By providing an Indigenous space and method for exploring microaggressions, Native women and 2SQ people were able to access and acknowledge the critical importance of relationality as a path to healing, resistance, and advocacy. In this sense, they support a viable Indigenous feminist future for themselves, their families, and communities.

Study findings underscore a deep sense of responsibility prevalent among participants in responding to microaggressions. Some participants felt like they were “constantly educating” while others were worried about the future “How do we teach our kids to deal?” Their responses focused on educating and resisting settler colonialism. Some women were defiant in the face of taking on aggressors, “Stopping the shit by scaring non-Natives into silence” whereas others expressed shame of being targeted, “Not feeling enough anywhere, not legit.” Our findings correlate with Evans-Campbell’s (2008) assertion about the difference in descendent response to historical trauma that was clearly prevalent among study participants (p. 325).

The word, ‘microaggression’ is nowhere to be found in the new EPAS 2022 revisions. Competency 3 specifically focuses on social worker’s demonstrating “anti-racist and anti-oppressive social work practice... [and] ...cultural humility to manage the influence of bias, power, privilege, and values...” (pp. 5-6). Attention to “tribal sovereign status” is noted in the context of “dimensions of diversity” (p. 5). We argue that this competency needs further revision and clarity to emphasize the harms done when social worker’s practice solely from the dominant perspective that does not attend more explicitly to settler colonialism as a structure in social work practice and education. We advocate all social work courses need to include content and context related to Indigenous people along with attention to racialized

microaggressions resulting from unexamined settler colonialism within social work classrooms, curriculum, and practices.

## Limitations

Interpretation of study findings should proceed with caution. First, the participants in this study came from various disciplines and work as professionals not necessarily in social work. Although some participants are social workers and/or took social work college courses, other participants did not. This study did not necessarily ask participants specifically about how social work covers or limits understandings of settler colonialism within courses, curriculum, and EPAS and instead focused on microaggressions in everyday experiences. Nevertheless, the impacts on Native women experiencing microaggressions in undergraduate and graduate classrooms, by other professionals and in the field remains concerning. At the same time, the sample size for this study is small. However, generalizability is not the primary purpose of qualitative research as much as uncovering the lived experiences of the participant population to inform social work knowledge. As a result, these findings are more appropriately considered for transferability and fittingness, particularly with the population of Native women and 2SQ people under consideration (Lincoln & Guba 1985). Another limitation in this study are the participants since they work within a broad area of education, Native affairs, services for Native people, communities, Native issues, and were not necessarily social work practitioners nor were student stories necessarily from social work classrooms. Many were employed in urban areas and some within reservation-based homelands. All the women and 2SQ participants in this study completed college or graduate education and are not necessarily representative of a current social work student cohort experience.

## Conclusion

Indigenous research focused on microaggressions, gender, and settler-related content is an understudied area of research and one that needs to be

included in future projects as well as taught in social work courses. In order to challenge microaggressions in social work practice, it is imperative to embed analyses settler colonialism into undergraduate and graduate social work curricular content, including both generalist and clinical programs, scaffolding student's awareness, and skill to challenge microaggressions in practice. For example, to build awareness in the United States students can learn to write land acknowledgement statements by visiting the Native Governance Center website ([nativegov.org](http://nativegov.org)) as well as learn about the land they reside on via the Native Land Digital website ([native-land.ca](http://native-land.ca)) to bring awareness to the effects of colonization and oppression of Indigenous persons. A more advanced skill includes asking social work students to view Dr. Yellowbird's 2-hour presentation titled, "Neurodecolonization and The Medicine Wheel: An Indigenous Approach to Healing the Traumas of Colonialization," which is available via YouTube. The online or in-class room discussion can then focus on inviting each student to identify two important themes from this presentation that they believe are imperative for social work practice regarding settler colonialisms impact on their work and consciousness. The course instructor can promote discussion on critical thought and self-reflectivity specific to their development as a social work practitioner.

It is important to note this study did not explore or ask about sexual violence yet many participants from both urban and rural communities specifically spoke about that experience. Participants also spoke directly about the lack of reflexivity among non-Native men who wielded a racialized masculinity through both sexually aggressive behaviors and more sexually charged microaggressions. Future research might include analyses of both non-Native and Native masculinity's impact on Native women and 2SQ people. Another important area of research that needs more exploration is the microaggressive experiences of LGBT2SQ people who experience extraordinary rates of discrimination.

A further step to consider is how social work programs can change their cultural norms of anti-racist complicity. This can best be illustrated in the social work textbooks selected for use. For example, do case examples



provide race, nation status, and ethnic identifiers throughout the text or is it only for persons of color? If this is the case, then the authors are operating from a White dominant narrative. Further, are Indigenous persons represented in the text? Does the textbook provide a discussion on how to be anti-racist and anti-oppressive? Is intersectionality and settler colonialism addressed in the text? Course developers and designers of social work courses are asked to examine each textbook to ensure key concepts on microaggression, power, privilege, and oppression are more than a side note or chapter. The concepts all noted need to be expertly embedded in the textbook. Therefore, an area for future research would be to examine social work textbooks and identify how aligned each textbook is with key concepts as well as the EPAS 2022 revised competencies 2 and 3.

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