

KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDES, SKILLS, AND SOCIAL IDENTITY: EXPERIENCES OF  
SOCIAL WORK FACULTY IN MANAGING CONTROVERSIAL CLASSROOM  
DISCUSSIONS

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## ABSTRACT

### Knowledge, Attitudes, Skills, and Social Identity: Experiences of Social Work Faculty in Managing Controversial Classroom Discussions

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There is a dearth of literature on how social work faculty manage controversial conversations in the classroom. This qualitative study addresses the deficit in the literature by using Deardorff's (2008) Intercultural Competence model, the literature on the role faculty social identity plays during teaching, and the lived experiences of eight social work faculty at a four-year public research university. The four themes that emerged in this study's findings are: 1) preparation, 2) interactions during discussions, 3) engagement, and 4) social identity. Guided by Deardorff's Intercultural Competence model, the study revealed that faculty knowledge, attitudes, and skills substantially influence the ways they engage students and manage controversial discussions in the classroom. Furthermore, faculty perceived their social identity to have an impactful influence on their teaching. In addition, findings revealed that faculty desired more training on navigating discussions on controversial topics, addressing microaggressive behaviors from students in the classroom, and de-escalating students when emotions arise during discussions. Guided by the findings in this study, I proposed a new tool that can be further explored in future studies of faculty experiences, titled the Controversial Conversation Competence framework. This study adds to the knowledge of social work faculty experiences

navigating controversial discussions in the classroom and includes relevant implications for practice, policy, and research.

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this dissertation to the Black girls, like me, who grew up in the “hood.” Please know that you are not confined or limited to your block, neighborhood, or city. I hope you find inspiration to aspire for greatness even if you are afraid or are the first person in your family to do it.

I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to social work students, especially the students who trusted sharing their experiences with me. Your transparent feedback inspired this study, and I hope you feel heard. Please understand that your decision to pursue a career in social work is one of the most rewarding and life-changing choices you may ever make.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	iv
DEDICATION .....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	vi
LIST OF TABLES .....	xi
LIST OF FIGURES .....	xii
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION .....	1
Conceptual Framework .....	4
Problem Statement .....	5
Purpose Statement .....	6
Research Questions .....	6
Researcher Positionality .....	7
Definition of Terms .....	8
Controversial Discussions .....	9
Faculty .....	9
Isms .....	9
Social Identity .....	9
Significance of Study .....	9
Summary .....	10
CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW .....	12
Classroom Discussion .....	12
Benefits of Discussion .....	13

Challenges Faced by Students.....	15
Challenges Faced by Faculty .....	16
Instructor Self-Awareness and Social Identity .....	17
Recommended Techniques .....	18
Social Work Careers and Education .....	20
Social Work Faculty Perceptions .....	21
Theoretical Framework.....	23
Intercultural Competence .....	24
Summary.....	26
CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY .....	28
Research Questions.....	28
Research Design.....	29
Research Site Selection .....	30
Participant Selection and Recruitment .....	31
The Participants.....	33
Data Collection.....	34
Data Analysis .....	35
Trustworthiness .....	35
Clarifying Research Bias.....	35
Member Checking .....	36
Peer Review .....	36
Positionality of the Researcher.....	36
Ethical Considerations .....	39

Limitations of the Study.....	39
Summary.....	40
CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS.....	41
Participant Descriptions.....	42
Ava.....	42
Cora.....	42
Denise.....	42
Emily.....	43
Janet.....	43
Kim.....	43
Marie.....	44
Stacy.....	44
Preparation.....	44
Instructor Preparation.....	45
Educational Experience.....	45
Personal Experience.....	46
Professional Experience.....	47
Student Preparation.....	50
Interactions during Discussions.....	53
Controversial Discussions.....	53
Discussion Etiquette.....	55
Instructor Response.....	58
Engagement.....	61



Strengths and Challenges .....	61
Strengths .....	62
Challenges .....	64
Strategies .....	66
COVID-19 Pandemic .....	70
Social Identity .....	75
Awareness of Biases and Limitations .....	75
Racial/Ethnic Group Membership.....	77
Summary .....	80
CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION.....	82
Summary of Key Findings .....	82
Knowledge .....	83
Attitudes .....	85
Skills.....	87
Social Identity .....	89
Controversial Conversation Competence Framework .....	90
Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research .....	92
Implications for Policy .....	92
Implications for Practice .....	93
Implications for Research.....	95
Conclusion .....	97
References.....	99
APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL.....	107

APPENDIX B: EMAIL TO ASSISTANT DEAN ..... 109

APPENDIX C: RECRUITMENT EMAIL ..... 111

APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT ..... 113

APPENDIX E: DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY ..... 118

APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL ..... 121

**LIST OF TABLES**

Table 1. Participant Demographic Characteristics, Education Level, Employment Status, and Experience..... 33

**LIST OF FIGURES**

Figure 1. Intercultural Competence (Adapted from Deardorff, 2006).....	25
Figure 2. Controversial Conversation Competence Framework.....	91

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Faculty preparedness to manage discussions on controversial subjects like race, sex, gender, and privilege is particularly significant for instructors who teach classes in disciplines where this content is essential to the curriculum (Deal & Hyde, 2004; Fellin, 2000). For example, courses in the areas of medicine, law, and social work tend to explore sensitive or controversial subject matter (Leslie & Hutchinson, 2018). However, controversial discussions, while crucial for student learning outcomes (Dudley-Marling, 2013), can be challenging for students. For instance, students often experience anxiety and resistance during controversial discussions, demonstrated through disengagement, tension in the classroom, and incivility towards other students (Daniel, 2011; Deal & Hyde, 2004; Mishna & Bogo, 2007). Furthermore, students experience more distress when discussing controversial topics instead of topics that are not controversial (Leslie & Hutchinson, 2018).

Consequently, faculty who work with these students face additional challenges and experience feelings of discomfort, emotional oppression, and even threatened when conducting meaningful classroom discussions (Pittman, 2010; Williams et al., 2016). Moreover, faculty who taught courses involving controversial topics in higher education, such as diversity, felt unprepared to manage discussions and frequently learned through trial and error in the classroom (Gayles et al., 2015). This unpreparedness could negatively influence students' learning and engagement process, as instructors play a crucial role in creating opportunities for students' self-exploration through controversial dialogues (Kang & O'Neill, 2018; Watt, 2015b). Not only is faculty preparedness important, faculty's own experiences of discrimination and realization of social identities influence the way they teach and play a critical role in ensuring students'

positive learning outcomes (Garcia & Van Soest, 2000; Gayles et al., 2015). For example, Garcia and Van Soest (2000) found higher sensitivity levels during the interracial conflict in the classroom from faculty who had previous discriminatory experience based on their social identity. Therefore, faculty preparedness to manage controversial discussions and their awareness of the impact of their prior experiences and identity is essential for classroom teaching and student learning (Williams et al., 2016).

Although they are significant for students in *all* disciplines, controversial conversations are crucial for students in social work because of the requirements for social work practice. According to the National Association of Social Workers (2017) Code of Ethics, social workers should:

- a) understand culture and its function in human behavior and society, recognizing the strengths of all cultures (para 41).
- b) have a knowledge base of their clients' cultures and demonstrate competence in the provision of services that are sensitive to clients' cultures and differences among people and cultural groups (para 42).
- c) obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression concerning race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status, and mental or physical ability (para 44).

Achieving these goals requires faculty to engage social work students in discussions of diverse topics, such as culture, religion, race, and sexual orientation, which could lead to controversial dialogues in the classroom. Researchers have identified these discussions as a vital aspect in students' understanding of controversial issues for social work practice (Dean, 2007; Garcia &

Van Soest, 2006). Preparing students for the social work profession makes social work faculty's preparedness to manage controversial discussions especially significant. According to Sue et al. (2009), faculty's ability to properly manage controversial discussions is an essential aspect of the student learning experience. Without proper management, the classroom climate may fall short of training social work students to be aware of and sensitive towards circumstances they will face in the field. Suppose social work faculty do not effectively manage controversial discussions with students. In that case, they could ultimately send a contradictory message to students regarding the importance of controversial issues in the profession, thus insufficiently preparing students for their practice in the field (Kang & O'Neill, 2018).

Unfortunately, social work faculty feel ill-prepared to lead discussions on controversial topics in the classroom (Garcia & Van Soest, 2000; 2006; Van Soest & Garcia, 2008). There is also a lack of research on social work faculty's perceptions and experiences of engaging students in controversial discussions in the classroom. To date, I only identified two studies that have focused mainly on this topic (i.e., Garcia & Van Soest, 2000; Werman et al., 2019). Garcia and Van Soest (2000) found that social work faculty's previous discriminatory experience and social identity impact their sensitivity towards controversial occurrences in the classroom. In addition, Werman et al. (2019) indicated that social work faculty perceive the school as unsafe to have these conversations. As controversial discussions occurred often, faculty desired more training on facilitating these discussions. Both studies provided meaningful insight into faculty's perceptions and experiences of managing controversial discussions in the classroom. However, the quantitative nature of these studies limited the researchers to provide an in-depth understanding of faculty lived experiences of conducting controversial discussions with students. It remains unclear how social work faculty perceive their preparation for, attitudes towards, and

skills of managing such conversations in the classroom, and how their social identity impacts their experiences and practices. Without such knowledge, higher education institutions cannot develop training programs catered to the needs of the social work faculty. Therefore, I adopted a descriptive qualitative approach to explore social work faculty's backgrounds, experiences, and perceptions on effectively engaging students in controversial discussions. I also explored how faculty's social identities influenced their practices in the classroom.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This study employs the Intercultural Competence conceptual framework to gain more knowledge of social work faculty experiences with engaging students in controversial discussions (Deardorff, 2008). This model explores one's knowledge, attitudes, and skills in diverse environments (Deardorff, 2008). According to Deardorff (2006), the first component, knowledge, is understanding their own and other cultures and appropriate body language that adds to effective communication. The second component, attitudes, refers to the respect one has for different cultures as they approach differences with curiosity and openness. Finally, the third component, skills, refers to the necessary skills needed for intercultural dialogues, including listening, observing, and the ability to view from others' perspectives. Taken together, as one develops their knowledge, attitudes, and skills, they should become flexible, adaptable, and empathetic, as well as display these behaviors during intercultural communication (Deardorff, 2008).

Typically, Intercultural Competence is used in international education to study student development in diverse environments (Deardorff, 2006). However, this framework was appropriate for my study as I learned about social work faculty experiences in diverse classroom environments. Thus, to explore how faculty's knowledge, attitudes, and skills influenced how



they engaged and interacted with students during controversial discussions, I selected Intercultural Competence as the conceptual framework. In addition, I was also interested in exploring the role social identity played in faculty navigating discussions on controversial subjects. Although the Intercultural Competence model does not include social identity, it provides a valuable framework to explore individuals' experiences in diverse environments. Therefore, it was helpful in my exploration of social work faculty experiences with teaching the Human Diversity (pseudonym) course. This framework is addressed in further detail in chapter two.

### **Problem Statement**

Social workers are required to engage people with diverse backgrounds and conduct effective communication on controversial topics; therefore, classroom discussions about controversial topics are critical for student preparation (Deal & Hyde, 2004; Fellin, 2000). Moreover, the need to communicate and think about controversial topics is essential in social work education. The purpose of social work education is to prepare students “for a professional practice that promotes individual, family, and community well-being, and social, economic justice” (Council on Social Work Education, para 2). In order to create an environment where the healthy exchange of diverse perspectives is possible, faculty preparedness to manage controversial conversations is incredibly crucial. Currently, social work educators are encouraged to promote social justice (Nicotera, 2018), cultural competence (Robinson et al., 2016), and student self-awareness (Law & Rowe, 2019). However, social work faculty desired training on facilitating controversial discussions in the classroom (Werman et al., 2019).

Furthermore, there is little research on how instructors' social identity and previous experience influence their teaching and engaging students in discussions. There are quantitative

studies on faculty levels of sensitivity towards interracial conflict in the classroom (Garcia & Van Soest, 2000) and faculty perceptions of the classroom environment during controversial conversations in social work (Werman et al., 2019). However, these studies only suggest that faculty social identity and previous experience may influence their experiences in the classroom during controversial discussions. Unfortunately, they do not contribute to an in-depth understanding of social work faculty's knowledge of, attitudes towards, and skills of managing controversial conversations in the classroom, and how their social identity influences their practice of engaging students in controversial dialogues.

### **Purpose Statement**

To address the gap in the literature, the purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of social work faculty at a four-year university as they manage controversial discussions in the classroom. Specifically, this study aimed to provide a fuller understanding of social work faculty's knowledge of managing controversial conversations, their attitudes towards and skills of engaging students in such conversations, and the perceived influence of social identity on their practices in the classroom.

### **Research Questions**

The first three research questions were guided by the tenants of the Intercultural Competence framework - knowledge, attitudes, and skills. Additionally, the final research question was guided by the literature on the influence of faculty social identity on their teaching and classroom experiences. The following research questions guided the current study:

- 1) How do social work faculty describe their preparation (i.e., training, educational background, and life experiences) of teaching courses covering controversial topics?
- 2) How do social work faculty describe their attitudes towards engaging students in

controversial conversations?

- 3) How do social work faculty describe their skills (i.e., strategies and techniques) of engaging students in discussions on controversial topics in the classroom?
- 4) How do social work faculty describe the influence of their social identity on their experience of engaging students in controversial conversations in the classroom?

The goal of the first research question was to learn how social work faculty prepared to teach classes where controversial discussions occurred. The second question intended to understand better how faculty engaged students and perceived their interactions with students during discussions on controversial topics. Additionally, the purpose of the third research question was to learn about the specific strategies that faculty used to deliver and manage controversial content. The intent for the fourth question was to understand how faculty social identity influences their interactions and teaching practices during discussions.

### **Researcher Positionality**

In qualitative research, the researcher must acknowledge how their positionality and relationship with the phenomenon might influence the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, I am providing a brief biography that demonstrates my relationship and experience with this study. I also include my assumptions and beliefs related to this topic.

As a Black female and first-generation college student, I have overcome many barriers throughout my formal education. Initially, I felt lost and disconnected in college, as I had no idea how to navigate university systems. Once I earned acceptance to the School of Social Work, I felt more connected to the campus community. As a social work student, my most enjoyable experiences occurred in the classroom during controversial discussions. I also remember how tactful my professors were in managing pointed conversations in the classroom. In those

moments, I believe I understood others' viewpoints and strategies for navigating conversations when others have differing opinions.

After earning my bachelor's and master's degrees in social work, I began a career in the field of social work. As a professional social worker, navigating controversial conversations was a beneficial skill for me, as I would often have difficult conversations with diverse client populations in the field. As an academic advisor and adjunct professor, I would share stories from my professional experiences. I always circled back to how vital and engaging in-class discussions were for my professional preparation. I would receive mixed reactions from students who had taken social work classes where controversial content was inherent in the curriculum. Some students had wonderful experiences, while others had negative experiences in class and even questioned their decision to select social work as their major. Consistently, students attributed their experience to the way their professor managed the class during discussions.

Repeatedly hearing about students' negative experiences in social work classes angered me and caused me to wonder what was occurring in class to create varying outcomes in students' experiences. My curiosity led to the current study of faculty experiences managing controversial discussions in the classroom. While my close relationship to the field of social work, social work education, and my social identity might potentially cause bias, I have taken the necessary actions to ensure the trustworthiness of this study. My positionality as a researcher is further detailed in chapter three.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following list includes definitions for terms that were relevant and frequently used in my study:

## **Controversial Discussions**

In this study, controversial discussions referred to conversations about subjects that can cause tension or discord in the classroom. These topics included but were not limited to ability or disability, age, ethnicity, diversity/multiculturalism, gender identity, immigration, nationality, political views, privilege, race, religious belief, sex, sexual orientation, socioeconomic background.

## **Faculty**

For this study, the term faculty was all-encompassing of tenure, full-time, and adjunct instructors, as previous research (Werman et al., 2019) had not revealed any significant differences in faculty ranking/status.

## **Isms**

Ism referred to “an oppressive and especially discriminatory attitude or belief” (i.e., ageism, racism, sexism, etc.) (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

## **Social Identity**

Social identity, in this study, represented the various groups an individual self-identifies with, including but not limited to ethnicity, gender, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, social class, and political opinion.

## **Significance of Study**

This qualitative study explored the perceived experiences of social work faculty as they engaged students in controversial discussions. Additionally, in the field, social workers are expected to engage clients from diverse backgrounds. Thus, navigating discussions on controversial subjects is particularly important in social work as these conversations aid in preparing students for the field. This research helped fill the void in the literature regarding the

experiences of social work faculty who manage controversial discussions in class. The knowledge gained from this study could provide important implications for practice, policy, and research.

The findings from my study could benefit social work education as faculty prepare to teach courses where they will engage students in discussions on controversial topics. In addition, college administrators might benefit from the findings as they create professional development and provide support to faculty. In contrast, intercultural-related experiences in the classroom may represent intercultural exchanges in the larger campus community (Becirovic & Beslija, 2018). Thus, the findings in this study could provide knowledge to administrators about potential supports for the campus community. Finally, this study concluded that faculty knowledge, attitudes, skills, and social identity influence their experiences with engaging students in controversial conversations. Future researchers could replicate this study in other social work courses, with faculty from other disciplines and faculty from regions outside of the South, as their experiences may differ.

### **Summary**

Faculty play a vital role in managing the classroom, especially during controversial conversations. The way social work faculty manage these discussions is especially significant for preparing future social workers who will enter a diverse career field. However, there was a gap in the literature on how social work faculty knowledge, attitudes, and skills, influence their experience while managing controversial discussions in the classroom. Furthermore, previous studies did not address the influence of faculty social identity on their experiences during controversial conversations in the classroom. Therefore, this study intended to understand the experiences of social work faculty as they managed controversial discussions in the classroom.

This study aimed to understand how faculty knowledge, attitudes, and skills influenced their experience with managing and engaging students and how their social identity influenced their experiences during controversial conversations in the classroom.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In order to explore the experiences of social work faculty in the classroom, this chapter includes literature on classroom discussion, instructor self-awareness and social identity, recommended techniques, and social work careers and education. First, I provide information about engagement, the benefits of discussion, challenges faced by students, and challenges faced by faculty during controversial discussions in the classroom. Then, in the self-awareness and social identity section, I explore the literature on faculty awareness of self and the role/influence of social identity in the classroom. Next, I present some of the recommended techniques and strategies for faculty to employ as they engage in controversial discussions in the classroom. Then, I provide typical job duties and expectations in the social work profession, the purpose of social work education, and social work faculty perceptions of managing controversial discussions. I conclude this chapter with the theoretical framework I used to guide my study; the Intercultural Competence model.

#### **Classroom Discussion**

This section includes the literature on the benefits of discussion and the challenges faced by students and faculty. In general, there is a positive correlation between student engagement and academic performance (Bakker et al., 2015). According to Tinto (2012), a distinguished scholar well-known for his research on student success, the classroom experience influences student success. The classroom is often the one or only place where students interact with academic staff. Dr. Tinto identified four attributes of an effective classroom: 1) expectations, 2) support, 3) assessment and feedback, and 4) involvement. Moreover, students' expectations for themselves and the expectations that faculty have for their students influence the student's



classroom performance. In addition, faculty providing support for students to meet their expectations is extremely important. While faculty support is crucial for student classroom success, assessment and feedback are also significant as “students are more likely to succeed in classrooms that assess their performance and frequent feedback about their performance in ways that enable everyone – students, faculty, and staff - to adjust their behaviors to promote better student success in the classroom” (Tinto, 2012, p. 5). Tinto (2012) identified the fourth attribute to be the most important; involvement or engagement. When students are engaged academically and socially in the classroom, they are more likely to succeed and have more involvement in the learning process (Tinto, 2012). One of the ways that students engage in course content is through discussion. Therefore, I explore the literature regarding the benefits of discussion, challenges faced by students, and challenges faced by faculty.

### **Benefits of Discussion**

Literature around student success, as it relates to the classroom experience, highlights how students positively benefit from engaging in a meaningful discussion (Dudley-Marling, 2013; Hamann et al., 2012; Weinzimmer & Bergdahl, 2018). Weinzimmer and Bergdahl (2018) conducted a quantitative study to evaluate the impact of a facilitated series of “race dialogues on students’ sociological knowledge and personal attitudes about race and ethnicity” (p. 229). The researchers distributed presurveys, distributed on the first day of class, and postsurveys, distributed during the last week of class, to students in three sections of a race and ethnicity course in the sociology department over three semesters (Weinzimmer & Bergdahl, 2018). The sample size for this study was 86 students and the researchers found that overall students valued race dialogues (Weinzimmer & Bergdahl, 2018). Weinzimmer and Bergdahl (2018) found a number of benefits for students who engaged in the race dialogues series; one being increased

ability to identify how race and ethnicity operate in society (Weinzimmer & Bergdahl, 2018). In addition, students had higher levels of awareness of White privilege, awareness of inequities, and awareness of the perpetuation of racism in society after engaging in the race dialogues series (Weinzimmer & Bergdahl, 2018). Another benefit for students who engaged in the race dialogues was a significant decrease in colorblind ideologies and “increased motivation to build bridge gaps between different racial and ethnic groups” (Weinzimmer & Bergdahl, 2018, p. 232).

In contrast, Hamann et al. (2012) conducted a quantitative study with a sample size of 79 to assess the effects of various discussion modalities on students, specifically, whether students identified different benefits from different discussion formats (i.e., online discussions, small group discussions, and in-class discussions). The researchers distributed a survey to determine students perceptions learning outcomes from discussions (Haman et al., 2012). Haman et al. (2012) found that discussion in various formats positively impacted students’ critical thinking skills, thought process, and overall satisfaction. In general, students perceive discussion as a valuable part of their learning, and discussion positively impacts student participation and academic achievement (Dudley-Marling, 2013). A discussion is a tool that instructors use to involve students in the learning process (Michaels & O’Connor, 2012). Through discussion, students can “examine and possibly change their attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviors, explore unfamiliar ideas open-mindedly and gain a deep, conceptual learning” (Nilson, 2016, p. 155). Moreover, when students participate in controversial conversations, they gain a better overall understanding than students who do not participate in these exchanges (Weinzimmer & Bergdahl, 2018). While students receive several benefits through classroom discussions, conversations around controversial subjects may be challenging for students.

## **Challenges Faced by Students**

The literature around the challenges associated with controversial discussions in the classroom indicates that these discussions tend to cause discomfort for students and inhibit the learning experience (Deal & Hyde, 2004; Mishna & Bogo, 2007; Walls & Hall, 2018). Specifically, the findings from research on social work students' experiences during potentially controversial discussions in the classroom note that students are more willing to engage when they perceive the classroom environment to be safe (Deal & Hyde, 2004; Flaherty et al., 2013; Werman et al., 2019). For instance, Flaherty et al. (2013) conducted a quantitative study of nearly 500 graduate and undergraduate social work students' perceptions of the classroom during discussions on politics. The researchers found that while most students were comfortable with such discussions, students with more politically conservative views did not perceive the classroom as a place where they could express their views openly (Flaherty et al., 2013). In addition, Daniel (2011) conducted a qualitative study of 15 minority, social work graduate students to explore their experiences with multiculturalism in social work education. Through analysis of student narratives, the author found that social work students perceived that the curriculum was not inclusive of minority students and perpetuated inequality (Daniel, 2011).

Furthermore, Werman et al. (2019) conducted a quantitative study of students and faculty in a social work graduate school to explore how safe they perceived the classroom environment during difficult conversations. The findings revealed that students had more negative perceptions of the classroom environment during difficult conversations than faculty, and both students and faculty desired more information on how to navigate difficult dialogues (Werman et al., 2019). In contrast, Deal and Hyde (2004) employed several developmental models for multicultural learning and concluded that the emotional response from students during controversial

conversation may be common given the stage of professional development students are in at the time. For students to understand controversial issues, controversial discussions are imperative and necessary for social work practice (Dean, 2007; Garcia & Van Soest, 2006). Social work students may face challenges when engaging in controversial discussions. They may experience anxiety and display signs of resistance during controversial conversations (Deal & Hyde, 2004). They may also become withdrawn entirely and disengaged from the discussion (Deal & Hyde, 2004).

### **Challenges Faced by Faculty**

As discussed above, challenges faced by students while participating in controversial discussions may lead to behavior issues, which could add another layer of challenges to faculty. For instance, students' feelings of anxiety and resistance present a challenge for instructors as some students try to sabotage discussions by suggesting "course bias, reverse 'victimization,' and the 'right' to be provocative" (Deal & Hyde, 2004, p. 75). These behaviors could also present a barrier for faculty to create a safe environment for controversial discussions (Deal & Hyde, 2004). According to Deal and Hyde (2004), faculty avoid controversial dialogues and additional research is needed on faculty competency when facilitating controversial discussions (Deal & Hyde, 2004). Another barrier that may prevent healthy, diverse exchanges in the classroom is incivility, which is "any action that interferes with a harmonious and cooperative learning atmosphere" (Feldmann, 2001, p. 137). These types of actions present themselves in both small, seemingly insignificant ways and in more impactful ways that take time away from the learning process for students (Feldmann, 2001).

Ultimately, faculty play a significant role in managing controversial discussions. Unfortunately, as Gayles et al. (2015) concluded that instructors learned to manage these

problematic situations through trial and error and felt ill-prepared to manage difficult dialogues in the classroom. In their qualitative study, Gayles et al. (2015) interviewed 11 faculty who teach diversity related courses to explore faculty experiences during difficult dialogues in diversity courses. The four major themes that emerged from their study were: 1) creating an environment for difficult dialogues, 2) co-producers of knowledge, 3) student dissonance in difficult dialogues, and 4) positionality of the professor (Gayles et al., 2015). The researchers found that faculty used difficult dialogues as a tool for student engagement, but still faced challenges and had an emotional response during such discussions (Gayles et al., 2015). Gayles et al. (2015) also found that faculty needed to realize how their social identities influence their teaching.

### **Instructor Self-Awareness and Social Identity**

Faculty play a crucial role in the delivery and management of course content in the classroom. Thus, realizing how their social identities might influence this process is necessary to ensure positive outcomes (Gayles et al., 2015). In particular, minority faculty face unique issues like heightened visibility, tokenism, isolation, and exclusion (Kelly & McCann, 2014; Zambrana et al., 2017). Minority faculty often have additional diversity-related roles and responsibilities to meet the goals of the university or department (Kelly & McCann, 2014). Consequently, faculty of color view this tokenism as a burden (Zambrana et al., 2017) and feel oppressed, making it extremely difficult to embrace their social identities (Martinez & Welton, 2017). In addition, minority faculty may also face racial discrimination (Zambrana et al., 2017) and report lower levels of job satisfaction (Hesli & Lee, 2013). For example, in a mixed-methods study by Zambrana et al. (2017), the researchers found that faculty perceptions of discrimination included “blatant, outright, subtle, and insidious racism; devaluation of scholarly contributions, merit, and skillset by colleagues and administrators; and the burden of “representing minorities,” or a

“racial/ethnic tax” (p. 1). Furthermore, minority faculty perceive blatant racism/discrimination from colleagues to be tolerated by the department and institution (Zambrana et al., 2017). Simultaneously, faculty also experience subtle forms of racism, commonly referred to as microaggressions, in the classroom or with colleagues (Follins et al., 2015).

It is crucial for faculty to engage in self-reflection and be aware of how their social identity influences their teaching and interactions with students during discussion (Ambikar et al., 2018). As controversial discussions occur within the classroom, faculty identity significantly influences their teaching (Ambikar et al., 2018). In addition, faculty social identity influences their perceptions and interactions with students during conversational dialogues (Matias & Silverstein, 2018). According to Matias and Silverstein (2018), teaching controversial subjects can be emotionally taxing for faculty as they experience “racial battle fatigue that stems from constant racial microaggressions from students and colleagues alike to the outright threats from the public on educators’ lives” (p. 35). While faculty are in a leadership position in the classroom, they also bring themselves, including their social identities and emotions, into the classroom (Ahad-Legardy & Poon, 2018; Gayles et al., 2015). As stated by Matias and Silverstein (2018), “teaching is emotional work...[and] to work through student emotions, an educator must understand their own” (p. 48). For this reason, there are several recommended techniques and strategies that faculty may use during controversial discussions.

### **Recommended Techniques**

Identified in the literature are several techniques regarding how faculty can broach tough conversations in the classroom. One delivery method is trigger warnings, which are purposeful cautionary notices provided by faculty to students before engaging in controversial topics (Bentley, 2017; Boysen et al., 2016). A benefit of trigger warnings is that it prepares students

before engaging in controversial dialogues. On the other hand, one challenge is that trigger warnings may censor the classroom discussion and have an adverse influence on students' willingness to participate (Bentley, 2017). Another technique involves the implementation of small, dialogue groups within the classroom. Some faculty prepare to deliver sensitive content by organizing the class into small, diverse groups and providing students with provocative texts for discussion (Placier et al., 2012; Quaye, 2012; Weinzimmer & Bergdahl, 2018). In Weinzimmer and Bergdahl's (2018) study, students kept track of their experience in personal journals. The researchers found that students valued their experiences and were more willing to share in these small groups than in the larger class.

On a more macro level, some institutions have adopted techniques and programs to promote faculty development like the Authentic, Action-Oriented, Framing for Environmental Shifts (AAFES) method, which focuses on improving faculty and students' skills to process controversial topics (Watt, 2015a). Another approach is the Difficult Dialogues Initiative (DDI). This grant-funded program allows universities to develop their project to promote challenging discussions while protecting academic freedom (Weinzimmer & Bergdahl, 2018).

Social work faculty are encouraged to create ground rules and "meet the student" where they are by understanding how students' culture impacts their development to engage them in controversial discussions (Deal & Hyde, 2004; Fellin, 2000). In addition, social work faculty should promote social justice (Garcia & Van Soest, 2006; Nicotera, 2018), cultural competence (Garcia & Van Soest, 2006; Robinson et al., 2016), and student self-awareness (Law & Rowe, 2019). One recommended method to assist social work faculty with managing controversial topics in the classroom is the critical conversations method (Kang & O'Neill, 2018). This method contains the following five steps: 1) the instructor tuning into their own social identity,

2) the instructor creating an environment and inviting students to engage in the discussion, 3) diving into the conversation while paying attention to student interactions and identifying power dynamics during the discussion, 4) being mindful of the time and moving the conversation forward to the conclusion, and 5) the instructor self-reflecting on the process and conversation (Kang & O'Neill, 2018). Social work faculty might find these recommended techniques helpful, as they often engage in controversial discussions with students.

### **Social Work Careers and Education**

In general, the social work profession and job duties naturally intersect with controversial topics. According to the National Association of Social Workers (2017), the social work profession mission is “to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty” (Read the Code of Ethics, 2017, para 2). Social workers should adhere to the code of ethics as they “promote social justice and social change with and on behalf of clients” (Read the Code of Ethics, 2017, para 3). Social workers should also be “sensitive to cultural and ethnic diversity and strive to end discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other forms of social injustice” (Read the Code of Ethics, 2017, para 3). The core values of the social work profession are “service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, the importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence” (Read the Code of Ethics, 2017, para 4).

Social work positions typically require a bachelor’s degree in social work, at minimum, but a master’s degree in social work is usually preferred (Careers in Social Work, 2020). Often, social workers have a passion for helping people and assisting people in crises by providing and connecting children, families, and other vulnerable populations to services that improve their lives (Careers in Social Work, 2020). Typical positions in the field include child and family



social worker, school social worker, mental health social worker, substance abuse social worker, healthcare social worker, clinical social worker, social and community service manager, and social work faculty (Careers in Social work, 2020).

Social work education helps prepare students to work with these vulnerable populations. Holden et al. (2002) found that students' self-efficacy and confidence in their ability to complete social work job-related tasks increased as they matriculated through their program. Students can engage in topics around controversial issues like isms, multiculturalism, and social policy (Fellin, 2000; Greenfield et al., 2018; Varghese, 2016). Moreover, faculty are responsible for developing students into social work professionals (Grant & Gail, 2012), and thus, instructors' ability to manage controversial conversations in the classroom is pertinent. As faculty have a responsibility to manage debatable discussions, according to Greenfield et al. (2018), "educator positionality or status—tenured, nontenured, adjunct, gender, race, and so on—greatly affects how freely or how safe one is to break through the educational expectation of neutrality" (p. 432). Notably, the experience of social work faculty is somewhat nuanced because most faculty are also social workers and expected to adhere to the social work code of ethics, which prioritizes advocacy for social justice (Greenfield et al., 2018). Few studies have explored social work faculty perceptions of managing controversial conversations in the classroom.

### **Social Work Faculty Perceptions**

Werman et al. (2019), Varghese (2016), and Garcia and Van Soest (2000) increased the knowledge of faculty perceptions in social work classrooms during controversial discussions. Werman et al. (2019) aimed to document the extent to which both students and faculty perceived a problem with having and managing difficult conversations in social work. Findings revealed that while difficult conversations often come up in social work classrooms, both faculty and

students perceived the school as unsafe and unsupportive to have controversial conversations (Werman et al., 2019). In the Werman et al. (2019) study, factors that students identified, which contributed to an unsafe environment, were faculty lack of ability to address conflict and manage microaggressions and retaliatory behaviors student criticism. As a result, students did not feel confident discussing power, privilege, oppression, or any of the isms (Werman et al., 2019). Interestingly, in this study, faculty perceptions of their confidence in managing sensitive conversations were high, but they also reported a strong interest in training for facilitating controversial discussions (Werman et al., 2019).

In a qualitative study, Varghese (2016) explored how faculty, who taught an advanced social work practice course, incorporated the topic of race and racism. The researcher found that faculty lacked understanding of the social, historical, and conceptual context of racism and viewed racism as an individual phenomenon. Consequently, the faculty in this study did not “think about or teach critical issues of race and racism, nor [were] they are of the many opportunities to incorporate issues of race and racism into clinical social work practice material” (Varghese, 2016, pp. 144-145).

Garcia and Van Soest (2000) focused solely on faculty by presenting data collected from a national survey of over 300 undergraduate and graduate faculty regarding their responses and teaching concerns during the interracial conflict in the classroom, specifically, faculty levels of sensitivity and responsiveness. Of the diverse group of participants, the researchers found that African American faculty, women faculty, assistant professors, and faculty who previously or currently taught a diversity course showed more sensitivity than their counterparts (Garcia & Van Soest, 2000). In addition, Garcia and Van Soest (2000) concluded that life and teaching experiences, specifically discriminatory experiences based on faculty social identity, might have

contributed to increased sensitivity levels during controversial instances in the classroom. The researchers also found that faculty showed more sensitivity when prompted with vignettes related to a group in which the faculty identified with themselves. Ultimately, Garcia and Van Soest (2000) suggested a need for more research on faculty experiences and take-aways from occurrences in the classroom.

In summary, while current literature identifies several strategies and delivery methods for controversial conversations in the classroom, social work faculty continue to feel ill-prepared to manage these discussions (Garcia & Van Soest, 2000; 2006; Van Soest & Garcia, 2008). Researchers have studied faculty perceptions of the classroom environment (Werman et al., 2019), the ways faculty integrate race and racism (Varghese, 2016), and levels of sensitivity towards controversial occurrences in the classroom (Garcia & Van Soest, 2000). Unfortunately, these studies do not provide an in-depth understanding of social work faculty lived experiences and the impact of their social identity on managing controversial conversations. There is a need for more research on social work faculty experiences and perceptions while engaging students in controversial dialogues.

### **Theoretical Framework**

For this study, I utilized the conceptual framework of Intercultural Competence (Deardorff, 2008) to gain a more in-depth understanding of social work faculty experiences during controversial conversations in the classroom. This model consists of three elements: 1) knowledge, 2) attitudes, and 3) skills (Deardorff, 2008). In this section, I provide an overview of Intercultural Competence, which includes a brief history, a description of the framework, its common uses and applications, and how the framework was helpful for my study.

## **Intercultural Competence**

An essential tenet in Intercultural Competence is knowledge, which refers to cultural self-awareness, culture-specific knowledge, socio-linguistic awareness, and global issues and trends (Deardorff, 2006). Culturally self-aware individuals understand how culture influences their behavior and perspectives (Deardorff, 2006). Cultural self-awareness leads to culture-specific knowledge and an understanding of global issues and other cultural groups (Rantala & Stack, 2018). Finally, socio-linguistic awareness occurs when individuals understand the significance of body language in effective communication (Rantala & Stack, 2018).

Another tenet in Intercultural Competence is developing attitudes that promote respect for various cultural groups (Deardorff, 2006). Deardorff (2006) suggests that individuals approach different cultures with curiosity, openness, and a sense of discovery to develop these attitudes.

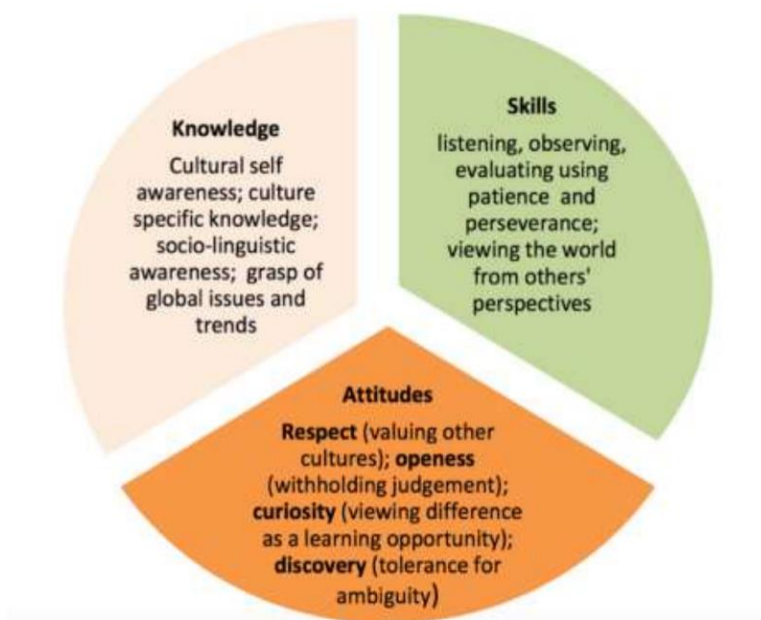
Finally, the last component of Intercultural Competence is the skills needed for dialogues across different cultural groups: listening, observing, viewing the world from others' perspectives, and evaluating (Rantala & Stack, 2018). According to the Intercultural Competence framework, "the goal is to understand, not to win" (Rantala & Stack, 2018, p. 13). Ideally, the expansion of knowledge, attitudes, and skills will lead to internal outcomes like flexibility, adaptability, empathy, and external outcomes exhibited through behavior and communication (Deardorff, 2006; 2008).

Although this framework is typically applied in international education to assess the development of Intercultural Competence in students (Deardorff, 2006), it provided a valuable structure to explore social work faculty's experiences and competence in diverse environments. Therefore, I selected Intercultural Competence as a theoretical framework for my study to

explore the influence of social work faculty's knowledge, attitudes, and skills regarding interacting with students during discussions of controversial topics in the classroom.

### Figure 1

*Constituent of Intercultural Competence (Adapted from Deardorff, 2006)*



I explored social work faculty experiences through the lens of Intercultural Competence to determine if faculty knowledge, skills, and attitudes influenced their experiences during controversial discussions. As I was also interested in learning the influence of faculty social identity, I considered the literature mentioned earlier on faculty social identity and self-awareness to understand the influence social identity has on faculty's experiences during controversial discussions. Because social identity plays such a crucial role in faculty managing controversial conversations in class, the Intercultural Competence framework and previous literature on social identity guided the development of my research questions. The Intercultural Competence model and the literature on faculty social identity provided the opportunity to study

the influence of faculty's knowledge, skills, attitudes, and social identity on their experiences with managing discussion on controversial topics.

### **Summary**

Scholars identified several benefits with classroom discussion (Dudley-Marling, 2013; Hamann et al., 2012; Weinzimmer & Bergdahl, 2018). However, discussion on controversial topics may cause discomfort for students or result in classroom incivility (Daniel, 2011; Deal & Hyde, 2004; Mishna & Bogo, 2007; Walls & Hall, 2018). Therefore, an instructor's ability to manage these types of conversations is critical. Not only is it beneficial for faculty to be able to manage difficult conversations, but it is also necessary for faculty to practice self-awareness and understand how their social identity influences their teaching practices (Ambikar et al., 2018; Matias & Silverstein, 2018). Teaching can be emotionally taxing for faculty (Matias & Silverstein, 2018). There are several recommended techniques and strategies that faculty may use when managing difficult conversations in the classroom (Bentley, 2017; Boysen et al., 2016; Kang & O'Neill, 2018; Placier et al., 2012; Quaye, 2012; Weinzimmer & Bergdahl, 2018). Nevertheless, faculty feel unprepared to navigate controversial discussions in the classroom (Gayles et al., 2015).

In social work classrooms, discussion on controversial topics often occurs as these topics are an integral part of the curriculum due to the nature of the field (Fellin, 2000; Greenfield et al., 2018; Varghese, 2016). Unfortunately, social work faculty also feel ill-prepared to navigate difficult discussions (Garcia & Van Soest, 2000; 2006; Van Soest & Garcia, 2008). As social work faculty play a crucial role in preparing students for social work (Holden et al., 2002) and discussion is a tool that faculty use, there is a need for more research on social work faculty experiences with managing these types of conversations. Therefore, the goal of this study was to

understand the experiences of social work faculty better as they manage discussion around controversial topics in the classroom. Through exploration of faculty knowledge, skills, and attitudes around managing controversial discussions in the classroom and the influence of their social identity during these types of exchanges, I purposed to increase the knowledge of faculty experiences.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

In this chapter, I present the research methods utilized in the study to explore social work faculty experiences with managing controversial discussions in the classroom. Specifically, I focused on their knowledge of managing controversial conversations, their attitudes towards and skills of engaging students in these conversations, and their perceived influence of social identity on their practices in the classroom. First, I restate the research questions and intent for each question. Then I provide details of the research design, including site selection, participant recruitment and selection, participant demographics, data collection, data analysis, and the steps taken to ensure trustworthiness. Next, I provide the positionality of the researcher. I conclude this chapter with ethical considerations and limitations of the study.

#### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the methodological decisions of this study:

- 1) How do social work faculty describe their preparation (i.e., training, educational background, and life experiences) of teaching courses covering controversial topics?
- 2) How do social work faculty describe their attitudes towards engaging students in controversial conversations?
- 3) How do social work faculty describe their skills (i.e., strategies and techniques) of engaging students in controversial conversations in the classroom?
- 4) How do social work faculty describe the influence of their social identity on their experience of engaging students in controversial conversations in the classroom?

The first research question intended to understand faculty knowledge and preparation to teach classes where discussions about controversial topics occur. I was curious to learn about any



formal training, previous education, and experiences that influenced their teaching. By asking the second question, I expected to learn the ways that faculty attitudes influenced their teaching. I hoped to acquire more information about how these attitudes influenced faculty perceptions and interactions during controversial discussions. The purpose of the third research question was to learn how faculty engaged students in potentially difficult conversations. I was interested in learning how faculty encouraged student engagement during controversial discussions, where students may present opposing viewpoints. Additionally, I wanted to learn about the specific strategies used to manage discussions. I was also curious to learn about the delivery methods that social work faculty used when discussing controversial topics in the classroom. Moreover, social work faculty have the added task of training future social workers for a diverse career field and I hoped to explore how faculty accomplished that task. While there were several strategies faculty may use, there was a deficit of research on faculty's use of these techniques in social work education. The fourth question was about the influence of faculty social identity on their teaching during discussing controversial topics in the classroom. The rationale for this question was that faculty also brought their beliefs, backgrounds, and assumptions into the classroom. While the first three research questions were related to faculty's experiences and perceptions of conducting controversial conversations with students, the final research question related to how faculty's social identity influenced such conversations and teaching practices in the classroom.

### **Research Design**

To study the perceived experiences of social work faculty during controversial discussions, I used a descriptive qualitative approach. In qualitative descriptive research, findings are presented based on the codes generated from the data (Lambert, 2012). I desired to provide a description of a phenomenon (Lambert, 2012); therefore, a descriptive qualitative methodology

was most appropriate for my study as it involves gathering non-numerical data through an exploration of meanings and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In the following sections, I include a description of the research site, participant selection and recruitment, participant descriptions, data collection, data analysis, and the strategies implemented to ensure trustworthiness.

In this study, I took a social constructivism approach as I sought to “understand the world in which I live and work” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 24). As a social constructivist, I also developed subjective meanings based on individuals’ experiences. I aimed to provide a “complexity of views rather than narrow the meanings into a few categories of ideas” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 24). Therefore, I included several broad, open-ended questions in the interview protocol. In addition, I also recognize how my background and positionality as a researcher influences my interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Moreover, my goal was to “make sense of the meanings others have about the world” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 24). In addition, qualitative research describes experiences when there is little knowledge about the topic (Doyle et al., 2020). Furthermore, descriptive qualitative studies provide a summary of individuals experiences (Lambert, 2012). Therefore, qualitative descriptive research was the most practical methodology for my study.

### **Research Site Selection**

The site used for this study was a four-year public research university in North Texas (RUNT, pseudonym), which had one of the most extensive social work programs in the nation. Accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), RUNT has been in existence for over 50 years. According to College Choice in 2018, the school ranked as one of the top 30 for MSW programs (Best College Rankings, 2018) and in the top 60 in the nation by the U.S. News

& World Report in 2020 (U.S. News Best Colleges, n.d.). RUNT was an excellent research site for my study due to its large size, with nearly 2,000 BSW and MSW students enrolled each semester. RUNT also had a diverse student body, with about 35% of the students identifying as White, 31% Black, 26% Hispanic, about three percent Asian and Multiracial, and less than one percent American Indian or Pacific Islander.

### **Participant Selection and Recruitment**

Participant selection and recruitment began after I received the necessary IRB approval (see Appendix A) from RUNT. I used purposeful sampling, which purposes to “intentionally sample a group of people that can best inform... about the research problem under examination” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p 148) to recruit participants for my study.

The selection criteria were as follows: participants had to have taught the Human Diversity course within the last calendar year. The Human Diversity course is an introductory course. It is an admissions requirement for Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) students and the first-year Master of Social Work (MSW) students, and part of the Human Diversity and the Social Environment curriculum, which is required in Schools of Social Work accredited by the Council for Social Work Education (CSWE). According to the course catalog, students learn an overview of “theoretical, practical, and policy issues related to diverse populations.” Also, in this course, “historical, political, and socioeconomic forces are examined that maintain discriminatory and oppressive values, attitudes, and behaviors in society and all levels of organizational behavior.” According to the objectives listed in the course syllabus, upon completion of this course students will be able to: demonstrate ethical and professional behavior as evidenced through assignments and discussions, communicate the importance of diversity and difference in shaping life experiences in practice at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels, and

apply concepts of social, economic, and environmental justice to advocate for human rights at the individual and system levels.

While the controversial discussion may occur in any social work course, I selected the Human Diversity course because this course, in particular, covers a broad range of controversial topics in each module. Topics explored in this course include: paradigms; prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination; cross cultural communication; privilege; immigration; sexism and gender diversity; ableism; ageism; classism; religious intolerance; and racism. In the Human Diversity course, students engage in weekly discussions on the course topics, complete quizzes and exams, and write an Out of Comfort Zone paper, which requires students to visit a place where they are considered an outsider and write about their experience. Therefore, controversial discussions were more likely to occur throughout the Human Diversity course. The expectation for students who complete this course is to have increased critical thinking skills around social justice-related issues and implement them into practice. In addition, I chose instructors from all ranking/status as Werman et al. (2019) indicated no difference in social work faculty perceptions during controversial discussions based on faculty classification. I also selected participants who taught this course within the last calendar year (2019-2020) to recall their experiences during controversial discussions readily.

To recruit participants, I emailed an Assistant Dean in the College of Social Work at RUNT (see Appendix B) for a list of instructors who taught the Human Diversity course within the last calendar year (2019-2020). I then contacted all of the faculty on that list via email. The email invitation (see Appendix C) included a brief introduction of myself, the purpose of the study, and an informed consent document (see Appendix D). I instructed potential participants to sign and return the informed consent form via email if interested in participating in the study.

Once I received the signed informed consent document, I scheduled a time and date for the interview, and I sent the demographic survey (see Appendix E) to gather background information. The demographic survey included the following categories: 1) age, 2) gender, 3) ethnicity, 4) education level, 5) field of study, 6) status of employment, 7) the number of semesters participants taught Human Diversity, and 8) educational level faculty taught. Scheduled interviews took place virtually, and I used Microsoft Teams software to record audio and video.

### **The Participants**

I assigned pseudonyms to each participant, and I only used those names to identify participants in my study. As shown in the table below (see Table 1), all participants were from different age groups and came with various experiences teaching the Human Diversity course. Five of the eight participants identified as Black or African American, two identified as Caucasian or White, and one identified as Hispanic or Latinx. Half of the participants hold masters' degrees, and the others hold Doctorate degrees. Two participants were tenure-track assistant professors, one participant was an assistant professor in practice, and five of the eight participants were adjunct professors. All but one participant's education and professional experience were in social work: Cora's was in higher education/Black studies.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographic Characteristics, Education Level, Employment Status, and Experience*

Pseudonym	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Education	Status	Experience
Ava	25-34	Hispanic/Latinx	Masters	Adjunct Professor	3 semesters
Cora	55+	Black/African American	Doctorate	Adjunct Professor	5 semesters

Denise	45-54	Black/African American	Masters	Assistant Professor	6 semesters
Emily	25-34	Caucasian/White	Doctorate	Assistant Professor (Tenure Track)	1 semester
Janet	45-54	Black/African American	Masters	Adjunct Professor	1 semester
Kim	35-44	Black/African American	Doctorate	Assistant Professor (Tenure Track)	3 semesters
Marie	35-44	Black/African American	Masters	Adjunct Professor	4 semesters
Stacy	45-54	Caucasian/White	Doctorate	Adjunct Professor	20+ semesters

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### Data Collection

Data sources included a brief demographic survey (see Appendix E) and semi-structured individual interviews. I used the demographic survey to collect participants' background information and confirm that they met the criteria for my study. The interviews provided the opportunity for me to gain a complete picture of each participant's experience. The virtual interviews took place via Microsoft Teams video conference and lasted approximately 40 to 60 minutes. Using the interview protocol (see Appendix F), which included open-ended questions, I collected information about each participant's experience during discussions on controversial subjects. Data collection occurred from June 2020 through August 2020. The interviews were video and audio recorded using Microsoft Teams conferencing software, and then transcribed verbatim using Temi transcription software. I saved the interview recordings and transcripts in a

secured OneDrive folder, which was only accessible by my advisor and me.

### **Data Analysis**

I used information from the brief survey to gather participants' demographic information during data analysis and saved it to the secure OneDrive folder. As I reviewed the transcribed interviews for accuracy, I used memos to document any initial thoughts or potential themes that emerged from the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I used line-by-line coding to code each transcript and then looked for similar instances between cases to identify themes through within-case analysis and cross-case synthesis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After I combined the codes into the final themes, I sent three transcripts with assigned pseudonyms and the themes to a colleague who was knowledgeable about the qualitative methodology for peer review. To ensure that my analysis was not biased, the peer reviewer asked for my interpretation of the themes. I also discussed the final themes with my supervising professor. Then, I used a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to organize quotes from participants used to support my findings.

### **Trustworthiness**

Researchers can use nine validation strategies to increase trustworthiness in their study, and Creswell and Poth (2018) recommend that researchers engage in at least two of these strategies. I chose to implement three validation strategies to ensure trustworthiness and have listed them in this section.

### ***Clarifying Research Bias***

To clarify bias, the researcher should identify and relay their understanding, biases, and experiences with the topic at the beginning of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I clarified my bias in Chapter One, where I provided a personal biography of my experience and relationship with the topic. I have also included a brief biography below (*see Positionality of the Researcher*).

### ***Member Checking***

In order to employ member checking, the researcher should request feedback from participants to certify that the findings and interpretations of the data are not biased (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

After I transcribed each interview, I sent the transcript to the participant for their review.

Participants had the opportunity to read their transcripts for accuracy and edit the information. I did not receive changes for the transcript from any of the participants. Once I identified the final themes after the data analysis, I shared the themes with the participants. I did not receive any feedback from participants regarding the final themes. However, one participant replied confirming receipt.

### ***Peer Review***

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the researcher should allow someone with knowledge of the research to check to ensure credibility. Once I finalized the themes, I sent interview transcripts and the final themes to a knowledgeable colleague for a peer review. In doing so, my colleague confirmed that my bias did not influence my final themes.

### **Positionality of the Researcher**

In 2006, I was a very nervous freshman at Rutgers University, a large public research institution in New Jersey. As a first-generation student, I felt completely overwhelmed in this setting. I lived in a dormitory where most of the students were White. I identify as a Black female, and this was my first experience cohabiting with people who were not from the same racial/ethnic background as me. Moreover, I attended classes where the lecture hall could hold hundreds of students. I often felt lost, misunderstood, and the need to explain myself. During my time at the university, there were a couple of events that contributed to my feelings of isolation. I attended Rutgers University in 2006, during “Jena Six,” involving six Black students from Jena



High School in Louisiana. The students were arrested and charged with over 100 years, collectively, regarding the beating of a White student. I remember the protest held by the Black Student Union at Rutgers. Then, in 2007, Don Imus, a former radio personality, referred to our mostly Black women basketball team as “nappy-headed hoes.” Imus’ hateful words caused an uproar on campus, and the racial divide was evident.

During my first year, I felt like an “other,” and I had not found my place on such a large campus until the spring of my sophomore year when I took an Introduction to Social Work class. This was the first time that I felt like I belonged. The history of the field and the fact that I could build a career solely based on helping others intrigued me. When I gained acceptance to the Bachelor of Social Work program, I experienced feelings of excitement and accomplishment. I was overjoyed about learning the skills that would help me accomplish my goals in social work. While social work is a writing-intensive discipline, much of what I retained from those undergraduate courses came from the classroom discussions. I joined a cohort of about 30 students, and two of the required classes were Human Behavior in a Social Environment (HBSE) I and II.

In these courses, I learned about developmental milestones, and a large part of the curriculum included topics about diversity and isms. Some of the most heated yet beneficial discussions occurred in these two courses. What I remember most is how well my professor managed the class during controversial conversations. As I learned how to acknowledge and address my own biases, I do not remember leaving the class feeling offended or disengaged afterward. Near the end of the program, our cohort took the Groups at Risk course, where we explored the experiences of marginalized groups and discussed common stereotypes. There is no doubt in my mind that the respect and understanding we built in the HBSE classes played a role

in the comradery we had in the Groups at Risk course. Moreover, I remember how calculated yet delicate my professor, a Latinx female, functioned in the HBSE courses when helping students consider opposing viewpoints, and how direct and honest my professor, a White male, was in the Groups at Risk course.

I currently hold a bachelor's and master's in social work. In addition, I have nearly five years of prior work experience as a direct practice social worker. Nonetheless, the experience I had in those undergraduate classes left a lasting impression. The skills I learned, as it relates to respecting the opinions of others and continuously reflecting on my own beliefs and actions to make sure I am taking the most culturally competent approach, remained with me well after school and into my professional career.

For several years, I was an academic advisor and am currently an adjunct professor at a school of social work. During my daily interactions with students, I received the most positive and negative feedback regarding the Human Diversity course, which is the equivalent of my HBSE class from undergrad. Learning about the students' experiences in this course is what sparked my interest in the topic for the current study. Regardless of whether a student's experience was good or bad, the common factor is how faculty managed the classroom. When students expressed feelings of satisfaction, they referred to how outstanding the professor was, and when students expressed discontent, they referred to how the professor performed poorly. Unfortunately, some students who did not have a good experience in the course either disengaged in future classes or chose to withdraw from the program. Knowing that students chose to leave the program angered me and caused me to reflect on the fantastic experience I had at Rutgers in the HBSE courses. A few questions came to mind upon reflecting: What is it about the professor that causes such drastic differences in the student experience during this class?

How are faculty trained or prepared to manage complex topics in the classroom? How would faculty describe their experiences while teaching a course designed to address controversial issues?

In short, based on my professional experience as a social worker, my current close relationship with social work education, and my identity as a Black woman, I acknowledge my beliefs and assumptions on this topic. While my personal views could potentially surface as a qualitative researcher, I implemented the appropriate strategies to ensure trustworthiness.

### **Ethical Considerations**

I adhered to the following measures to prevent the occurrence of potential ethical issues. After receiving approval from the RUNT Institutional Review Board in Spring 2019, I began participant recruitment and followed all procedures. I emailed the purpose of the study along with the consent form and informed participants that they would not be required to participate and may withdraw at any point without penalty. During the interviews, I provided the option for participants to leave their cameras off if they were not comfortable with their faces being in the recording. Finally, I assigned pseudonyms to protect participants' identities during the data collection and data analysis stages. I also stored data in a secure OneDrive folder and ensured the deletion of records when applicable.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While interpreting the findings of this study, I identified the following limitations. The first limitation was my cultural identity and close relationship with the field of social work, as my experience as a Black woman and professional social worker could potentially influence my interpretation of the data. However, I implemented the validation strategies I mentioned previously to ensure credibility. A second limitation was that all participants identified as female,

whereas male instructors might have had a different experience. Another limitation was that this study was not longitudinal, as data collection consisted of one semi-structured interview instead of data collection over time. A fourth limitation is that faculty in the current study held various rank (i.e., adjunct instructors, assistant professors, tenured, and non-tenured) and there was no differentiation between faculty status. There might be differences in experience between faculty rank as adjunct faculty are current practitioners in the field of social work, whereas, faculty who hold Ph.D. degrees were formally trained for teaching. One final limitation was the purposeful selection of one course for this study, while other courses, where controversial topics are inherent in the curriculum, were not included. However, Human Diversity is a required foundational course for both BSW and MSW students with potentially controversial topics inherent in the course curriculum. Nevertheless, through qualitative methodology, I provided an in-depth understanding of faculty experiences while managing controversial discussions.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I presented the methodology and research questions for this study. Then, I provided a detailed description of the research design: research site selection, participant recruitment and selection, participant demographics, data collection and analysis, and strategies to ensure trustworthiness. I also provided the positionality of the researcher. Finally, I provided information on the ethical considerations and the limitations I identified for the study. In the following chapter, I present the thematic findings from the study.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to extend the knowledge of social work faculty experiences of managing controversial discussions in both virtual and face-to-face classrooms. Specifically, this study aimed to gather information about how faculty knowledge, skills, attitudes, and social identity impact their discussions with students on controversial topics. As the COVID-19 pandemic occurred during this study, I also explored participants' experiences with managing controversial discussions during the pandemic. During data analysis of the eight participant interviews, several themes emerged. The first theme is *preparation*, specifically, the ways in which faculty prepare themselves to teach the course and also prepare students for the field of social work. Therefore, the subthemes identified under preparation are 1) instructor preparation and 2) student preparation. The second theme that emerged was *interactions during discussions*, as faculty described the type of topics that lead to controversial discussion, discussion etiquette, and the instructor's response during these conversations. The subthemes identified within the interactions during the discussion theme were 1) controversial discussions, 2) discussion etiquette, and 3) instructor response. The third theme was *engagement*, as participants shared their strengths and challenges, the strategies used during discussions, and additionally, how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced all of these. The subthemes within engagement were 1) strengths and challenges, 2) strategies, and 3) COVID-19. Finally, the fourth theme that was overwhelmingly consistent among all participants was *social identity*. Within the social identity theme are the subthemes 1) awareness of biases and limitations and 2) racial/ethnic group membership. In this chapter, I provide participant descriptions, explicate the four major themes (*preparation, interactions during discussions, engagement, and social identity*) and subthemes,

and provide supportive quotes from the participants' interviews.

### **Participant Descriptions**

This section introduces the eight participants for this study, listed by their pseudonyms in alphabetical order. The brief introduction of each participant includes their age range, gender, ethnicity, educational background, field of study, current employment status, and experience teaching the Human Diversity course. I also include each participant's perspective on the purpose of the course.

#### **Ava**

Ava identifies as a Hispanic/Latinx female, and she is within the age range of 25-34 years old. She holds a master's degree in Social Work. Ava was an adjunct professor who taught Human Diversity at the undergraduate level for three semesters. For Ava, the purpose of this course is to assist students with "getting comfortable talking about uncomfortable topics or subjects... because I tell them that as a social worker, you will be discussing these types of topics with your potential clients or patients."

#### **Cora**

Cora is a Black/African American female over the age of 55. She holds a Doctorate in Higher Education and Black Studies. Cora was an adjunct professor who taught the Human Diversity course for five semesters at both the graduate and undergraduate levels at the time of the interview. In Cora's opinion, the objective of this course "is to make sure that we are not colorblind, and to see people for who they are and where they are... to be able to, even if you disagree with how they live, to understand better."

#### **Denise**

Denise identifies as a Black/African American female and is between the ages of 45-54

years old. She holds a master's degree in Social Work. During the interview, Denise was an assistant professor in practice who taught the Human Diversity course for approximately six semesters at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Denise explained that this course "is designed to help our students prior to entering the field to, um, first of all, be exposed to different areas of diversity... it also teaches them to examine their biases."

### **Emily**

Emily is a Caucasian/White female within the age range of 25-34 years old. She holds a Doctorate in Social Work. At the time of the interview, Emily was a tenure-track assistant professor who taught one semester of the Human Diversity course at the graduate level. Emily stated the following regarding the purpose of this course: "Within social work specifically... we're preparing practitioners... one of the competencies of our profession that we expect our students to be able to do when they leave our program is to engage diversity in practice."

### **Janet**

Janet identifies as a Black/African American female between the age of 45-54 years old. She holds a master's degree in Social Work. During the interview, Janet was an adjunct professor who taught this course for one semester at the graduate level. According to Janet, the objective of the Human Diversity course is "about helping students, especially new social work students, um, get a feel for what it would be like working with people in different populations."

### **Kim**

Kim is a Black/African American female within the age range of 35-44 years old. She holds a Doctorate in Social Work. During the interview, Kim was a tenure-track assistant professor who taught the Human Diversity course for three semesters at the graduate level. Kim stated that the purpose of this course is "to trigger students' awareness of, um, how

discrimination works in society and has worked... [and] foster their own ability to be able to look at their own biases, potentially how they perpetuate discrimination or not."

### **Marie**

Marie identifies as a Black/African American female between the ages 35-44 years old. She holds a master's degree in Social Work. Marie was an adjunct professor who taught this course for four semesters at both the undergraduate and graduate levels at the time of the interview. Marie believes the purpose of the Human Diversity course "is to kind of give them an idea of the populations that they'll be working with within the social work realm and some of the history that comes along with those populations."

### **Stacy**

Stacy is a Caucasian/White female within the age range of 45-54 years old. She holds a Doctorate in Social Work. During the interview, Stacy was an adjunct professor who taught the Human Diversity course for over 20 semesters at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. For Stacy, the objective of this course "is to educate people about all the different isms that we have out there."

## **Preparation**

As participants reflected on their experiences, one theme that emerged was preparation. This concept was two-fold, as a couple of subthemes developed when participants discussed preparation. Participants explained how they prepared to teach Human Diversity and how they prepared students for the field of social work through this course. In this section, I will delve into what faculty believe contributed to their preparation and how faculty used the course as a tool to prepare students. This first theme comprises the following subthemes: 1) instructor preparation, which includes professional experience, personal experience, and educational experience, and 2)



student preparation.

### **Instructor Preparation**

Faculty attributed their preparation to teach Human Diversity to their formal education, personal encounters, and professional training. Faculty acknowledged aspects from their formal education that they utilized in their teaching and also the aspects from their formal education that they have changed. Instructors also identified occurrences in their personal life that they perceive contributed to their preparation for this course. In addition, faculty shared the ways their professional training prepared them to teach Human Diversity. Therefore, in this section, I will present instructors' perspectives on their preparation for teaching the Human Diversity course, focusing on 1) educational experience, 2) personal experience, and 3) professional experience.

#### ***Educational Experience***

While participants' educational backgrounds generally ranged from MSW to Ph.D. in social work, consistently, all participants attributed their educational experiences to have influenced their teaching practices. For example, Cora, whose educational background was in higher education, also credited her comfort during controversial discussions to her education. Likewise, other participants felt that their experiences as students trained them to teach a class like Human Diversity. Consequently, participants acknowledged how their educational experience was lacking and how they purposed to alleviate these deficiencies in their teaching practices. Kim stated:

I tried to take it to another level where people are actually... evaluating how systems... including social work systems continue to perpetuate these things. I didn't learn that in a classroom. I wished I had... learned how to actually evaluate systems for systemic injustice and of the isms that... continue to occur.

Thus, it suggests that Kim hoped to provide the instruction and information to her students that she perceived was missing from her own educational experience. She hoped to foster students' abilities to evaluate macrosystems and not only focus on micro-level issues as future social workers. Overall, faculty perceived their educational experience as preparation for teaching and believed that part of their responsibility was to prepare students for the field of social work.

### *Personal Experience*

Participants acknowledged the ways that their personal experiences prepared them to teach this course. For example, faculty often described how their personal experiences as members of marginalized groups influenced their preparation for this course. Several instructors mentioned how their affiliation to a marginalized group contributed to their overall familiarity with discrimination and how these lived experiences equipped them with first-hand knowledge on most of the topics discussed in this course. Kim shared:

I'm happy that, you know, I'm able to share... kind of personal experiences myself or with family members or with other students in schools that I've worked with as a school social worker, all of those things... I'm able to bring into... teaching the [Human Diversity] course... lots of the isms... I've experienced personally, so have... family members.

Kim found her personal experience or that of her family members offered an invaluable contribution to the classroom. Furthermore, her experiences prepared her for this course as she had personally experienced or knew someone who personally experienced many of the isms discussed in this class. Similarly, Denise also considered her personal life and other factors as she prepared for this course. Denise explained:

Most of my preparation for the class is making sure that I'm emotionally able to teach the

class. So, I really do look at what's going on in the world, what's going on with me personally, and just making sure that... mentally I can sustain that, you know. It's a... tough class to teach and so... self-care and... balancing it out with other classes.

Before teaching this class, Denise reflected on her emotional state, current events, and personal life circumstances to ensure that she could manage the class. In preparation, Denise also thought about maintaining self-care throughout the semester and balancing Human Diversity with the other classes she taught. Not only did faculty find it helpful to have an awareness of the current state of their personal life, but instructors also found that their interests in diversity helped prepare them to teach the Human Diversity course. Kim stated:

I think a lot of this is... a self-interest thing or like a personal interest... in terms of... understanding the isms like completely seriously. So again, the way I try to structure the [Human Diversity] course is a walking knowledge as opposed to some book knowledge.

Kim noted that she had a previous interest in diversity. She believed her personal interests and research prepared her for this course, as she incorporated the knowledge and skills she had acquired on her own. In short, the findings in this section are noteworthy as they inform the reader of how instructors' personal experiences influence their preparation to teach and manage a discussion on controversial subjects. Not only did faculty believe that their personal experiences prepared them to teach Human Diversity, but instructors also acknowledged how their professional experiences prepared them to teach controversial content.

### ***Professional Experience***

While social work practice experience varied among participants, they all believed their professional experiences prepared them to teach this course. For instance, Denise found similarities between managing social workgroups in her professional practice and managing

discussions in this course. She stated, "this time, I decided to treat it like I would a social work group and give them ownership instead of me dictating what they should do. And I found that to be so much more effective." Additionally, participants found that their ability to navigate difficult conversations in their profession helped foster their ability to navigate controversial conversations in the classroom. Janet mentioned, "based off of my own experience, being a social worker for... over 20 years... my experience itself helps to prepare me." Additionally, participants also found that work-related training provided helpful tools for the classroom. Marie added:

I work for a school district, so... I do a lot of training for cultural competence and things of that nature. So... the topics weren't that new, but just making sure that we edit it for a college room.

Marie perceived that the content presented in the professional development she received at work was similar to the topics for this course. She was able to glean ideas for the classroom from those trainings. The similarities between Marie's professional training and the Human Diversity course content aided in her preparation to teach controversial subjects in class.

Conversely, participants identified the areas where they wanted more training before teaching this course. Some participants believed that more technology training would have helped them better navigate the online classroom, while others desired more specific training on classroom management. For example, Ava expressed how her training in social work simultaneously prepared her to teach a course like Human Diversity, yet, she desired specific training on de-escalation. She shared:

I remember... the very first time I taught this class, it got very heated in a topic and... I'm trained, I guess you could say, to teach the content and to talk about content, but it's that

de-escalation where it gets really tense that... I had no formal training on how to... get the class back together... There's a lot of, well, here's the content let's teach it, which is awesome. But there, especially for this course, I think another teaching aspect or teaching component to this class would be... how to effectively, how to non-judgmentally deescalate... a classroom when... topics arise and it's very difficult.

Ava explained how difficult it was for her to bring the class back together after heated moments in class and how she believed de-escalation training would have assisted during those moments. Similarly, Emily would have liked more training on handling microaggressions in the classroom. She stated, "I think one thing that would be really useful for this course is... addressing microaggressions that occur in the classroom." Emily further explained how reactions to microaggressive instances in the classroom could cause students to withdraw and disengage, preventing the learning process. However, training on ways to address microaggressions would have prepared her to manage these instances and maintain student engagement in controversial discussions. Emily stated:

I think a lot of things maybe could be microaggressions. And so just going through, this is how we're going to deal with it, where we don't want that student to feel like they can never talk again in class or, you know, contribute, say anything that might be controversial in the discussion posts, but we also want to make very clear why this is a microaggression and why this may hurt certain students in the class.

Emily shared how difficult it was to encourage students to share after making a microaggressive statement, which others perceived as hurtful. Emily believed that training on ways to address these types of statements and creating an environment where all students feel comfortable speaking honestly would have been beneficial for her preparation. The data presented in this

section regarding faculty professional experiences help understand how instructors' professional experiences helped prepare them for discussions on controversial subjects in the classroom.

### **Student Preparation**

Overwhelmingly, participants viewed this course as a tool to prepare students for the field through their engagement in controversial topics, respectful disagreements, and enhanced critical thinking skills. When asked to state the purpose of the course, every participant indicated that the Human Diversity course was designed to prepare students for the field. Whether it was through exposure to controversial content or engaging in discussions with students who have differing viewpoints, consistently, faculty viewed these actions as career preparation. Additionally, Cora added that she prepared students to engage in issues around social justice. Cora explained her classroom environment as a place "where [students] feel comfortable being themselves and they can find their voice because if you're going to be a social worker, you must be able to speak out because we talk about this whole thing of social justice." Cora found it pertinent to prepare students for a career in social work related to working individually and as advocates for social justice. Instructors found it necessary to prepare students for social work by being social justice advocates and identifying students who may not be a good fit for the field. For instance, Denise described her role as a gatekeeper:

I also feel like this course is kind of a weed-out... for people who really don't belong in the profession because of our core values. And... I'm really okay to have those conversations with people. I've actually, whenever I do have an issue, it's only happened once since I've made that decision, but having a conversation individually with the student and... keeping a record of it through the advising office that, you know, I have concerns about you moving forward in the profession. What is your plan for addressing

these issues that I see? And I think now, you know, if I were teaching it now, I'd be even more empowered because of what's going on in the world right now, and just kind of that... reiteration and highlight of the social justice part of social work that I feel like I would be supported... when things are happening that are inappropriate, addressing them right on.

Denise viewed the Human Diversity course as an opportunity to assess students' fitness for the social work profession. She described her experience having conversations with students who exhibited behaviors and beliefs that were so contradictory to the social work core values that they would not be a great fit for the profession in her professional opinion. Denise felt supported by the department to make this assessment and report her concerns about students. Notably, she mentioned how seriously she took her role as a gatekeeper to the profession as she considered what was going on in the world around social justice and social work.

Another way faculty prepares students for social work is by encouraging them to think critically and identify their own biases. Participants agreed that social work students must identify their biases before engaging with diverse client populations in the field. According to Kim, while interacting with students, her ability to "foster their own ability to be able to look at their own biases, potentially how they perpetuate discrimination or not" is extremely important. Moreover, Kim believed that "educating [students] on ways to intervene and to potentially stop discrimination in their own practice as social workers" was even more critical.

In addition to making students aware of their own biases, faculty found it necessary to foster students' critical thinking skills. Participants mentioned how imperative critical thinking is for social work, as students would likely serve the most vulnerable populations. Emily mentioned that "recognizing one's own values, one's own identities, and how that is a role

eventually as a professional in the working world may impact some of the client interactions." Furthermore, Emily attempted to develop student's critical thinking as she facilitated controversial discussions in class. She added:

My objective is that students go out with a critical eye, being able to self-reflect and understand how [their] own identities may impact the client relations... embrace diversity and embrace different identities... and understand traditionally and historically the oppression that certain groups have faced and how that may manifest itself in client behaviors.

Emily hoped to prepare her students to think critically and engage in self-reflection as there is an expectation that professionals interact with diverse groups. Emily also believed that educating students on the history of oppression within specific populations prepared them for some of the behaviors they might observe when working with clients.

Taken together, instructors identified ways that their educational, professional, and personal experiences prepared them to teach Human Diversity. As trained social workers, most participants found that many of their professional skills were relevant while teaching this course. However, instructors also identified areas where they desired more training in preparation for teaching Human Diversity. Furthermore, faculty used their educational experience as inspiration to either model or revise their teaching practices. Instructors' personal experiences provided real-life examples that they could bring to the classroom to further students' understanding of the content. The faculty also described how they prepare students for the field of social work through this course. Participants believed that they prepared students by exposing them to controversial content, assessing students' suitability for the field, and identifying their biases. The information presented in the previous sections is vital in further understanding how faculty prepare to teach



controversial content and how faculty prepare social work students for the field. With this in mind, faculty also described their interactions with students during discussions.

### **Interactions during Discussions**

The second theme that emerged during data analysis was interactions during discussions. Faculty shared their understanding of the topics that may result in a controversial discussion. Participants also provided the process through which they establish expectations for discussion etiquette. In addition, instructors described their responses during these types of discussions. This section presents the feedback participants provided about: 1) controversial discussions, 2) discussion etiquette, and 3) instructor responses.

### **Controversial Discussions**

Participants identified the types of topics they perceived would spark a controversial discussion. Based on the nature of the Human Diversity course, most of the participants in my study believed that several topics covered could lead to controversial discussions for several reasons. One reason for controversy during the discussion is that students may have difficulty coming to terms with their affiliation to a group that has historically and currently oppressed others. Emily stated:

I think almost all of [the topics] are going to be controversial because I mean, when you're talking about these relationships where there's a group that's oppressing, and there's a group that's oppressed... it's going to be uncomfortable because... you're going to be talking about situations where most of the time students are either going to identify with a group that faced oppression and everything that brings with it, or in the group that's been the oppressor, which is also really hard for students to come to terms with.

Emily believed that all of the topics covered in this course could be controversial because the

Human Diversity course covers a broad range of isms. Furthermore, these topics caused students to explore the relationships between an oppressed group and an oppressor, and students may find that they belong to either group. According to Emily, this dichotomy can cause controversy in the classroom during discussions as this might be the first time that students have ever faced the realization of their group membership and how they might be on the receiving or imposing end of discrimination. Another reason there might have been controversial discussions around specific topics was if those topics are debatable. Kim added:

I think the... most challenging topics are concepts that are still debated, right... these people from this country did move here. That's something you can't dispute, but then when you try to say, and the legacy of the discrimination they experienced then, still amounts to something called White privilege or... amounts to institutional sexism because there are this many women CEOs or, you know, we still haven't had a woman president yet.

Kim found that discussions regarding the historical context of discrimination of certain groups were not as debated. However, discussions about the current and ongoing implications of that discrimination were more contentious. In Kim's experience, students were more accepting of the history of discrimination and oppression but contested its current manifestations through White privilege and institutional sexism. Comparatively, Ava found that the demographics of students might build rapport within the class. Ava mentioned, "most of the individuals in my classroom can identify as lower middle-income students. So, there's kind of like a comradery there when we talk about classism." Similarly, Emily believed the level of controversy or awareness during heated discussion depended on the student population in the class. According to Emily:

The students this past semester, I think like the [unit on] racism... [and] the unit on

immigration, I think that those were actually less controversial in the sense that students didn't necessarily question it because I think a lot more of them had actually lived it, whereas in [my previous university] it was all White. And so... the students, it was like, wow, yes, we now acknowledge privilege.

Emily compared what it was like when she taught a diverse classroom of students who had lived experience with discrimination to the experience she had with an all-White class. For Emily, discussions about discrimination were less controversial when students could personally relate to the topic. Comparatively, when she taught an all-White class, the students were less aware of issues around racism and immigration and the role of privilege. Emily also mentioned the self-actualization that occurred in the classroom as White students became more aware of privilege. Due to the diversity of students in the classroom, which could lead to differing viewpoints and pointed conversations, instructors found it necessary to establish basic guidelines and develop decorum for discussions.

### **Discussion Etiquette**

As a result of the types of topics covered in this course, which tend to lead to controversial conversations, participants emphasized the importance of the classroom environment and ground rules. For example, Cora described a classroom environment where students wanted to be present. She stated, "I want my class to be a place where students want to come, where there's a waiting list." In addition to creating a space where students did not just feel obligated to be present but looked forward to being there, Cora described her classroom environment as one where students were free to explore. Cora added, "I allow students to really explore without being detained or being careful." Likewise, Emily also created a class environment where students did not feel so restricted that they were not challenged. Emily

added, "I actually, don't really always like the word triggering... I think that there are situations where it's good for students to feel uncomfortable. So, it's not necessarily that it's about comfort." Emily did not mind if her students experienced discomfort during discussion and viewed these moments as beneficial for the learning process. Regarding safe environments, Kim also stated:

If everything is safe and comfortable and you can shake your head yes to everything, I don't think you're really analyzing what those are. So internally... I'm kind of happy when... students are getting engaged in that way and they're getting their feelings involved... Those are good times for me.

Kim became elated when she observed students' feelings getting involved during the discussion. Like Kim, other participants were cognizant of the fact that students' feelings might surface during controversial conversations in class. In consideration of this, participants often used words like patience, understanding, respect, empathy, honesty, openness, and safety to describe their desired classroom environment.

The faculty also found it necessary to set ground rules for discussion before engaging and were flexible in revising and revisiting those rules. Several instructors allowed students to create the ground rules, and faculty added to the list if there were any critical rules that students missed. Participants mentioned that they would revisit these rules during controversial discussions as a way to refocus the conversation. For example, Emily often reminded students of her expectations. She stated, "the weekly feedback was helpful for students because it kind of gave them a sense of... what I was expecting in terms of the discussion." Emily provided weekly feedback to make students aware of her expectations regarding discussions. Emily found it particularly helpful to incorporate rules around language: "just in terms of like language to be used... remembering again that when they're posting that it's an academic setting." Furthermore,

Emily referred to the online classroom environment and noted how important it is for students to be mindful of their language in an academic setting. Likewise, Kim also found the use of language important, specifically, the use of terminology. Kim added, "we're not here to change feelings, but we want to make sure that we're using the terminology appropriately." Kim made sure that students used terms appropriately during discussions and mentioned how she referenced the textbook when necessary.

In summary, participants found that creating ground rules and an environment where students feel comfortable sharing honestly fostered a space for healthy, controversial dialogue. Moreover, for social work students, there was an additional consideration for the code of ethics. Emily addressed this consideration for the code of ethics as she stated that students were:

...guided by a code of ethics. And so, while on the one hand, I do think there's some value to students... completely being uncensored and saying what they really feel and being able to respond to that. At the same time, I know that can be triggering for other students, and... with our code of ethics, we have another professional standard we have to be held to.

Taken together, faculty appreciated a classroom environment where students were able to explore freely and were challenged, even to levels of discomfort during the learning process. However, faculty also found it essential to create ground rules for this type of discussion to occur and, more importantly, kept in mind the use of language and its impact on students in the class. The information regarding instructors' expectations for discussion etiquette helps learn more about faculty experiences during controversial discussions, precisely how faculty create boundaries during conversations on potentially emotionally provoking topics. As faculty shared their experience with controversial discussions in the classroom, another critical topic that

became evident was the instructor's response during these dialogues.

### **Instructor Response**

The instructor's response to students' attitudes, behavior, and discussion is a vital aspect for faculty as participants in this study shared their emotional and non-verbal reactions during controversial discussions. Faculty often referenced their emotional temperament and desired to model appropriate behavior for students in class. Stacy prioritized listening, as she stated, "I listened even more than I read," and she welcomed students' passion during discussion. Stacy added, "I'm not as afraid of the passion... [and] the zeal in talking about a topic." Stacy considered controversy during the discussion to be zeal and passion and not necessarily something that needed to be prohibited.

Just as students experienced emotions during controversial discussions, faculty also had an emotional response. Denise recalled times where the class discussion influenced her feelings. She stated, "I have cried. I have been angry.... I've been hurt. My feelings have been hurt." Through this statement, Denise shed light on the emotional process she went through during controversial discussions. Likewise, Stacy shared her experience during the first course she taught. She said, "the first class that I taught, I don't remember which one we were talking about, but finally it was like, I got angry with them. I was like, y'all aren't listening to each other." Stacy reflected on a time when she experienced feelings of anger during the discussion. Despite this occurrence, Stacy also added, "I get excited. I like the passion... by the time I taught this [most recent] course, I had taught enough that their passion didn't make me nervous or scare me." Stacy acknowledged how her emotional response during controversial discussions has transformed over time. Where she initially responded with anger, Stacy now recognized students' responses as passion and stated that these types of responses did not scare her.

Furthermore, faculty perceived their reactions and behaviors in class to be very influential to students. Almost all of the participants referenced their role in preparing students for the field by modeling behaviors in the classroom of a social worker's disposition. For example, Emily mentioned the way she modeled empathy to her students. She stated:

The point of the class...is really to be able to engage in dialogues with others. A big portion of that is empathy. And so... if I, as an instructor, I'm not able to empathize with the situation that my students are going through, how are they going to be able to model that for the people they're working with in the future.

Emily viewed her behaviors in the classroom as another tool to show students how they should respond as future social workers. Another example was from Janet, who mentioned how cognizant she was of her facial expressions. Janet added:

I would always make sure that before I would respond that I take a step back and make sure that I get [me] under control because I don't want the students to see any biases come across, especially facial expressions, [because] facial expressions can say a lot... so I try to make sure that I stay neutral.

Here, Janet mentioned how important non-verbal responses were for her. Janet saw value in being aware of her facial expressions and would allow herself time to make sure she kept her facial expression neutral before responding to students during discussion. Likewise, Stacy also mentioned how she used her behaviors as a tool to teach her students how social workers should respond. Stacy stated:

And so, modeling that behavior for them. Hey, someone brought this to my attention. I looked at what I had done. I realized that there was validity in what they said, and I apologized and, and making an effort to be different. That's how we do this.

In this example, Stacy referred to a time when a student provided criticism regarding some of the information presented in class. Stacy used the situation in which she was provided feedback from a student to show students how they can also apologize during moments where they reacted out of emotion in a way that was not conducive for effective communication.

While some instructors displayed an emotional response in class and others desired to model behaviors for their students, some faculty found it helpful to seek outside support. For instance, Marie purposefully sought outside support while teaching Human Diversity. She stated:

Outside of this, I may call a colleague and be like, oh, today in class; I was shaking my head at some of those comments. But with [the students] ... that's not our place. My place is to help educate them and empower them and give them the knowledge to work through those issues.

Even though Marie found it helpful to debrief the classroom discussion with a colleague, she was determined to remain professional and model appropriate social worker decorum through her behaviors in front of the students. Likewise, Denise also found solace in seeking support outside of the classroom. She added:

I am often processing... with other people. I've even been in counseling and talked about... this class before. So, it's certainly affected me outside of here. And that's what I have to gear up for to prepare to teach it. And if there's just too much going on in the world and too much going on in my personal life, then I'll pass it that semester because I know that it's going to be taxing.

Denise used support from colleagues and counseling as she processed discussions in this course. She mentioned that this course has the potential to be taxing. Because of this, she made special consideration of current events and what was going on in her personal life before agreeing to



teach Human Diversity.

In brief, faculty identified the types of discussions that often led to controversial dialogues. Most faculty believed that many topics covered in Human Diversity were controversial. The instructors observed that students were very passionate during these discussions and established ground rules to maintain decorum. Significantly, faculty welcomed and accepted moments where students' feelings got involved during discussion. Likewise, faculty also exhibited a range of responses during the controversial discussion from emotional reactions to modeling the appropriate behaviors of a social worker for students. Sometimes the instructors' emotional responses resulted in anger, hurt feelings, and even crying. Moreover, faculty were interested in using their reactions and behaviors in the classroom to model how students should conduct themselves in the field as social workers. The information presented in this section regarding the instructor's response during controversial discussions is essential and provides insight from the faculty's perspective of what they experience during controversial dialogues.

### **Engagement**

A third theme that emerged during data analysis was engagement. Overwhelmingly, participants shared how they maintained engagement during discussions. In this section, I provide the instructors' self-identified 1) strengths and challenges, 2) strategies, and 3) the influence that the COVID-19 pandemic had during controversial discussions.

### **Strengths and Challenges**

As participants shared their experiences while managing controversial discussions in the classroom, they provided information about their strengths and some of the challenges they faced. The findings on faculty strengths and challenges are essential in understanding faculty experiences during controversial discussions.

### *Strengths*

The faculty explained what worked well for them during the discussion. For instance, when broaching topics, Kim initiated discussion "by just putting it out there, ripping off the band-aid." She found that being straightforward and direct with the content was a great way to engage students. Furthermore, according to Denise, the nature of the course is engaging in and of itself. Denise mentioned, "I don't know that I've ever had to do anything to engage them because the topics are so controversial that they're at least committed to listening to what's going on and watching the fireworks." Denise found that the topics discussed in this course were compelling and widely debated that students remained engaged. In contrast, one thing that worked well for Stacy was flexibility. Stacy explained, "I've always been willing to go wherever they wanted to go...If you want to talk about it, by George, we are going to talk about it. There's nothing off the plate in my class." During discussions, Stacy found that allowing students to lead the conversation worked well. Similarly, Cora also found it beneficial when she allowed students to lead the discussion. Cora mentioned:

I had one White female; everybody else was Black and Brown. She said, this is my first time ever being in the minority. And for her, it was the best learning experience. She said, I have learned so much by just listening to everyone speak.

Cora provided an example of how beneficial it can be to students when everyone has the chance to speak in the classroom. Additionally, one strength for Ava was her ability to build rapport with her students where they felt comfortable enough to talk to her. She stated, "I think they just feel comfortable enough to come and talk to me because I'm on their level...I was where you are at a couple of years ago." Ava built camaraderie with her students as she could relate to them being a recent graduate herself. Ava noted that she prided herself on creating an environment

where students viewed her as a resource and means of support. Emily also mentioned that she engaged students by genuinely showing concern for their wellbeing. Emily stated:

If a student doesn't turn something in, you know, there's a reason for each behavior for each action. And so, if it's happened repeatedly, well, what's going on in that student's life. If a student's late for class. Well, you know, we're glad you could join us. I hope everything's okay. Instead of saying, oh, you're late, or just, you're not able to submit anything now, or we're closing the door, and you're not entering the classroom.

Emily found it helpful to show compassion and understanding for the reasons why students exhibited certain behaviors. As opposed to quickly penalizing students for missing deadlines or being late, Emily would allow her students and time for her to learn the cause of these actions.

Several instructors found that creating an open and welcoming environment where students felt comfortable sharing worked well during controversial discussions. For example, Cora noted, "I understand that if students don't feel connected, they'll shut down. So, I worked very hard to make my students feel that they belong." In her experience, Cora observed that students were not as likely to shut down when they felt a sense of belonging. In addition, Emily preferred for students to share their thoughts uncensored. She stated, "I tried to have it be open where students felt like they could share their true reflections and not have to censor themselves." While Emily allowed students to share their thoughts on course material honestly, she also used discussion as an opportunity to check in on their wellbeing. Emily added that "being flexible having that space, not just to reflect on the course material, but... really checking in on how each student was doing." Emily understood that some of the course content might be difficult for students and found it helpful to check in with them during class discussions. Denise also created an environment for students to engage with the course material fully. She described

her classroom, "I really want... my students to immerse themselves in the learning process and not focus so much on grades." Denise fostered an environment where grades were not the sole focus and created a learning environment where students could fully immerse themselves in the material.

### *Challenges*

While faculty identified what worked well for them as they engaged students, they also faced several challenges during controversial discussions. One of the challenges mentioned was the course format. Denise spoke about the difficulty she experienced as she taught this class individually. Denise believed "this class should be taught as a seminar with multiple instructors." It would have been helpful for Denise to have different topics presented by a group of instructors instead of one instructor teaching the entire course. Another challenge identified was teaching this course in an online format. For example, Marie explained the difficulty in teaching this course online:

Like this class is not, to me, effective online because you don't get to kind of understand your peer. We're all reading behind a screen, and then things can be conveyed difficultly, so... Online is different, like we don't really get to have that... body language, that... face to face... understanding of what people say.

Marie found that the online format for Human Diversity potentially created a barrier to effective communication during controversial discussions. In her opinion, not reading someone's body language in the same manner as she would in person presented a barrier to understanding.

One final and significant challenge identified by participants was classroom management during controversial discussions. Several participants mentioned the difficulty they have experienced when managing the classroom during controversial discussions and fostering

understanding of the topics presented. For example, Kim found it challenging to get students to understand how systems worked. Kim mentioned:

Like some of us live in diverse areas. So, you know, I don't really see all of this stuff that you're talking about in terms of racism. I love everybody. So also taking it out of their own experience and helping them understand the systems is a very big challenge.

Attempting to cultivate an understanding of how systems influenced students' daily lives proved challenging for Kim. Furthermore, Kim mentioned the difficulty with combating colorblindness when teaching diversity content because the student's point of reference was their personal experience. Similarly, Emily shared an experience she had with managing students during a controversial discussion:

One of the challenges that did come up was I think there were two students, and I don't know if they knew each other previously or not, but they started kind of having an interaction that went from... just being curious to being a little more pointed in terms of comments. And... as an educator, being able to see that very quickly and on the one hand, not delete it because I felt like it was a good opportunity to model to students. If they're in a situation where they're with other people that are escalating, how do you deescalate it? And how can you kind of center the conversation back on the topic... without invalidating people and, you know, trying to encourage people not to just shut down or... no, we're just going to erase it and forget this was said, but this is how we can deal with it on kind of a step by step.

In her statement, Emily shared the difficulty she experienced when students might engage in heated exchanges during discussions. For Emily, there was a delicate balance with using moments of contention as a tool in the learning process. While arguments between students

presented a challenge, Emily chose to use these moments as an opportunity to model to students how they might refocus and engage others when the conversation escalated. Likewise, Denise also experienced difficulty with classroom management during controversial discussions early on in her teaching career. Denise stated:

I just remember thinking that I allowed those three students who were just so opinionated and strong and loud to influence the way I taught the class. And I feel like I failed some of my other students because that's what I was focused on. . . I felt like, as the instructor, for the course, it was my responsibility to handle that. And... I didn't to my satisfaction. I would definitely do it differently now.

Unfortunately, in Denise's experience, the discussion was so challenging that it created a distraction for other students during the learning process. As a result, Denise experienced feelings of failure and dissatisfaction with managing the classroom during that semester. Nevertheless, Denise took that experience as a learning opportunity for her to reevaluate her classroom management strategies moving forward. Furthermore, several participants developed strategies over time that they found helpful during controversial discussions.

### **Strategies**

Participants provided information about the strategies they used to deliver controversial content and techniques that they found helpful to keep students engaged during discussion. One strategy that faculty found compelling related to delivering course content was allowing students to lead. Stacy mentioned:

I let them choose the topic that they want to cover and share that with each other, and so that tends to take the power dynamic... of me being the expert to... a different level that we're all there to listen, and we're all there to work.

Stacy allowed her students to select the topics, and she assumed a facilitator role. Stacy preferred to approach controversial discussions on the student's level and have open dialogue instead of taking the expert role. Marie also shared this view. She added, "I make sure that when we are talking that I don't sit above them kind of at that teacher's perch. I sit level to level with them that way they understand that this isn't a judgmental view." Thus, Marie preferred to sit eye-level with her students instead of standing at a podium to lecture. She found that sitting level with her students created a more open and non-judgmental environment for discussion. Nevertheless, even when allowing students to lead the discussion, faculty also made sure students were accurate in their use of terminology. Kim mentioned how she spent her time "trying to make the case of what I'm teaching" by using textbook definitions, and often referred to the textbook when she found students "saying as their either opinion or they're... disagreeing with something they're not using the terminology the right way." Kim allowed students to lead the discussion, made sure students used terms correctly, and referred back to the textbook for support in instances where they were not. Another way that Kim used the textbook was to help students analyze systems.

Kim added:

If you take it out of the I and the, sometimes, individual experience that's often rooted in misunderstanding and bring it back to the textbook definition, you can try to... acknowledge that they're saying something, but challenge them to see if it really is what they think it means.

Kim taught students to focus on the micro-level and referenced the textbook when teaching students to pay attention to macro-level trends and issues. Kim described how she taught her students to challenge systems and not solely focus on personal ramifications. Kim found controversial discussions to be less contentious when she encouraged her students to focus on

concepts and not solely focus on their individual experiences.

Instructors not only created an open environment for dialogue by allowing students to lead the class, sitting on their level, and using the textbook to steer dialogues, but they also intentionally promoted marginalized voices in the classroom. Emily mentioned: "I want students to make sure that they're not experiencing further oppression or further marginalization in the classroom." Emily made sure to minimize oppression within the classroom during controversial discussions. Kim also shared a great deal about how she enhanced marginalized voices in class:

As long as... the voices of the marginalized are not shut out... that would be kind of one of the instances where I tried to elevate voices of students of color or students that have different identities... to actually... protect them from experiencing... discrimination and marginalization, something like that in class... in centering... Black voices in terms of the prompts that I use, the readings that I use.

Kim chose to include prompts and readings from Black authors and scholars to promote marginalized voices in her class. Kim explained how she might also intervene during the class discussion if she observed marginalized voices being shut out in the classroom and create an opportunity for input from students of color.

Another way that faculty promoted diverse voices in class was through the use of guest presenters. As mentioned previously, one challenge identified by Denise was having to teach this course individually. Thus, one strategy that Denise used was incorporating guest speakers in her lectures. Denise shared: "I remember having a White male to come in and there were just certain things that I thought were received differently from him than they would be from me." Denise found it helpful to have a White male deliver specific topics because she realized students tend to view her as biased when presenting the same content. Denise added:



Me talking about... White privilege... to White men, you know... maybe they're not all going to get the same thing from me. So, bringing a White male in to actually talk about that and how he benefits from that, I think, is a huge plus.

Denise found that using guest presenters was helpful when discussing topics that students may not receive well based on her social identity. She also found it helpful to incorporate guests who have lived or professional experience with specific topics such as White privilege. Denise also mentioned how she used guest presenters to humanize certain content like gender identity:

When I feel like it's going to be extra difficult and they're going to... be influenced by stereotypes and just... ignorance and just not knowing things... bringing someone in. I try to bring people in to humanize that experience. I'll also bring in... social workers who work predominantly with that population.

Denise found it helpful to select guest presenters who were experts in the field or had personal experience with the topic. Bringing in guest presenters provided an opportunity for students to hear directly from those with lived experiences related to course content or from professionals who primarily work with the specific population.

Another strategy that faculty used to make course topics more concrete was incorporating current events. They found that what was happening in the world was relevant to topics discussed in class. Cora mentioned how her students "get to talk about these issues. Then they go home, and they turn the TV on, and they see it happening." Cora believed that current events made the topics discussed in the classroom more real for students, as they could see how course concepts played out in real life. Going a step further, Kim instructed her students to bring current events into class. Kim added:

There's so much happening in the world that is related to discrimination and those types

of things, but it does make a lot of information available to be able to teach from... so... bringing in current events and asking students how they would process those things or... apply the social work code of ethics... how what we're talking about in terms of all of the isms applies to what's happening now.

Kim used current events as a tool or case study for students to process in class. Kim also used real-life examples to educate students about the social work process and applying the social work code of ethics. Emily also instructed her students to "look for a current event... and go through a process of like connecting it to theory or connecting it to some of the concepts in [the course]." Emily incorporated current events into the course as a tool to help students process abstract concepts and theories. Emily also considered how current events impacted her students on a personal level. She stated:

You know, having a learning environment that is, in my mind, trauma-informed and that we recognize that what's going on around us is going to be impacting our students and not only kind of their perception or how they're viewing the coursework.

Emily incorporated current events into her teaching, and she also considered how these events impacted her students and their views on course materials. One current event that several participants agreed influenced their teaching and the course, in general, was the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **COVID-19 Pandemic**

Faculty faced unique challenges and implemented specific strategies as a result of the pandemic. Participants conveyed the ways that the COVID-19 pandemic influenced their experience in the Human Diversity course. Instructors described how the societal impact of the pandemic was relevant to the topics discussed in the course, how they provided extra attention

and compassion to students, and how they were flexible with the course schedule and grading.

Several instructors recounted how the impact of the coronavirus made the course topics more relevant. For example, Stacy mentioned that “COVID really brought to the forefront the inequality in the United States and who’s suffering the most. And it’s... the people that we talk about [Human Diversity].” Similarly, Kim described how “COVID-19 has laid bare all of... the social inequities that we’ve had for the longest.” Kim further explained her perception of how the social inequities exposed during the pandemic related to the class. Kim stated:

I think it’s an opportunity to... give some concrete, like if you’re practicing right now or if you are to be practicing... what are the key questions because this is going to forever change our society... so I think kind of leading with the discussion of COVID... and what it means beyond just... it’s a physical thing that’s happening, but it’s a lot more of a social thing.

Kim viewed the social impact of the pandemic as an opportunity to provide concrete examples of the inequities discussed in class. Moreover, Kim used these discussions to spark students' thought processes around how they might handle different situations in the field as social workers. In Kim's opinion, the pandemic was so relevant that she formed discussions around COVID-19 and its social impact. Emily also identified examples from the pandemic that directly related to course topics. Emily added:

I think we talked a little bit about like xenophobia... we did talk about that and ethnicity as well. Um, at the very beginning, when there were some attacks against Asian Americans... so our last module we did before the end was like racism revisited.

Emily discussed how the backlash from the coronavirus outbreak directly correlated with the topics discussed in class. Overall, faculty did not just identify the ways in which the pandemic

related to course topics, but they also paid attention to how the pandemic impacted their students.

Furthermore, instructors described how they paid extra attention and showed even more compassion during this time. For instance, Cora spoke a great deal about the extra time she spent checking on her student's wellbeing during the pandemic:

I pay more attention to my students during this because I knew that they were stressed out. I knew that I had some students who have some mental health issues, and I knew that they may not have been handling it well. So, I've made an effort to reach out to them constantly... I understood that for students... this is a big change. You go to spring break, and then you're told you're not going to have the class anymore. What, what's going on? And so, we tried to be compassionate and work with our students and keep that cool head so that when they're stressed out, we can calm them down.

Cora paid close attention to her students' mental health during the initial changes due to the pandemic. She intentionally contacted students more often to inquire about their wellbeing. In addition, Cora showed understanding and compassion to her students to help reduce their stress during the pandemic. Not only did instructors show support to students during this time, but Stacy mentioned how she used class time as a support system for her and her students. Stacy added, "and we also... used that time as a support for each other. One day it's like everybody was having a hard time. And so, we talked about that instead." Stacy prioritized creating a supportive classroom environment for students during the pandemic and prioritized this environment over strictly focusing on the curriculum. Emily also adjusted her lessons in consideration for students during the pandemic. She explained:

I had considered posting something on the racial and ethnic disparities, but at the same time, I honestly like, I didn't want to oversaturate, and I felt like too many students were

living it too closely. I had a few students of color who lost family members, and I didn't want to trigger anything in that sense.

COVID-19 influenced the way Emily presented the material in her class. Emily was concerned with how specific topics might impact her students during the pandemic based on their demographics. Like Emily, other instructors also displayed flexibility during the pandemic.

Participants explained how they were flexible with grading and made changes to the course during the pandemic. Cora shared: "I had a student who... was through chemo during all of this. I'm like, listen, don't worry about this. You, you're good. You got the midterm stuff if you need an incomplete." Cora was flexible with her students' assignments and grading, as she considered personal circumstances that they were facing during the pandemic. Emily was also flexible with assignments during the pandemic. She added:

I mean, in my mind, it's not like... a math course where you have to learn these 10 equations and how to do the math on these problems by the end of the course. I mean, these are all more interpersonal skills. And so, for interpersonal skills... for me, I feel like you have to kind of keep these things in mind, and yes, maybe that means that we adjust assignments.

Emily realized the level of thought that went into students analyzing the concepts in this course, and she provided grace through her flexibility with assignments. Accordingly, Denise described her flexibility with the course modality and how she maintained a sense of community while switching to a completely online format. Denise shared:

We tried to continue that same energy online, and I think it actually went really well. We had, uh, synchronous sessions, and that community that we had already built face-to-face continued... We'd already established a community in class, so that part was really

seamless, and I really think it was because we... had that time together already. Denise found the transition to a solely online format seamless because she had already established a community during the in-person sessions earlier in the semester. Denise explained that she and the students maintained the energy online that they had during the face-to-face class sessions. However, other instructors did not find the transition as seamless. Stacy mentioned how she struggled with technical issues while transitioning to the online format, and other instructors who chose an asynchronous format observed lower attendance during this time.

In short, faculty shared their strengths and challenges, the strategies they used, and the impact of COVID-19 during controversial discussions. Instructors found that approaching discussion straightforwardly, allowing students to lead the conversation during the discussion, showing compassion, and creating an open and welcoming environment was helpful. Some of the challenges instructors faced were teaching the course individually, teaching the class online, and managing the class during pointed discussions between students. The faculty presented several strategies that they implemented during controversial discussions. These strategies included instructors assuming the role of facilitator, meeting students on their level, promoting marginalized voices in class, and incorporating current events.

Regarding the pandemic, instructors explained how the social impact was relevant to course topics, how they showed more compassion and attention to students during this time, and their experience transitioning to an online format. Instructors found that the pandemic exposed many of the inequities discussed in class and used these examples as tools during their teaching. The faculty also shared how they increased their interactions with students during this time as they inquired about students' mental wellbeing. Instructors were flexible with grading and also intended to maintain a similar sense of community in the online course format. In short,

instructors showed compassion, flexibility, and understanding to students during the pandemic. Furthermore, faculty were cognizant of student's identities and group membership when instructors presented topics in class. In addition to faculty awareness of how students' identities might influence the discussion during the COVID-19 pandemic, faculty also described their self-awareness while teaching the Human Diversity course.

### **Social Identity**

One final theme that emerged during data analysis was social identity. Instructors described the influence of their social identity through their group membership, like belonging to certain racial/ethnic groups and their gender. Faculty shared details about their awareness of biases and limitations during controversial discussions in the classroom. They often engaged in self-reflection and constantly remained aware of their social identity and personality while teaching this course. Participants also discussed their racial/ethnic group membership and how this influenced their experiences. Thus, this section includes two subthemes: 1) awareness of biases and limitations, and 2) racial/ethnic group membership.

#### **Awareness of Biases and Limitations**

Awareness of biases and limitations came up often as participants shared their experience managing controversial discussions in the classroom. Ultimately, several instructors mentioned self-reflecting, life-long learning, and accepting criticism and feedback to navigate and become more aware of their biases and limitations. For instance, Emily valued the process of reflection and considered herself a lifelong learner. She stated, "I feel we're more lifelong learners and we need to continuously engage in reflection processes." For most faculty, self-reflection involved recognizing their own biases and privilege, accepting criticism, and acknowledging their limitations.

A number of the participants deemed it essential to recognize their own biases and privilege. For instance, Kim used implicit association tests regularly to increase her awareness. She mentioned, “I deploy experiments where people have to complete these Harvard implicit association tests that look at discrimination. And so, I’ve taken all of them. I continue to take them.” Likewise, Emily agreed that just as students, instructors should also be aware of their biases. Emily added:

I think it’s just as important for the students as for the instructor to do that self-reflection and how your current status or your current positionality may implicitly perpetuate bias or what that looks like in terms of student interactions and who has the power in those situations.

It was essential for Emily to engage in self-reflection to remain aware of her biases and avoid perpetuating them in the classroom. Emily recognized that as the instructor, she was in a position of power.

In an attempt to minimize their implicit biases, instructors also welcomed feedback and criticism from students. Kim viewed herself as “one of those professors that is... open to criticism or different ideas.” Like Kim, Emily also opened the door for her students to hold her accountable. Emily added:

I tell students at the beginning of each semester... please feel free to call me out. If I say anything that you think is bias because my personal thought is like, it’s impossible to not be biased. We all have our certain values or certain attitudes. And so, making sure that we’re held accountable and in check, but also... as the instructor taking that lead role and in showing these processes of how do you engage in the self-reflection, how do you engage constantly to make sure that you are being open, that you’re listening to others,



that you're not just... seeking out confirmations of what you already believe.

Very early in the semester, Emily found it helpful to inform students that she was open to their feedback and wanted them to hold her accountable. Emily recognized her humanity and that even as an instructor, she would inevitably operate in her values and beliefs, which might lead to perpetuating bias. Emily also found this process of self-reflection and accepting criticism to be an excellent example for her students of the process they should engage in as future social workers.

In addition to an awareness of their biases and welcoming feedback/criticism from students, instructors also identified their limitations. Participants often referred to the subjects in the Human Diversity course that pertained to isms or marginalized populations. While faculty used a number of tools to engage students and educate themselves, they could also recognize their limitations. Emily found this recognition helpful even during the preparation stage before teaching the course. She stated, "recognizing the limitations in my own perspective of going into it." Emily acknowledged how her perspective might create a limitation as she engaged students in controversial discussions. Similarly, Stacy understood her limitations as they related to social identity. She mentioned, "I'm a White heterosexual middle-aged social worker, teaching [Human Diversity], and you just can't get more... un-diverse... so acknowledging that and listening and being okay with not having all the answers." Here, Stacy recognized how her social identities as White and heterosexual created a limitation when discussing various topics in Human Diversity. However, she found that one way to overcome that limitation was through listening.

### **Racial/Ethnic Group Membership**

Similarly, several instructors shared information about their group membership and the influence their racial/ethnic identity had on their experience managing controversial discussions

in class. As mentioned previously, Stacy realized how her status as a White, heterosexual woman was a limitation. Stacy also stated, “I will never know what it’s like to be a Black woman. I mean it ain’t going to happen, much less a Black man...and so, I listen... and I listened even more than I read.” While Stacy recognized the limitations associated with her social identity, she assumed the role of learner and prioritized listening.

In contrast, faculty who belong to several marginalized groups referenced the intersectionality of their identities. Kim mentioned, “Well, when we’re talking about... racism obviously, and institutional racism and being... a woman... that’s always interesting... you know, Black woman. Which is first? You’re both, all of these things.” Kim pondered over belonging to more than one group: being Black and being a woman. As a person with intersecting identities, Kim questioned which should come first. In contrast, Emily believed there was a benefit to being an “insider” and having lived experiences associated with social identity. Emily stated, “being like an insider, having insider knowledge of certain isms, whatever they may be... or... experiences of oppression like that maybe can help you empathize with certain students in certain situations.” For Emily, personal experience and awareness of certain isms helped her empathize with her students. Conversely, Emily also believed that belonging to a group could present a barrier to identifying privilege. Emily asserted:

I think we also have to caution this... one of the, I think, critiques I have with moving beyond like White privilege is now everyone says, oh, but I grew up poor, and so I also am disadvantaged. And not think that, I mean, the fact that I have many identities that do have a lot of privilege with them.

Emily found her social identity helpful because it allowed her to empathize with students. She also deemed it essential to be cautious, as being closely connected to a particular group might

result in the obliviousness of other privileged identities.

Furthermore, faculty often used their social identity as a tool to promote the voice of marginalized groups in class. Denise stated, “my identity and just being who I am, every part of me and being open about those things in class, I think are... a tool, I mean, is a tool that I use in teaching.” Denise used her social identity and openness about who she was as a tool during teaching. Cora mentioned, “I live it and I breathe it... I still encounter on a regular basis, racism and discrimination.” Cora found her lived experience with discrimination to be relevant while teaching the Human Diversity course. Cora also reported how comfortable she was presenting her authentic self in the classroom. She added:

I know how to code-switch and all that... I choose not to. It's like, look; this is who I am.

This is what we're going to do... because someone is uncomfortable with me, it's no problem because I'm comfortable with me.

Cora preferred to be open about who she was in the classroom and found her social identity a helpful tool. Like Cora, Kim chose to lead with her social identity while teaching. She stated:

I think that's what I tend to lead with... as a person of color... what other people of color might be experiencing... so I think that's probably where identity comes in, in terms of like where, where I'm, I guess, resonating with the material.

Kim incorporated her lived experiences, related to her social identity, into the classroom discussion. She found her personal experiences as a person of color to be helpful as she delivered course content.

Unfortunately, while faculty chose to use their social identity as a tool, Denise reported how her social identity created a barrier related to class discussion. Denise mentioned, "I have come to believe that just being an African American woman, I'm going to always get that no

matter if I am [biased] or not, someone's going to see that." Denise explained how she often experienced pushback from students and was viewed as biased because of her social identity. Simultaneously, Denise also felt the responsibility that comes along with being an African American professor. She shared, "I had two students that told me they never had a female professor, or an African American professor. And that just really made me realize the responsibility that comes with, you know, representation and how important that is." Denise described the level of responsibility she felt associated with her social identity, as she was the only African American female professor some of her students had.

In summary, instructors found that having an awareness of biases and limitations and understanding the influence of their racial/ethnic group membership were relevant components in their experiences with managing controversial discussions. Considering their racial/ethnic group membership, instructors identified ongoing self-reflection to be crucial as they navigated these types of discussions. Self-reflecting included identifying their own biases as well as accepting feedback and criticism from students. Participants also perceived their social identity has an essential role as they acknowledged their limitations and used their social identity as a tool during discussions.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I shared descriptions of each participant and the findings for my study. During data analysis, the four themes that emerged were preparation, interactions during discussions, engagement, and social identity. The faculty described how they prepared for the Human Diversity class and how they used the class to prepare students for their future careers in social work. Instructors also identified the topics that led to controversial discussions, expectations for discussion etiquette, and their responses during these conversations. The

engagement was a large part of faculty experiences during controversial discussions. Faculty shared their strengths and challenges, strategies, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic during controversial dialogues in class. Finally, social identity, which included awareness of biases and limitations and racial/ethnic group membership, influenced instructors' experiences while managing controversial discussions. The findings presented in this chapter are important because they expanded the knowledge of social work faculty experiences as they engaged students in controversial discussions in the classroom. In the following chapter, I contextualize my findings with the literature on this topic. I will also provide implications for policy, practice, and future research.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION**

As controversial discussions occur in the classroom, faculty must be prepared to manage these types of discussions. Faculty preparedness is especially significant in social work classrooms, as topics that may lead to controversial discussions are inherent in the curriculum. In addition, faculty play a crucial role in preparing students for the field of social work, where there is an expectation for practitioners to engage clients from diverse backgrounds. However, controversial discussions can be challenging for both faculty and students, and unfortunately, faculty feel unprepared to manage these discussions. There is limited research on social work faculty preparedness and experiences managing controversial discussions in the classroom.

The purpose of this study was to increase the knowledge of faculty experiences with managing controversial discussions in the classroom, specifically the influence of faculty knowledge, skills, attitude, and social identity as they engage students in these types of discussions. Using descriptive qualitative research, I conducted a study of eight social work faculty to explore their experiences with managing controversial discussions influenced their experience. Each participant attended a semi-structured interview to answer questions about their experience during controversial discussions in the Human Diversity course. This chapter includes a summary of key findings and implications for policy, practice, and research.

#### **Summary of Key Findings**

I used qualitative methodology to explore faculty experiences during controversial discussions in social work classrooms. The Intercultural Competence model was helpful in my exploration of faculty knowledge, skills, and attitude during controversial discussions. Likewise, the literature provided a context to explore the influence of faculty social identity. The

Intercultural Competence framework and the literature on faculty social identity during discussions guided my development of the research questions for this study. While I did not initially purpose for this study to move in this direction, I would be remiss not to acknowledge how the events surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement, particularly, the murder of George Floyd potentially influenced the findings. Data collection occurred at the height of the outrage surrounding George Floyd's murder and several participants identified how current events influenced their experiences, the discussions, and the environment in the classroom. In the following sections, I present a summary of the findings organized by the tenets of the Intercultural Competence model and my research questions.

### **Knowledge**

Research question one, "How do social work faculty describe their preparation (i.e., training, educational background, and life experiences) of teaching courses that cover controversial topics?" explored faculty knowledge of managing controversial discussions in the classroom. In the Intercultural Competence model, knowledge includes cultural self-awareness, cultural knowledge, socio-linguistic awareness, and understanding of global issues and trends (Deardorff, 2006). In the current study, I explored participants' knowledge of managing controversial conversations with students by inquiring about faculty preparation. Thus, the preparation theme emerged from my exploration and included the following subthemes: instructor preparation and student preparation. Faculty shared how their educational, personal, and professional experiences aided in their preparation to navigate controversial conversations in the classroom and prepare students for the field of social work. In this section, I will provide a summary of faculty knowledge of managing controversial discussions and how my data compares to relevant literature.

Faculty attributed their training to teach controversial topics to their formal education. In contrast, faculty purposed to equip their students with the knowledge they perceived their formal education lacked. Participants also described how their personal experience with belonging to marginalized populations provided first-hand knowledge to teach controversial topics. Similarly, participants' knowledge gained from the personal experiences of others aided in their knowledge of various diversity topics. Due to the controversial nature of these discussions, Denise explained how she considers her emotional state in conjunction with current events. Denise said, "I really do look at what's going on in the world, what's going on with me personally, and just making sure that, that mentally I can sustain that, you know." The role of faculty emotions is evident in the literature as Matias and Silverstein (2018) indicated that faculty might experience emotional fatigue from teaching controversial subjects.

As trained social workers, several participants identified similarities between managing social work groups and managing social work students in class. Additionally, participants found that their social work practice experience and work-related training contributed to their knowledge when managing controversial discussions in the classroom. Conversely, participants identified areas where they desired more training in preparation to manage controversial discussions. Areas where faculty desire more training are technology, de-escalation, and how to deal with microaggressions in class. The literature indicates that faculty constantly face racial microaggressions from students and how emotionally taxing this can be for instructors (Matias & Silverstein, 2018). Simultaneously, faculty found it pertinent to use the knowledge they attained from their educational, personal, and professional experience to prepare their students for careers in social work, where there is an expectation to work with diverse populations. According to Holden et al. (2002), as social work students matriculate through their program, students'



confidence and self-efficacy to fulfill social worker roles increase.

Hence, instructors in the current study used their knowledge to assume the role of gatekeeper and determine which students were unqualified for the field of social work. Faculty also prepared students by developing critical thinking skills, promoting advocacy, and helping students identify their biases. Another recommendation for social work faculty is to prepare their students for the field by promoting social justice (Garcia & Van Soest, 2006; Nicotera, 2018), cultural competence (Garcia & Van Soest, 2006; Nicotera, 2018), and student self-awareness (Law & Rowe, 2019). In the following section, I provide an overview of faculty attitudes during controversial discussions.

### **Attitudes**

Research question 2, “How do social work faculty describe their attitudes towards engaging students in controversial conversations?” focused on faculty attitudes as they interacted with students during discussion. According to Deardorff’s (2006) Intercultural Competence model, the attitudes component involves respect, openness, curiosity, and discovery in diverse environments. In the current study, I explored participant's attitudes towards students during controversial conversations by inquiring about instructors' interactions with students during discussions. Interactions during discussions is the theme that emerged from my exploration of faculty attitudes, and this theme consisted of three subthemes: controversial discussions, discussion etiquette, and instructor response. This section summarizes the data on instructors' attitudes during controversial discussions and how my findings contrast to relevant literature on the topic.

Participants identified the topics that were controversial or typically led to controversial discussions. For example, one topic not heavily debated was the historical context of

discrimination. Whereas, topics where students realized their affiliation with an oppressed group or the oppressing group and discussions about the current implications of discrimination tended to cause controversial discussion. Likewise, the demographics of students in the class influenced discussions, and instructors found it necessary to create rules for discussion at the beginning of the semester. Establishing discussion etiquette and revisiting this agreement for discussions helped facilitate a classroom environment where students want to be present, are free to speak honestly, and sometimes experience discomfort. Participants acknowledged that students' feelings might get involved during a discussion, and faculty purposed to create an environment with patience, understanding, respect, and empathy. To refocus the class when the conversation becomes heated and feelings arise, faculty revisit the discussion rules and remind students of the instructors' expectations. Moreover, faculty informed students of the social work code of ethics during their interactions, which is the expected professional standard for social workers to uphold. The faculty also made sure that their responses and behaviors coincided with the ground rules established for discussion. In the literature, a recommendation is that faculty create rules for discussion and understand students' cultures to engage students in conversations on controversial topics (Deal & Hyde, 2004; Fellin, 2000).

Just as feelings might arise for students during controversial discussions, faculty also have an emotional response. For instance, participants in this study noted how they felt anger or hurt and cried in response to controversial discussions. Undoubtedly, social work faculty perceived that their responses during discussions influenced students, so they desired to model professionalism. However, instructors experienced a broad range of emotions during controversial discussions. Instructors' reactions would sometimes cause them to end the class early or apologize to students. Even in these instances where instructors did not respond ideally,

they perceived their ability to hold themselves accountable and apologize as a noble trait to model for students. To minimize their emotional response during discussions, faculty often sought support from colleagues and even found balance by engaging in therapy. The emotional response from faculty is confirmed by the literature as it can be emotionally taxing for faculty to teach controversial subjects (Matias & Silverstein, 2018). In the following section, I provide an overview of faculty skills during controversial discussions.

### **Skills**

Research Question three, “How do social work faculty describe their skills (i.e., strategies and techniques) of engaging students in discussions on controversial topics in the classroom?” explored faculty skills for managing controversial conversations. The Intercultural Competence model's skills component is one's ability to listen, observe, use patience to evaluate, and view the world from other's perspectives (Deardorff, 2006). In the current study, I explored participants' skills by inquiring about the strategies and techniques employed by instructors during controversial discussions in the classroom. The theme that emerged from my exploration of faculty's skills was engagement, which consisted of the following subthemes: strengths and challenges, strategies, and the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on faculty experiences during discussions. The literature indicates a positive relationship between student engagement and academic performance (Bakker, Vergel, & Kuntze, 2015) and that engagement is an essential attribute of an effective classroom (Tinto, 2012). In this section, I will summarize the instructor's skills during controversial discussions and how my findings compare to relevant literature on the topic.

The faculty used several techniques to engage students in controversial discussions. Two of the techniques that participants preferred were allowing students to lead discussions in a

flipped classroom model and assuming the role of a facilitator where the instructor positions themselves at eye level with students during discussions. Instructors also purposed to promote marginalized voices in the class by allowing students of color and students with different identities to speak without discrimination. For example, Kim noted that she would intervene if she observed that marginalized voices were silent in class. The literature supports Kim's promoting marginalized voices. Kang and O'Neill (2018) indicated that it is crucial for faculty to identify power dynamics while paying attention to student interactions during critical conversations. Another strategy that faculty found compelling during discussions on controversial topics was inviting guest presenters who had lived experiences with the topic. Denise said, "bringing a White male in to actually talk about [White privilege] and how he benefits from that, I think is a huge plus." Denise preferred to have guest presenters with lived experiences because she perceived that her social identity as a Black woman often presented a barrier for her to deliver controversial content. This assertion is supported by the literature, as Kong and O'Neill (2018) noted that instructors should tune into their own social identity during critical conversations in the classroom. Faculty also incorporated current events while considering how these events might impact their students.

An example of a current event that significantly impacted students is the COVID-19 pandemic and its societal impact, which altered the way faculty presented discussion topics, taught the course, and interacted with students. Instructors used the media and events surrounding COVID-19 as a tool to provide concrete evidence of the inequities marginalized groups face, which is a topic typically discussed in class. As trained social workers themselves, faculty paid close attention to students' mental health and showed compassion and support to their students during the pandemic. To create a supportive environment, faculty were cognizant

of presenting content on topics like race/ethnicity, which might have triggered students during the racial unrest throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, faculty preferred to broach topics straightforwardly to create an environment for open dialogue. The consideration and carefulness that faculty displayed towards their students during the pandemic aligns with the literature, which indicates that faculty should "meet the students" where they are and understand how students' cultural group membership impacts their engagement in class (Deal & Hyde, 2004; Fellin, 2000). In the following section, I summarize the influence instructors' social identities have on their experience during controversial discussions and how my findings compare to relevant literature.

### **Social Identity**

Research question four, "How does social work faculty's social identity influence their overall experience of managing controversial conversations in the classroom?" explored the influence of faculty social identity during controversial discussions. According to the literature, an instructor's social identity is influential in their experience navigating controversial discussions in the classroom (Ambikar et al., 2018). In the current study, all instructors acknowledged that their social identities influence their teaching and managing controversial discussions. Social identity influenced participants in two significant ways, 1) their awareness of biases and limitations and 2) their racial/ethnic group membership. Instructors maintained a constant awareness of their biases and limitations. Faculty became more self-aware through ongoing self-reflection and acceptance of criticism and feedback from their students. As another tool of self-reflection, faculty intentionally engaged in implicit bias tests. Similarly, the literature recommends that faculty engage in self-reflection (Ambikar et al., 2018) and realize how their social identities influence their course management (Gayles et al., 2015).

Likewise, faculty understood the ways that their social identity created a limitation for them during discussions. For example, Stacy noted how her lived experiences as a White, heterosexual woman might cause a limitation when teaching diversity content. Stacy accepted not having all the answers and instead listened to students with lived experiences during discussions. Overall, faculty deemed it essential to be aware of their biases, privilege, and limitations as they engaged in controversial discussions in the classroom. In summary, the findings of this study revealed that one's social identity ultimately influenced their knowledge, skills, and attitudes during controversial discussions. The literature also supports this finding as several scholars found that faculty social identity and emotions are ever-present in the classroom and influence their teaching (Ahad-Legardy & Poon, 2018; Gayles et al., 2015). In short, the findings from my study indicate that faculty knowledge, attitudes, skills, and social identity all influence the way they manage controversial discussions in the classroom. In the following section, I present an extension of the Intercultural Competence model to include social identity as an influential component.

### **Controversial Conversation Competence Framework**

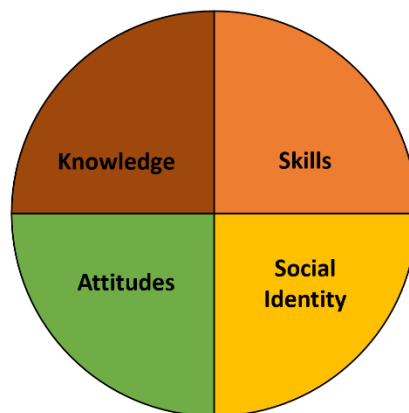
Deardorff's model of Intercultural Competence helped further the knowledge of students' experiences in international education (Deardorff, 2008; Rantala & Stack, 2018). Specifically, the model provides a way for scholars to study individuals' knowledge, attitudes, and skills in diverse environments (Deardorff, 2008; Rantala & Stack, 2018). For this reason, the intercultural model helps expand the knowledge of social work faculty experiences during controversial discussions in the classroom, as diversity-related subjects are often inherent in the social work curriculum. However, this model does not consider the role social identity plays in an individual's Intercultural Competence.

According to the literature, an instructor's social identity significantly influences their teaching during controversial discussions (Ambikar et al., 2018) and their perceptions and interactions with students during these conversations (Matias & Silverstein, 2018). Gayles et al. (2015) asserted that instructors should understand how their social identities influence their experiences in the classroom. Teaching controversial content, however, is somewhat nuanced as faculty and students' emotions may get involved. It becomes crucial for faculty to understand the role their identities and emotions play during these conversations (Matias & Silverstein, 2018). Therefore, I recommend reconceptualizing the Intercultural Competence model to include social identity.

The current model highlights the knowledge, attitudes, and skills of individuals in diverse settings. Furthermore, the literature suggests that an instructor's social identity plays a role in addition to each of these categories; knowledge, attitudes, and skills (Ambikar et al., 2018; Gayles et al., 2015; Matias & Silverstein, 2018). In addition, my findings revealed that faculty social identity influenced their experiences of managing controversial discussions. Unfortunately, there was no present model that explored one's knowledge, attitudes, and skills, while also considering the influence of social identity. Therefore, concerning the relevant literature and my findings from the current study, I propose a new tool that may be helpful in exploring the role of social identity as well as knowledge, attitudes, and skills; the Controversial Conversation Competence (CCC) framework. As shown in Figure 2, the CCC model provides a lens to explore the influence of one's social identity, knowledge, attitudes, and skills on their experiences while navigating controversial discussions in the classroom.

## **Figure 2**

### *Controversial Conversation Competence Framework*



### **Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research**

As a result of the current study, there are several implications for practice and policy. This study expanded the knowledge of the experiences of social work faculty who manage controversial discussions in the classroom. Implications for practice include access to ongoing training and creating small group/learning communities for faculty. Policy implications include creating relevant professional development, prioritizing recruiting, hiring, and retaining faculty of color, and facilitating diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives for the entire campus community. In this section, I provide significant implications for practice, policy, and research supported by the literature and my findings.

#### **Implications for Policy**

There was limited research on the experiences of social work faculty as they engaged in controversial conversations in the classroom. Therefore, data from this study could benefit college administrators as the findings provide insight into the influence of faculty knowledge, attitudes, skills, and social identity on their overall experiences in the classroom during controversial dialogues. Moreover, according to Becirovic and Beslija (2018), intercultural relations in the classroom may represent a microcosm of intercultural relations at the institution. Thus, this study is significant because the findings may benefit college administrators who can



create training and provide support to faculty. This study's findings could help inform professional development for faculty members as they prepare to teach classes that involve topics where controversial discussions might emerge. Faculty in the current study also noted how they felt a sense of responsibility for representing their racial/ethnic group for students who shared the same social identity, especially if they were the student's first encounter with an instructor from the same racial/ethnic group. Considering this insight on representation, administrators could enhance efforts to increase the availability of appropriate campus support to recruit, hire, and retain faculty of color. Subsequently, college administrators could prioritize ongoing initiatives that create a welcoming and inclusive environment for faculty with various social identities and also promote diversity, equity, and inclusion training for the entire campus community. Finally, understanding the experiences of social work faculty from the current study may be helpful in the development of a model or framework that encompasses social identity in addition to knowledge, attitudes, and skills, which faculty may use to prepare for, deliver, and manage controversial dialogues in the classroom.

### **Implications for Practice**

Based on the data from my study, I have identified the following implications for practice to support faculty as they navigate controversial discussions in the classroom; 1) ongoing training and 2) small learning communities for faculty. The literature provided insight into recommended social work faculty techniques as they deliver controversial content (Deal & Hyde, 2004; Fellin, 2000; Kang & O'Neill, 2018). The literature encourages faculty to prioritize social justice (Garcia & Van Soest, 2006; Nicotera, 2018), cultural competence (Garcia & Van Soest, 2006; Robinson et al., 2016), and student self-awareness (Law & Rowe, 2019). Nonetheless, faculty felt unprepared to manage discussions (Garcia & Van Soest, 2000; 2006;

Van Soest & Garcia, 2008) and desired more training on facilitating controversial conversations (Werman, 2019). Likewise, in the current study, social work faculty also desired more training to facilitate these conversations. For instance, the faculty in this study noted how they would have appreciated basic training on technology in the transition from face-to-face to online modality during the pandemic. More importantly, faculty would appreciate training addressing microaggressive occurrences and de-escalation techniques. In addition, faculty stated that while their formal education helped prepare them to teach the Human Diversity course, it lacked content in systematic oppression and discrimination. Thus, instructors incorporated information on the topic in their teaching. Therefore, college and departmental administrators can provide ongoing training for faculty on ways to deescalate students in class and address microaggressions in a way that is conducive to the learning process for everyone. Department leaders might consider assessing the areas or topics that instructors would like to receive more training on through a survey and then creating learning opportunities for faculty to attain that knowledge and skillset. Additionally, technological assistance can be readily available for faculty to focus on student engagement without the distraction of technology issues. The current study occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic when faculty needed to shift from face-to-face to online course formats with short notice. Consequently, in light of the current and potentially ongoing restrictions due to COVID-19, faculty may be expected to transition to virtual teaching swiftly. It might be beneficial for instructors to know how the online modalities function and access quick technological support.

Researchers found that meaningful discussions in the classroom have several benefits for students (Dudley-Marling, 2013; Hamann et al., 2012; Weinzimmer & Bergdahl, 2018). However, controversial discussions may cause discomfort for students (Daniel, 2011; Deal &

Hyde, 2004; Mishna & Bogo, 2007; Walls & Hall, 2018). Thus, faculty faced challenges with creating a safe space while also managing students' emotions during controversial discussions (Deal & Hyde, 2004). However, balancing the two is complex, and instructors may experience emotional fatigue when they teach courses covering controversial topics (Matias & Silverstein, 2018). Moreover, faculty who belong to marginalized racial/ethnic groups often face more significant challenges as they deal with microaggressions from students (Matias & Silverstein, 2018).

In contrast, in the current study, faculty agree on the importance of engaging students in conversation. However, instructors also noted how emotionally taxing it can be to manage discussions on controversial topics. Consequently, as a result of navigating controversial discussions, faculty in this study have experienced anger, solicited support from therapists and colleagues, and decided to take a break from teaching the Human Diversity course. Furthermore, faculty shared that their social identities influenced their experience facilitating controversial discussions in class, and likewise, instructors sought solace from colleagues who share the same identities. Therefore, creating small groups or learning communities for faculty to share their educational, personal, and professional experiences would help enhance instructor's knowledge of the experiences of another instructor. Small groups could also help faculty learn helpful strategies for delivering controversial content and providing a sounding board for instructors to process any residual feelings they may be experiencing due to class discussion.

### **Implications for Research**

The focus of this section is implications for future research. The following implications, which are related to the limitations of this study, are associated with exploring the experiences of faculty who teach other social work courses, participant demographics, and the research design.

Future research can explore faculty experiences in other social work classes that include controversial topics, as I only focused on one course in this study. It might be interesting to see how faculty experiences in other social work classes compare to the faculty in the current study. Future researchers can also explore male and non-binary faculty experiences. Participants in the current study identified as female yet indicated the significant influence their social identity had on their experiences. In the current study, I focused on faculty experiences through one semi-structured interview. Future researchers might conduct a longitudinal study and collect data over time through repeated faculty observations as they teach controversial content in the classroom.

In terms of data collection, future researchers could incorporate course observations. It would be interesting to observe the interactions between faculty and students during controversial discussions in the classroom and collect data about students' experiences. Furthermore, future studies could explore how faculty manage discussions on controversial content in various course formats (i.e., two-week or eight-week accelerated courses). Another recommendation is to study faculty who manage controversial discussions from various disciplines. Additionally, future researchers might replicate this study in other regions as faculty experiences in the South may differ from those located at institutions in other regions. In addition, researchers can explore the experiences of faculty with different ranking status (i.e., tenure, full-time, and adjunct) to discover any potential differences. Faculty in the current study included assistant professors, tenured and non-tenured, as well as adjunct instructors. However, there may be differences in experiences for full faculty who hold a PhD degree where their formal education included training to teach, as opposed to assistant, non-tenured, and adjunct faculty who are practitioners in the field of social work.

Future researchers could use the CCC framework to guide their study of faculty

experiences with managing controversial conversations in the classroom. The CCC framework provides a lens to study the influence of one's knowledge, attitudes, skills, and social identity. The literature (Ambikar et al., 2018; Gayles et al., 2015; Matias & Silverstein, 2018) and the current study suggests that instructors' social identities play an influential role in their experiences with engaging students during controversial discussions. This model can be used in future research to analyze further the relationship between social identity and instructors' experiences during discussions on controversial topics. Adapted from the Intercultural Competence model, which aided in studying international students in diverse environments, the CCC framework might also be used to explore students' experiences during controversial conversations.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to gain a greater understanding of social work faculty experiences with facilitating discussions on controversial topics, particularly the perceived influence of their knowledge, attitudes, skills, and social identity during these types of conversations. The four themes that emerged from the data indicated that:

- 1) Instructors' educational, personal, and professional experiences all helped prepare them to manage controversial discussions and, in turn, helped faculty prepare students for the field of social work.
- 2) Instructors identify the topics that may lead to controversial discussions and thus establish expectations and etiquette for discussions to address the sometimes-heated emotional response from both the instructor and students during these conversations.
- 3) Student engagement is pertinent as faculty broach controversial topics. Faculty allow students to take a leadership role during discussion while also being cognizant of

promoting marginalized voices, being aware of potential triggers in students, and having compassion, flexibility, and understanding for students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- 4) Social identity plays a crucial role in how faculty teach and manage controversial discussions as instructors practice self-reflection, are aware of their biases and limitations, and understand how their racial/ethnic group membership influences their classroom experiences.

As mentioned previously, my study addresses the gap in the literature regarding social work faculty experiences managing controversial discussions. The current study is significant because controversial topics are inherent in the social work curriculum. Additionally, I created a new model to explore faculty knowledge, attitudes, skills, and social identity; the CCC Framework. Moreover, faculty have the added task of adequately preparing students for the field of social work. Controversial discussions in the classroom often lead to students' identity development and preparation for the diverse field of social work. Therefore, it is essential to learn how faculty navigate these controversial dialogues and where more support can be provided to faculty to manage a discussion on controversial topics better. The current study and future studies will add to the knowledge in social work and education.

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**APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL**



UNIVERSITY OF  
**TEXAS**  
ARLINGTON

OFFICE OF RESEARCH ADMINISTRATION  
REGULATORY SERVICES

6/5/2020

### **IRB Approval of Minimal Risk (MR) Protocol**

**PI:** Tiara Thomas

**Faculty Advisor:** Dr. Yi Leaf Zhang

**Department:** Student Conduct Legal Services

**IRB Protocol #:** 2020-0761

**Study Title:** *A Qualitative Exploration of Faculty Experiences with Managing Controversial Discussions in Social Work Classrooms*

**Effective Approval:** 6/5/2020

The IRB has approved the above referenced submission in accordance with applicable regulations and/or UTA's IRB Standard Operating Procedures.

#### **Principal Investigator and Faculty Advisor Responsibilities**

All personnel conducting human subject research must comply with UTA's [IRB Standard Operating Procedures](#) and [RA-PO4, Statement of Principles and Policies Regarding Human Subjects in Research](#). Important items for PIs and Faculty Advisors are as follows:

- **\*\*Notify [Regulatory Services](#) of proposed, new, or changing funding source\*\***
- Fulfill research oversight responsibilities, [IV.F and IV.G](#).
- Obtain approval prior to initiating changes in research or personnel, [IX.B](#).
- Report Serious Adverse Events (SAEs) and Unanticipated Problems (UPs), [IX.C](#).
- Fulfill Continuing Review requirements, if applicable, [IX.A](#).
- Protect human subject data ([XV](#).) and maintain records ([XXI.C](#)).
- Maintain [HSP](#) (3 years), [GCP](#) (3 years), and [RCR](#) (4 years) training as applicable.



**APPENDIX B: EMAIL TO ASSISTANT DEAN**

Good morning,

I hope all is well! You may recall that I am a Ph.D. candidate in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies (ELPS) program at UTA. I am working on my dissertation with Dr. Yi (Leaf) Zhang, an Associate Professor in ELPS. I am excited to announce that I have received IRB approval and I am in the participant recruitment stage!

As a former MSW advisor, I desire to explore a topic I am extremely passionate about. Taking in consideration my love for social work and passion for education, this study aims to understand faculty experiences while managing controversial discussions in the classroom, and the influence of faculty identity and the COVID-19 pandemic on their teaching practices.

I am particularly interested in recruiting instructors who taught SOCW 3307/5307 Diverse Populations within the last year, as this course covers an array of topics that may lead to controversial conversations in class. I am contacting you both, as program directors, to ask if you can assist me by providing a list of instructors (name and email) who have taught SOCW 3307/5307 in the last year either online or face-to-face?

Please let me know if you have any questions or need any additional information. Your assistance is greatly appreciated!

Thank you,  
Tiara Thomas, LMSW  
Ph.D. Candidate College of Education  
University of Texas at Arlington  
[tiara.thomas@uta.edu](mailto:tiara.thomas@uta.edu)

**APPENDIX C: RECRUITMENT EMAIL**

Hello,

I am Tiara Thomas, a Ph.D. Candidate in the College of Education at UTA. I am working on my dissertation with Dr. Yi (Leaf) Zhang, an Associate Professor in ELPS. This study aims to understand faculty experiences while managing controversial discussions in the classroom, and the influence of faculty identity and the COVID-19 pandemic on their teaching practices. You have been identified as a faculty member who has taught SOCW 3307/5307 Diverse Populations within the last year. We would like to invite you to participate in the study and to share your experiences with managing controversial discussions in the classroom.

If you are interested in participating in this study, you can expect the following:

1. Once you respond to this email and indicate interest in participating in the study, I will email you the consent form for your review and signature.
2. If you agree to proceed, then we will schedule a time for the interview session. This study involves one 45 to 60-minute interview that will take place via Microsoft Teams. You will have the option to share your video or refrain from sharing your video during the interview. The interview will be recorded only for the purpose of this study. The recording will be stored securely in a OneDrive folder; only accessible by the researcher and advisor, Dr. Zhang. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or leave the study at any time, without penalty. You can also skip any questions that you do not wish to answer during the interview.
3. At the start of the interview session, I will send a brief survey to collect demographic background information. This electronic survey will be sent to you via email and will take about 5 minutes to complete. Once you complete this survey, we will proceed with the interview process.
4. After the interview, you will be emailed the word-for-word transcription of your interview to review and add/edit any information.

You will be assigned a pseudonym; your name or personal identifiers will remain strictly confidential and will not be used for any public purpose or publication. The results of the study may be published or presented at a conference, but your personal information will not be revealed. Research data will only be accessible by the researcher and advisor, Dr. Zhang.

Your input is greatly appreciated as I explore this topic. If you have any questions or **would like to participate in this research project, please contact me at tiara.thomas@uta.edu** to schedule a time for the interview.

Sincerely, Tiara Thomas, LMSW  
Ph.D. Candidate  
College of Education  
University of Texas at Arlington  
tiara.thomas@uta.edu

**APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT**



## Informed Consent for Studies with Adults

### **TITLE OF RESEARCH PROJECT**

A Qualitative Exploration of Faculty Experiences with Managing Controversial Discussions in Social Work Classrooms

### **RESEARCH TEAM**

#### Student:

Name: Tiara Thomas (PI); University of Texas at Arlington Department: COEd- Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

Email: tiara.thomas@uta.edu

#### Faculty Advisor:

Name: Yi Zhang, Ph.D.; University of Texas at Arlington Department: COEd- Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

Email: lyzhang@uta.edu

### **IMPORTANT INFORMATION ABOUT THIS RESEARCH PROJECT**

The research team above is conducting a research study about faculty experiences with managing controversial conversations in the classroom and the influence of faculty identity on these experiences. The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of social work faculty at a four-year university as they manage controversial discussions in the classroom.

Specifically, this study aims to provide a fuller understanding of social work faculty's knowledge of managing controversial conversations, their attitudes towards and skills of engaging students in such conversations, and the perceived influence of self-identify on their practices in the classroom. You can choose to participate in this research study if you have taught SOCW 3307/5307 Diverse Populations in the last year.

You might want to participate in this study if you would like to share your experiences in the classroom while managing controversial discussions, how/if your identity influences your teaching practices during discussion on controversial content. However, you might not want to participate in this study if you are uncomfortable sharing your personal experiences or if you do not have the time to attend a one-hour interview session via Microsoft Teams.

This study has been reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB). An IRB is an ethics committee that reviews research with the goal of protecting the rights and welfare of human research subjects. Your most important right as a human subject is informed consent. You should take your time to consider the information provided by this form and the research team and ask questions about anything you do not fully understand before making your decision about participating.

### **TIME COMMITMENT**

There will be two interactions with the research team:

1. You will be asked to participate in a one interview session via Microsoft Teams that will last approximately 45 to 60-minutes. You have the option to share your video or refrain from sharing your video during this interview.
2. Once the interview is over and the recording is transcribed, your transcript will be emailed to you for your review. At that time, you may add to or edit any information in the transcript. Please note: the final information will be used in the research study.

### **RESEARCH PROCEDURES**

If you decide to participate in this research study, this is the list of activities that we will ask you to perform as part of the research:

1. Read through this Informed Consent and talk with the research team to make sure that any questions you may have are answered. Make your choice about whether to participate and inform the research team.
2. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to allow a member of the research team to contact you via email to schedule an interview via Microsoft Teams.
3. At the start of the interview session, you will be emailed a brief survey to collect demographic background information; which will take about 5 minutes to complete. Once you complete this survey, the interview session will begin.
  - Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or leave the study at any time, without penalty. You can also skip any questions that you do not wish to answer during the interview.
4. After the interview, you will be emailed the word-for-word transcription of your interview to review and add/edit any information.

The interview will be audio recorded using Microsoft Teams conference software. You will have the option to share your video during the interview or leave your video off. After the interview, the recording will be transcribed, which means it will be typed exactly as it were recorded, word-for-word, by a professional transcription service. Audio recordings will be safely stored and potentially used for future research studies.

### **POSSIBLE BENEFITS**

While the research will not benefit you directly, your personal experiences will increase the knowledge of faculty experiences with managing controversial conversations in social work, as well as the influence of faculty identity during these conversations.

### **POSSIBLE RISKS/DISCOMFORTS**

You might experience stress or discomfort while sharing your experiences with managing controversial discussions. This research study is not expected to pose any additional risks beyond what you would normally experience in your regular everyday life. However, if you do

experience any discomfort, please inform the research team. Remember that you have the right to quit any study procedures at any time without penalty and may do so by informing the research team.

In addition, your personal identification will remain confidential and will not be released or permitted for public use. Your name will not appear in the research student and all information will be encrypted and stored safely.

### **COMPENSATION**

No compensation will be offered for participation in this study.

### **ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS**

There are no alternative options offered for this study.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

The research team is committed to protecting your rights and privacy as a research subject. All paper and electronic data collected from this study will be stored in a secure location on the UTA campus and/or a secure UTA server for at least three (3) years after the end of this research. The recorded interview will be kept with the other electronic data in a secure UTA OneDrive folder for the duration of the study.

The results of this study may be published and/or presented without naming you as a participant. The data collected about you for this study may be used for future research studies that are not described in this consent form. If that occurs, an IRB would first evaluate the use of any information that is identifiable to you, and confidentiality protection would be maintained.

While absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, the research team will make every effort to protect the confidentiality of your records as described here and to the extent permitted by law. In addition to the research team, the following entities may have access to your records, but only on a need-to-know basis: the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the FDA (federal regulating agencies), the reviewing IRB, and sponsors of the study.

### **CONTACT FOR QUESTIONS**

Questions about this research study or reports regarding an injury or other problem may be directed to Tiara Thomas at [tiara.thomas@uta.edu](mailto:tiara.thomas@uta.edu) or Yi Zhang at [lyzhang@uta.edu](mailto:lyzhang@uta.edu). Any questions you may have about your rights as a research subject or complaints about the research may be directed to the Office of Research Administration; Regulatory Services at 817- 272-3723 or [regulatoryservices@uta.edu](mailto:regulatoryservices@uta.edu).

### **CONSENT**



By signing this form, you are confirming that you understand the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and your rights as a research subject. By agreeing to participate, you are not waiving any of your legal rights. You can refuse to participate or discontinue participation at any time, with no penalty or loss of benefits that you would ordinarily have. Please sign below if you are at least 18 years of age and voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

---

**SIGNATURE OF VOLUNTEER    DATE**

*\*If you agree to participate, please provide the signed copy of this consent form to the research team. They will provide you with a copy to keep for your records.*

**APPENDIX E: DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY**

## Demographic Survey

Please highlight and/or type in your response

1. What is your age?
  - A. 25-34 years old
  - B. 35-44 years old
  - C. 45-54 years old
  - D. 55 years old and above
  
2. What is your gender?
  - A. Male
  - B. Female
  - C. Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
  - D. Prefer not to say
  
3. What is your ethnicity?
  - A. Asian or Pacific Islander
  - B. Black or African American
  - C. Caucasian or White
  - D. Hispanic or Latinx
  - D. Multiracial
  - E. Native American or American Indian
  - G. Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_
  - H. Prefer not to report
  
4. What is the highest degree you have obtained?
  - A. Master's degree

- B. Doctorate degree
  - C. Other (please specify)
5. What is your field of study? Please specify \_\_\_\_\_
6. What is your current employment status?
- A. Adjunct Professor
  - B. Full professor
  - C. Tenure-track assistant professor
  - D. Assistant professor in practice
  - E. Associate professor
  - F. Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_
7. How many semesters have you taught SOCW 3307/5307 Diverse Populations? \_\_\_\_\_
8. Have you taught Diverse Populations (SOCW 3307 or SOCW 5307)?
- A. I have only taught SOCW 3307 Diverse Populations
  - B. I have only taught SOCW 5307 Diverse Populations
  - C. I have taught both SOCW 3307 and SOCW 5307

**APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

### **Interview Protocol**

1. How would you describe your teaching style, and does it vary depending on the course you teach?
2. In your own words, what are the objectives or the purpose of the Diverse Populations course?
  - A. What do you hope students learn in this course?
3. How would you describe your classroom environment?
  - A. How do you establish clear guidelines for discussion?

#### **Knowledge (training, education, and learning experiences)**

4. How do you prepare to teach this course?
5. What formal education or training did you receive prior to teaching Diverse Populations?
  - A. Was there anything you wish you received training on? If so, what?
6. Have your previous life experiences prepared you to teach a course like Diverse Populations? If so, in what ways?

#### **Skills (strategies and techniques)**

7. Provide examples of the easiest topics and some of the hardest topics to discuss in Diverse Populations.
  - A. How do you broach controversial topics in this class?
  - B. What strategies do you use to overcome the challenges when discussing controversial topics in this class?
8. How do you keep students engaged in controversial topics?
9. How has your approach for discussing controversial topics changed over time?

#### **Attitudes (perceptions, teaching, and interactions)**

10. How would you describe your openness during controversial discussions?
11. Has there ever been a time where your teaching was influenced by the mood or climate of class during a controversial discussion? If so, in what ways?
12. Describe your interactions with students during controversial discussions (one positive/one negative interaction).

#### **Identity (knowledge, skills, and attitudes)**

13. How does your identity (gender, race/ethnicity, or both, etc.) influence the way you prepare for and teach Diverse Populations?
14. Does your identity influence the strategies you use to deliver controversial content in the class? If so, in what ways?
15. Which topics cause you to consider your identity more than others?
16. Please describe your emotional response during controversial conversations.
17. Has there ever been a time where you believe you were viewed as biased while teaching Diverse Populations? If so, please explain.

### **COVID-19**

18. In what ways did the recent COVID-19 pandemic influence the way you prepare for and teach Diverse Populations?
19. How does the COVID-19 pandemic influence your interactions with students during controversial conversations?
20. Are there certain topics that cause you to consider the current pandemic more than others? If so, which topics?
21. Did the COVID-19 pandemic influence the strategies you use to deliver controversial content in this class? If so, in what ways?

### **Concluding Questions**

22. Is there anything you will do differently the next time you teach the course? Why?
23. Is there something else you think I should know to better understand your experience with teaching the Diverse Populations course?

*Thank you for taking the time to meet and sharing experiences thoughts and insights. If for some reason I need to clarify anything we discussed today can I reach back out to you via email?*