

# Beyond “Weaponization:” Reframing Identity and Trauma in Social Work Education

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## Abstract

Social work graduate programs increasingly describe students and early career faculty invoking identity and trauma in ways that can operate as power moves within academic settings. Commonly labeled as “weaponizing” identity or trauma, these dynamics can be analyzed through a critically conscious, anti-oppressive theoretical lens without discounting the reality of identity-based harm or the pervasiveness of trauma. Using an intersectional, antiracist, trauma-informed framework, we contextualize these behaviors amid generational shifts, social-media logics, the disruptions of COVID-19, and contemporary socio-political racial polarization to illuminate their nuance and variability. The central charge of this article is to clarify when identity and trauma-based claims highlight inequities and impact justice or learning, and when they are co-opted to silence others, halt inquiry, evade accountability, or circumvent institutional roles and policies. The article proposes recommendations to guide faculty, administrative leadership and program decision-making that both honor equity and diversity and protect educational rigor and professional integrity.

## Keywords

Graduate Education, Social Work, Antiracist, Trauma-Informed, Intersectionality, Identity, Weaponization, Generational Differences, Socio-Political Distress, Social Media, COVID-19

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## 1. Introduction

Graduate education can provide a context of critical inquiry, personal transformation, and professional socialization. Yet, it is also a terrain where identity, power, and vulnerability intersect in complex ways (Ahmed, 2020; Fassin & Rechtman, 2009). Over the last decade, social work faculty and administrators have increasingly described dynamics in which appeals to identity and trauma are

mobilized not only as genuine expressions of harm but also as tactical tools within disputes. This phenomenon, sometimes referred to as the “weaponization” of identity or trauma remains understudied and conceptually ambiguous.

It is important to clarify that analysis of weaponization does not erase, deny, or diminish the reality of identity-based oppression, marginalization, or the legitimacy of trauma claims. Rather, it interrogates how institutional, generational, socio-political, professional, and technological conditions create contexts in which these claims can serve multiple, sometimes contradictory, functions: protection, empowerment, silencing, or leverage. By using an intersectional, antiracist, trauma-informed framework, the authors deconstruct some of the conditions under which weaponization occurs in graduate programs, illustrate critical cues with examples, and outline recommendations for practice, policy, and social work education.

## 2. Literature Review

### Identity and Intersectionality in Higher Education

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013) is essential to understanding how overlapping forms of oppression shape student and faculty experiences. In social work, debates about cultural competence and critical race theory highlight enduring challenges to culturally relevant instruction (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Ashley & Paez, 2015). Faculty of color experience tokenization and assume disproportionate service burdens (Jani, Osteen, & Shipe, 2016). Students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, frequently encounter microaggressions that shape their sense of belonging and impact feelings of competence and confidence (Lipscomb, Ashley, & Mountz, 2017; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). As Ray (2019) theorizes, universities are “racialized organizations,” in which structural and cultural practices reinforce racial hierarchy even as institutions adopt diversity language. These inequities provide a legitimate basis for identity-based claims, while also creating contexts where identity becomes a primary mode of navigating and leveraging disputes.

### Trauma Discourse in Educational Settings

Trauma-informed pedagogy is increasingly prominent and critical for helping professions (Carello & Butler, 2014, 2015; Fassin & Rechtman, 2009; Furedi, 2013; Knight, 2015; Levenson, 2017). Social work education emphasizes integrating trauma awareness into both the curriculum and practicum (internship) settings, increasing sensitivity to student well-being and aiming to reduce retraumatization in the classroom and in service provision (Carello & Butler, 2014, 2015). The expansion of trauma discourse in universities has both increased institutional sensitivity and generated new tensions around academic freedom, rigor, and dialogue (Jones & Okun, 2001).

However, when trauma language is applied to discomfort, critique, or ideological disagreement, it risks conflating psychological injury with intellectual challenge (Grubbs et al, 2019; Herman, 2015). In educational settings, this can turn vulnerability into moral capital that elevates those who exhibit it, discourages dis-

agreement, and subtly shifts pedagogical authority. This can dilute its clinical precision and complicate institutional responses. For example, a student describing a classroom debate or a faculty member framing an interaction with the Dean as “traumatizing” may be expressions of genuine distress but may also be conflating discomfort with injury, effectively shutting down critique, self-accountability, and growth or professionalism opportunities.

### **Generational Differences**

Generational differences amplify these dynamics. Gen Z students, who now constitute a majority of graduate cohorts, have grown up in a digital environment where moral signaling, identity affirmation, and vulnerability disclosure are culturally rewarded (Deogracias, 2015; Twenge, 2023). Gen Z and Millennial students report higher rates of anxiety and depression, as well as stronger commitments to equity, safety, and inclusivity compared to previous generations (American Psychological Association, 2025). In social work education, these expectations affect classroom norms, feedback receptivity, and authority (Grubbs et al, 2019; Miller & Grise-Owens, 2022; Ng, 2020).

In contrast, older generations of faculty may adhere to norms of stoicism, delayed gratification, and academic detachment. These differences often manifest in graduate school environments as disputes about feedback, power, accountability, and academic rigor. Early-career faculty, often themselves Millennials or Gen Z, also navigate generational divides with senior faculty who may hold different norms regarding hierarchy, emotional expression, and professional conduct (Ng, 2020; Twenge, 2023). These younger faculty may identify more with students, occupying liminal positions where they are vulnerable to student evaluations, senior faculty review, and online scrutiny. For them, identity or trauma-based claims can serve both as shields against biased evaluation and as leverage to assert authority in unsupportive climates (Ahmed, 2020). These generational tensions can create or exacerbate conflicts over teaching, mentorship, and evaluation. Both student and faculty dynamics intersect with discipline-specific standards and competencies, paving pathways for confusion, poor communication, and conflict.

### **Social Media and Amplification**

Social work education routinely involves interpersonal exchanges in classrooms and internships that are activating. Students are expected to manage their internal and external responses, and these interactions are viewed as opportunities for internal growth and self-regulation. Digital platforms, however, provide opportunities for students to share feelings of anger, frustration and disappointment with their friends, cohort, program and across their universities, amplifying grievances and shifting conflicts into public arenas (Deogracias, 2015; Tufekci, 2017). In social work, this intersects with ethical mandates around confidentiality and professionalism (Reamer, 2013; Hitchcock, Sage, & Smyth, 2019).

Social media can blur professional and personal boundaries, placing faculty and administrators under constant surveillance by students and the public (Kimmons & Veletsianos, 2018). Additionally, social media can escalate disputes rapidly, with

moral grandstanding rewarding outrage, transforming local disputes into viral controversies and evoking cancel culture responses (Grubbs et al., 2019; Ng, 2020; Tufekci, 2017). In this context, identity and trauma-based claims can achieve rapid amplification and confirmation, pressuring faculty and institutions to respond swiftly and often punitively.

Social media has become an extension of academic life, shaping both student and faculty behavior. For example, a student who feels slighted by feedback may bypass departmental procedures and post about the incident on Instagram, garnering external validation and pressuring administrators into action. Faculty members, particularly those in precarious positions, may turn to social media to highlight inequities or grievances, mobilizing reputational pressure against their institutions. These dynamics collapse boundaries between academic and public spheres, making identity and trauma claims more visible and more potent.

### **COVID-19 and Socio-Political Polarization**

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted higher education, moving learning online and exacerbating mental health concerns. Social work and other mental health graduate programs rapidly restructured curricula and practicum education to meet the stay-at-home orders necessitated by the viral pandemic; however, the rapid shifts impacted program stability as well as the well-being of faculty and students (Aristovnik et al., 2023; Son et al., 2020; Lipscomb & Ashley, 2020). Students reported higher levels of stress, anxiety, grief and isolation, while faculty experienced burnout, blurred work-life boundaries, and increased pressure to accommodate students (García & Weiss, 2020). The pandemic overlapped with racial justice uprisings, producing heightened identity and trauma-related concerns (Lipscomb & Ashley, 2020; Ray, 2019). In the absence of in-person conversations, the shift to remote learning eliminated informal repair mechanisms, leading to disconnection and greater reliance on formal complaint processes.

The viral pandemic overlapped with a period of heightened socio-political polarization that has continued until the present date. Protests against law enforcement murders of unarmed Black men and women in 2020, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids and deportation in 2025, anti-DEI legislation, and debates over academic freedom have intensified identity-related tensions in universities (Ray, 2019; Son et al., 2020). Graduate programs became microcosms of these cultural battles, with identity and trauma claims often centered as the source of dissatisfaction and maltreatment.

### **Intersectionality and Systemic Racism**

Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989; Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013) has been pivotal in highlighting how interlocking systems of race, gender, sexuality, disability, and class shape experiences of privilege and oppression. Graduate education is deeply implicated in these systems, as universities both reproduce and contest inequities (Mahoney et al., 2019). Research reflects that students of color, students of diverse gender identities, and disabled students encounter disproportionate barriers in graduate programs, including microaggressions, tokenization, and underrepresentation in faculty ranks (Sue et al., 2007; Gildersleeve et al., 2011;

Lipscomb & Ashley, 2017). Faculty of color often experience “cultural taxation,” being asked to serve on more committees and provide greater mentorship to students of similar identities (Solorzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000). These examples of systemic racism create conditions where appeals to identity are necessary and valid forms of advocacy. Yet, acknowledgment of identity in organizational systems also creates incentives for its strategic invocation, particularly in moments of conflict where institutional decision-makers are primed to respond to equity-based claims (Ray, 2019).

The literature demonstrates that identity and trauma are deeply embedded in graduate education, both as genuine axes of inequity and as lived experiences of marginalized individuals navigating institutions. Intersectionality highlights systemic inequities that have historically oppressed marginalized and minoritized students and faculty. However, trauma-informed pedagogy acknowledges the significance of trauma but risks conflating psychological injury with intellectual challenge; generational differences shape expectations of safety and authenticity of graduate programs, impacting classroom norms, feedback receptivity, and authority; social media creates public platforms that amplify grievances; and COVID-19 (leading to the current socio-political climate) led to decreased relational repair and encouragement of formalized complaint processes. The confluence of factors has collectively created the conditions for the weaponization of identity and trauma in graduate education.

### 3. Defining “Weaponization” without Trivializing Harm

Within this context, weaponizing identity or trauma can be defined as the *strategic deployment of identity or trauma-based claims primarily to gain procedural advantage, suppress critique, or punish adversaries, rather than to repair harm, improve equity, or advance learning*. This conceptualization privileges an analysis of function and consequence over assumptions of motive or intent.

#### Critical Cues with Examples

The following six critical cues, followed by real-life examples, illustrate how identity and trauma claims can shift from being tools for validating lived experiences and creating accountability to tools of leverage, depending on context and function.

#### 1. Threat Avoidance

- *Critical Cue:* Identity or trauma invoked at evaluative threat points.
  - *Example:* A graduate student resists instructor feedback on writing quality by reframing a critique of an assignment as “an erasure of my cultural voice.”

#### 2. Defended Escalation

- *Critical Cue:* Claims framed as self-evident and closed to dialogue.
  - *Example:* A student asserts they were “traumatized” by a peer debate on immigration and refuses to return to class or speak with the instructor, claiming that dialogue itself compounds harm.

### 3. Sanction Seeking

- *Critical Cue.* Immediate demand for punitive outcomes or reputational damage.
- Note: Sanction seeking must be distinguished from legitimate whistleblowing or grievance reporting by examining the reporter's primary objective, timing, and engagement with institutional processes. While good faith reporting is oriented toward preventing harm, addressing misconduct, or improving conditions or processes, sanction seeking is characterized by an immediate emphasis on punitive or reputational outcomes, often following an adverse evaluation. Additional indicators include premature escalation outside established processes, resistance to remedial or restorative options, and the strategic use of public exposure to induce disciplinary action. Legitimate reporting, in contrast, demonstrates proportionality in requested outcomes and sustained engagement with corrective efforts, even when those processes are slow or imperfect.
  - *Example.* An early-career faculty member, after receiving a critical peer review, files a discrimination complaint and simultaneously posts the comments online to generate public outcry.

### 4. Audience Construction

- *Critical Cue.* Conflict framed for external validation rather than internal repair.
  - *Example.* A student in disagreement with an instructor about their grade creates a viral TikTok accusing a professor of being "unsafe," shaping administrative response more than internal investigation.

### 5. Discrediting Competence

- *Critical Cue.* Dissatisfaction is framed as devaluation or discrediting of competence.
  - *Example.* A student is unhappy with an instructor's teaching style or grading and makes an appointment with the college Dean to inform them that the instructor is incompetent and "shouldn't be teaching graduate education."

### 6. Empathy Inversion

- *Critical Cue.* Appeals for understanding are made without reciprocal empathy or perspective-taking.
  - *Example.* A student who disrupted a group project cites past trauma to justify their behavior and demands accommodation but dismisses the impact on peers or refuses to acknowledge how their actions affected the group dynamic.

To ensure ethical, equitable, and defensible application of these critical cues, documentation must remain grounded in observable behaviors, specific language, and contextualized actions, rather than inferred intent, motivation, or character assessment. Faculty and administrators should describe what occurred (e.g., statements made, actions taken, timing, and response to feedback), the setting in which

it occurred, and the impact on learning, group functioning, or professional standards, avoiding speculative conclusions about psychological states or moral character. For example, documenting that a student “declined to engage in follow-up dialogue after feedback and escalated concerns to external platforms” is substantively different from labeling the student as “manipulative” or “defensive.” Grounding documentation in what occurred, how it unfolded, what standards were not met, and what expectations were established moving forward allows these cues to be used as analytic tools for assessment and support rather than as labels, thereby preserving due process, transparency, and alignment with social work values of dignity, integrity, and accountability.

## **4. Recommendations for Practice, Policy, and Graduate Education**

### **1. Explicit Definitions and Policies**

Administrators and Universities should clearly distinguish between harm (e.g., discrimination, harassment or retaliation), discomfort (e.g., challenging academic content and material), and growth (e.g., critical feedback) when assessing and addressing faculty and student claims. Embedding these distinctions in syllabi, student handbooks, and faculty policies can reduce misinterpretation (Carello & Butler, 2015). Since academic policies on interpersonal dynamics, professionalism, and collegiality are deliberately broad to safeguard academic freedom, providing explicit definitions of these concepts is inherently difficult. Additionally, weaponization thrives in environments where inequities remain unresolved. Thus, Universities must address systemic inequities in workload, pay, representation, and promotion (Ray, 2019). Equity reforms reduce reliance on identity claims as the primary means of navigating conflict.

Because practicum (field) education is social work’s signature pedagogy, programs should align concepts of intersectional identity and trauma to the Council on Social Work Education’s (CSWE) Educational and Policy Accreditation Standards (EPAS) competencies (e.g., ethical and professional behavior; antiracism, diversity, equity and inclusion; engagement, assessment, intervention and evaluation) so students learn to tolerate productive discomfort while safeguarding against harm in classroom, supervision, and practicum settings (CSWE, 2022). Anchoring policies and practices in the CSWE competencies, to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics, and in trauma-informed and culturally humble approaches helps prevent re-traumatization and bias while maintaining clear performance standards (NASW, 2021; NASW, 2015; SAMHSA, 2014; Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998). Graduate students need structured training and ongoing coaching in conflict resolution, professional communication, and receptivity to feedback. Embedding professional development with clarity around identity, resilience, and trauma discourse into graduate curricula can foster constructive engagement, healthy communication, and teach future mental health providers methods of reengagement and repair following a disruption (Twenge,

2023). Furthermore, such practices and policies can help students recognize when expressions of righteous indignation may be unconsciously used to deflect critical feedback or avoid accountability. The *NASW Code of Ethics (2021)* emphasizes the importance of professional integrity, self-awareness, and a commitment to lifelong learning. By reinforcing these values through explicit training and policy, programs can support students in moving beyond defensiveness and toward ethical, reflective, and collaborative social work practice.

Critical cues offer actionable insight into how identity and trauma related claims function within academic and practicum contexts and provide an operational framework for faculty and practicum instructors assessing student performance and professional readiness. When examined through a competency-based lens, these cues align with the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) Social Work Competencies and can be systematically mapped to support consistent, equitable instructor evaluation. Framing these dynamics within the EPAS competencies allows educators to differentiate between ethical expressions of lived experience and patterns that interfere with professional engagement, accountability, or learning, while maintaining alignment with social work values and accreditation expectations. Below are examples of how these critical cues may be connected to the CSWE competencies.

- **Threat avoidance.** Reflects difficulty tolerating evaluative feedback and maintaining professional engagement when identity or trauma is activated. This aligns with CSWE Competency 1 (Ethical and Professional Behavior) and Competency 7 (Assessment of Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities), as ethical practice requires openness to feedback and accountability, while assessment competence involves distinguishing critiques of performance or critical feedback from perceived threats to personal or cultural identity.
- **Defended escalation.** Undermines professional dialogue and relational engagement by framing claims as self-evident and closed to discussion. This dynamic implicates CSWE Competency 1 (Ethical and Professional Behavior) and Competency 6 (Engagement with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities), reflecting challenges in sustaining ethical conduct and meaningful engagement during conflict, particularly when disagreement or discomfort arises in group or institutional contexts.
- **Sanction seeking.** Raises ethical concerns related to due process and the misuse of formal accountability mechanisms. This pattern aligns with CSWE Competency 1 (Ethical and Professional Behavior) and Competency 5 (Policy Practice), as grievance and disciplinary systems function as policy tools that require responsible, good-faith engagement rather than being leveraged primarily for punitive or reputational outcomes.
- **Audience construction.** Reflects challenges related to professional ethics, confidentiality, and organizational engagement. This dynamic aligns with CSWE

Competency 1 (Ethical and Professional Behavior) and Competency 6 (Engagement), as competent practice requires navigating disagreement through appropriate institutional channels and sustaining relational repair within micro, mezzo and macro settings.

- **Discrediting competence.** Conflates dissatisfaction or disagreement with evidence-based evaluation. This pattern aligns with CSWE Competency 1 (Ethical and Professional Behavior) and Competency 9 (Evaluation of Practice), as ethical practice requires respectful, proportionate critique, while evaluation competence involves distinguishing personal preference from systematic assessment of professional effectiveness.
- **Empathy inversion.** Reflects difficulty with reciprocal perspective-taking and relational responsibility, wherein appeals for understanding are made without acknowledgment of impact on others. This dynamic aligns with CSWE Competency 1 (Ethical and Professional Behavior), Competency 6 (Engagement) and Competency 8 (Intervention), as effective engagement requires mutual empathy, and competent intervention involves addressing behavior with a level of professionalism, in ways that consider its effects on others and support the restoration of group functioning.

## 2. Restorative and Ethics Grounded Infrastructures

Departmental policies should be anchored in core social work values and ethics, including dignity and worth of the person, integrity, service, and should explicitly name cultural humility and anti-oppressive practice as guiding principles (e.g., [NASW Code of Ethics, 2021](#); [NASW cultural competence standards, 2015](#)). In addition to these ethical anchors, institutions should adopt restorative models, such as restorative justice informed or restorative practices, specifically adapted for educational and organizational hierarchies ([Karp & Sacks, 2014](#); [Vaandering, 2014](#)). Unlike purely punitive or grievance-based approaches, restorative models emphasize accountability, collaboration, relational repair, and reintegration while preserving institutional authority and due process. For example, a tiered restorative infrastructure might include a) informal, faculty-facilitated dialogue or reflective coaching for low-level conflict or harm; b) structured restorative conferences or facilitated circles, supported by trained neutral facilitators, for repeated or escalated concerns; and c) formal investigative or disciplinary pathways for cases involving discrimination, harassment, retaliation, or safety risks. Such tiering allows proportional responses that match the nature and severity of the concern while reducing unnecessary escalation.

Institutions should acknowledge the inevitability of social media escalation and develop policies that balance freedom of expression with internal processes for addressing conflict and harm ([Ng, 2020](#)). Faculty and students require explicit training in digital professionalism, confidentiality, and reputational risk to maintain competency in contemporary academic environments. Practice recommendations include annual faculty/staff development in trauma-informed, antiracist conflict resolution and cultural humility, along with syllabus language that clari-

fies expectations for professional use of self, boundaries, repair processes, and an explicit anti-retaliation stance. Transparent grading rubrics, multi-rater evaluations, and equitable mentoring structures reduce suspicion of bias. Faculty should be trained in providing trauma-informed feedback that maintains rigor without collapsing critique into harm (Herman, 2015). Practicum education supervision should build the capacity to discern when identity or trauma-based claims advance justice versus when they silence peers or circumvent policy. Finally, programs should incorporate mechanisms to identify and address microaggressions and other climate concerns across classroom and practicum settings, and routinely review data on cases, outcomes, and digital conduct to ensure consistent, equitable application of policy.

### 3. Faculty and Leadership Preparation

Department chairs, deans, and faculty should be trained to differentiate between genuine calls for repair and strategic leverage. This includes thorough assessment, responding proportionately, resisting performative appeasement, and maintaining commitments to both justice and rigor (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2019). Further, departments need accessible, tiered infrastructures for surfacing and resolving conflict before escalation, with restorative justice circles, facilitated intergroup dialogue, and peer mediation as the default, paired with clear timelines, documentation standards, confidentiality parameters, and anti-retaliation protections, while formal investigative or disciplinary processes are reserved for allegations of discrimination, harassment, or violence. To preserve both trust and due process, roles for support (e.g., Chairs, ombudspersons, confidential advocates) should be separated from adjudication (Deans, Title IX, or Equity and Compliance), and conduct thresholds should be content-neutral, focusing on behaviors and impacts rather than labeling claims.

In practice, educators and administrators can differentiate awareness raising from weaponization by evaluating specificity, proportionality, accountability, and repair orientation within a trauma-informed, anti-oppressive frame. Concerns that aim to address harm typically name concrete behaviors and impacts (not character judgments), align with established equity/Title IX/ADA processes, and show willingness to engage dialogically, accept feedback, and co-create remedies consistent with trauma-informed principles of safety, trust, choice, collaboration, healing, and empowerment (Carello & Butler, 2014; SAMHSA, 2014). By contrast, “weaponized” appeals often surface as patterns of avoidance or deflection from performance and or professional conduct expectations, rely on vague or shifting claims, and exhibit DARVO dynamics (denying impact, attacking critics, and reversing victim/offender roles) especially when accountability steps are proposed (Freyd, 1997). Educators should also weigh proportionality (e.g., whether the requested accommodation or sanction fits the described harm), consistency over time (documented patterns versus isolated incidents), and relational posture (openness to restorative problem-solving versus demands that silence critique) (Ahmed, 2020; Herman, 2015). Finally, situating reports within broader campus climate and microaggress-

sion literature helps distinguish legitimate naming of structural harms, which merits validation and corrective action, from defensive “discomfort” used to shut down inquiry (Sue et al., 2019; Tuck & Yang, 2014). Rigorous documentation, transparent policies and procedures, and reflective supervision support equitable judgments while minimizing harm to those raising concerns in good faith (Carello & Butler, 2014; SAMHSA, 2014).

#### **4. Critical Pedagogy and Reflexivity as Antiracist Practice**

Social work programs must integrate critical pedagogy and reflexivity as core elements of antiracist education to address the complex, and sometimes contradictory, roles that identity and trauma-based claims can play in academic contexts (Ashley, 2024; Tang Yan et al., 2022). Educators should be trained to foster classroom climates where critical self-examination, dialogic learning, and mutual accountability are normalized and expected, rather than avoided or pathologized. This requires framing identity not only as a potential site of harm or legitimacy, but also as a site of power and positionality as it relates to race and racism.

Graduate programs must embed structured reflexivity training that distinguishes between authentic advocacy and the strategic invocation of identity to avoid feedback, discredit others, or seek sanction. This includes helping students and faculty identify critical cues that signal when discourse may be shifting from repair to leverage. Reflective assignments, guided discussions, and supervision should invite students to interrogate how their own identities and trauma histories shape their responses to conflict, critique, and authority—while simultaneously building tolerance for productive discomfort as an essential component of professional development.

Faculty must be supported to hold dual roles as compassionate educators and boundary-setting professionals, with clear institutional backing for maintaining academic standards and rigor. Institutions must resist collapsing care into indulgence or mistaking critique for harm. Creating a pedagogical space where multiple truths can coexist without the need to resolve or escalate disagreement allows identity and trauma narratives to retain their significance without being misused.

Ultimately, advancing antiracist collaboration requires normalizing complexity: recognizing that power flows through all identities, that trauma can both require care and obscure accountability, and that genuine equity work includes learning to navigate discomfort without weaponization. These are not individual competencies alone but collective practices that must be intentionally cultivated and assessed across classrooms, practicum placements, and faculty development.

#### **5. Initiate Explicit Conversations**

When routine academic interactions are consistently experienced as painful, activating, or traumatic, that pattern provides actionable information about support needs rather than evidence that standards must be lowered or inquiry curtailed. In social work education, this supervisory-mentoring function is central to the discipline’s signature pedagogy (practicum education) and EPAS competen-

cies, so students learn to harness identity and experience as practice assets without letting unprocessed activation compromise client care, peer learning, or program standards. Graduate programs should respond with both validation and development by acknowledging identities and lived experiences of trauma, then scaffolding reflexive practice and self-regulation so that activation does not chronically spill into professional roles (Ashley & Paez, 2015; Carello & Butler, 2015; CSWE, 2022). Concretely, faculty and practicum educators can frame this as part of professional development (not remediation), offering reflective supervision, skills-based coaching (e.g., grounding and pacing strategies, internal regulation scripts for difficult moments), and, when appropriate and with consent, confidential referrals to counseling, employee assistance, or disability services. Learning contracts and performance evaluations can include specific, observable goals around feedback tolerance, boundary navigation, and repair processes (e.g., attending post-incident debriefs, using agreed-upon communication steps before escalating a concern, methods of communication that are engaging and reparative). This approach preserves dignity and equity while reducing the risk that chronic activation, however understandable, displaces course standards, disrupts peers, or shifts emotional labor onto others.

#### **6. Consideration of our own Intersectional Identities**

Faculty should engage in critical self-location, attending to their own intersectional identities and positionalities when discerning whether a student or colleague is naming harm, signaling discomfort, mobilizing identity/trauma to deflect accountability, or engaging in growth (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 2013). This reflexive work is particularly essential given the risk that the language of “weaponization” itself may be misapplied by faculty to prematurely dismiss, minimize, hijack or defensively neutralize legitimate student feedback, especially when that feedback challenges authority, pedagogy, or institutional norms. Without deliberate self-interrogation, faculty may inadvertently reproduce the very power asymmetries and silencing dynamics that trauma-informed and equity-oriented frameworks seek to disrupt.

Those with visibly dominant or institutionally centered identities (e.g., white, male, cisgender, able-bodied) are especially susceptible to missing the subtle dynamics of oppression, racialized trauma and microaggressions that often activate student claims of harm (Helms, 2017; Sue et al., 2019). In such contexts, labeling a student’s response as “defensive,” “avoidant,” “aggressive,” or “weaponized” can function as a protective maneuver that shields faculty from discomfort, accountability, or the need to revise practice. At the same time, the fact that marginalized individuals may strategically assert power within socio-political, administrative, and relational hierarchies where they hold little formal authority does not negate the operative realities of white supremacy culture, privilege, and institutional silencing (Ahmed, 2020; Bonilla-Silva, 2021).

Multiple truths can co-exist: people who are targeted by oppression may seek agency and protection and, at times, may also weaponize identity or trauma nar-

ratives to avoid discomfort and the developmental work of accountability and repair (Herman, 2015; SAMHSA, 2014). Importantly, distinguishing between these dynamics requires careful attention to context, timing, and evidentiary grounding, rather than reliance on intent attribution or generalized skepticism toward student claims. The presence of boundary-testing, conflict, or strong affect alone is insufficient to justify a weaponization label.

This does not mean that dominant presenting faculty should acquiesce or ignore the behavior or behaviors that need to be addressed. Rather, it underscores the ethical responsibility to respond in ways that neither pathologize student resistance nor abdicate faculty authority. Faculty should seek reflective consultation with colleagues of diverse identities with whom they have an established, trusting relationship to reduce projection and pathologizing, and to craft responses that both validate substantiated harm and scaffold the individual's movement toward accountability, skill-building, and internal growth (Menakem, 2021; Sue et al., 2019). When used with rigor and humility, this approach allows faculty to hold complexity without collapsing into either defensive dismissal or unquestioned acceptance, thereby modeling the reflective, ethical practice social work education seeks to cultivate and model.

## 5. Conclusion

Graduate education must balance care with rigor, justice with inquiry, and equity with academic freedom. In practice, this means clarifying what counts as harm versus discomfort and growth; building reliable, restorative processes that address conflict without collapsing standards; preparing faculty and leaders to respond proportionately and consistently; teaching through a critical, reflexive pedagogy that treats identity as a site of both vulnerability and responsibility; initiating direct, supportive conversations when activation is chronic, pairing validation with skill-building and clear boundaries; and consideration of our own intersectional identities and positionality to navigate the subtle dynamics of oppression and racialized trauma that activate claims of harm.

In social work education, these shifts are inseparable from the profession's mandate. Practicum education requires EPAS-aligned competence, reflective use of self, and boundary integrity. When programs normalize productive discomfort while safeguarding against targeted harm, they protect client welfare, sustain practicum partnerships, and strengthen graduates' readiness for licensure and interdisciplinary practice at the micro, mezzo, or macro levels. Taken together, these measures center learning, stabilize roles, and improve morale; they support student well-being without diluting standards, protect faculty judgment while preventing re-traumatization, and reduce fear-based overcorrection, allowing graduate programs, especially social work, to remain spaces of growth, accountability, and justice.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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