

Counseling Today

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Peering into counseling's future

Identifying and treating
trauma-induced insomnia

Recognizing disordered
eating symptoms in clients

Helping counselors separate
work life from personal life

Counseling Today

January 2021

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Compiled by Jonathan Rollins

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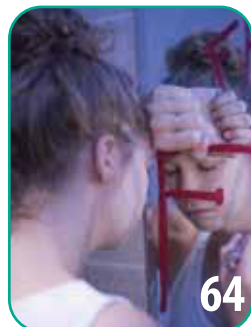
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Counselor Career Stories

Identifying the impact of microaggressions

Interview by Danielle Irving-Johnson



Shreya Vaishnav is a visiting assistant professor at Palo Alto University. She graduated with a master's degree in clinical mental health counseling from Arizona State University and with a doctorate in counseling and educational development from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Vaishnav is a 2020-2021 Western Association of Counselor Education and Supervision emerging leader, a 2020-2021 *Counselor Education & Supervision* fellow, and 2018-2019 National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) Foundation doctoral minority fellow. She is currently the co-chair of the American Counseling Association Graduate Student Committee and the Awards Committee chair for the Association of Multicultural Counseling and Development (AMCD).

Danielle Irving-Johnson: What led you to the counseling profession and where you are today?

Shreya Vaishnav: I grew up in Mumbai, India, and migrated to the United States with my family right after I completed high school. Growing up, I was drawn toward issues of social justice within my community. When I had the opportunity to continue my undergraduate education in the U.S., I chose to study psychology due to my inclination to serve others. During my undergraduate years, I worked with students with learning disabilities, refugees from Bhutan, Iraq and Sudan, and at an inpatient psychiatric hospital. This strengthened my interest to pursue

a master's and, ultimately, a doctorate in counseling.

I also experienced microaggressions for the first time as an undergraduate. Even though English is my first language, I would receive daily compliments on my English-speaking skills. Often, professors would single me out by not pronouncing my name because it was too difficult. These experiences motivated me to research microaggressions and their impact on students from marginalized backgrounds.



Shreya Vaishnav

I am now a visiting assistant professor at Palo Alto University located in Palo Alto, California. I also work part time in a private practice, Silicon Valley Therapy, in the Bay Area. As I look back at my journey to where I am today, I would not change a single thing about the experiences I have had so far, as they have shaped me into the person I have become today.

DIJ: In 2018, you were selected to receive the fellowship award from the NBCC Minority Fellowship Program. Could you share more about this experience and any suggestions you have for graduate students seeking funding opportunities?

SV: The NBCC Foundation has several scholarship and fellowship opportunities for master's as well as doctoral students. When I applied to the ... doctoral minority fellowship program, I did not expect to receive the fellowship. I clearly remember the day I received a call from the NBCC Foundation telling me that I

had been selected from hundreds of applicants and had just been awarded the \$20,000 fellowship.

As a part of the cohort of 22 doctoral fellows, we were provided the opportunity to attend the NBCC symposium for two summers and received mentoring. We also had the unique opportunity to participate in an immersion experience at the White Earth Nation Reservation in Minnesota, where we learned about culturally responsive approaches in working with the Native American community. I feel honored and humbled to have had this opportunity and to call my cohort as family. Two years later, we are still very well connected and collaborating on presentations, webinars and research projects. This opportunity enriched my educational experiences in profound ways.

For graduate students seeking funding opportunities, I encourage you to look into national and regional organizations — such as the Southern Association for Counselor Education and Supervision, the Association for Assessment and Research in Counseling, [the national] Association for Counselor Education and Supervision [and] AMCD — that offer research grants to fund your thesis or dissertation. Apply to as many opportunities as you can. You never know, one day you may receive a call or an email informing you that you were selected.

DIJ: What are some of your clinical and research interests?

SV: My own cross-cultural experience as an immigrant has motivated me to pursue my clinical interests in work with immigrant, refugee and

international student populations. My research interests are closely tied to my own personal experiences as a student of color in higher education. I have led several research projects on the impact of microaggressions on students with marginalized identities and facilitated workshops for educators on navigating and responding to microaggressions in academia.

A few other projects that I am currently working on are exploring effective mentoring practices for students and faculty, strengths-based approaches in working with students from marginalized backgrounds, and social justice advocacy within our field.

DIJ: Could you elaborate on racial microaggressions, what they may look like and the impact they can have on graduate students?

SV: Racial microaggressions are subtle, seemingly harmless, often unintentional comments or behaviors that can convey insulting and derogatory messages to individuals of color. Racial microaggressions are based on assumptions about someone's visible and invisible identities and experiences. These often convey messages of ascription of intelligence, being a second-class citizen in your own country, criminality status and many more.

Unfortunately, racial microaggressions are quite common in counseling and the academic environment. Racial microaggressions can be so subtle that individuals on the receiving end often experience a Catch-22 situation when deciding on how to respond. On one hand, if they respond, they may be met with denial or defensiveness. But on the other hand, if they don't respond, they often wonder if this interaction really happened and wish that they had said something. Both situations are disadvantageous for those on the receiving end of microaggressions.

The impact of microaggressions can be quite harmful and is often explained as "death by a thousand cuts." We know from research that when graduate students experience racial microaggressions, they often question their reality, doubt their own feelings

and wonder if they are overreacting. All of this leads to exhaustion, frustration, isolation and disconnection. In several cases, experiencing microaggressions can lead to psychosomatic issues, increased anxiety and depression.

From my own research, I know that doctoral students of color in our field often feel left out of opportunities. These students have to struggle harder than their white peers to receive equal respect and recognition. Finally, these experiences lead to a disconnection from their academic environment.

DIJ: What do you identify as the current trends in the counseling profession, and how can students become better equipped to serve their future clients considering these emerging trends and developments?

SV: I believe that the current trends in our profession are widely connected to our current sociopolitical climate. The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed counselors to think of creative and inclusive approaches to telemental health counseling. Further, COVID-19 and the sociopolitical climate have led to an increase in instances of racism. As students training to be counselors, we must be in tune with the current sociopolitical climate to best serve our clients.

It is important to remember that the personal is political. The policies created and implemented at the government level trickle down to impact our clients on an individual and systemic level. This includes response to the pandemic by politicians, immigration laws, and addressing race and equity issues within institutions. As counselors, it is important that we stay connected and acknowledge these experiences as playing a role in our clients' lives.

DIJ: What are some of the challenges that you have recognized within the profession, and how would you recommend the profession as a whole move forward to rectify these issues?

SV: I have noticed that there are not very many role models in our profession for individuals from marginalized backgrounds. This creates

a barrier for students and clients from marginalized backgrounds, as they often don't see people who look like them represented in the profession. It is important to recruit, retain and support diverse students, counselors and counselor educators to best serve our students and clients.

We still have a long way to go in terms of decolonizing counseling as a field, whether in academia or in clinical practice. I encourage all graduate students and professionals to continue advocacy efforts and to play an active role in promoting inclusivity on behalf of our profession and our clients.

DIJ: You are the current chair of the ACA Graduate Student Committee. What is the committee doing to support graduate student members?

SV: The ACA Graduate Student Committee is committed to supporting and connecting graduate students and new professionals in the field. Our committee actively offers insight and resources to graduate students and new professionals via member blogs published on ACA's website. We have also been presenting at the ACA annual conference on issues that are most pertinent to graduate students and new professionals. Look for the committee's presentation at the ACA Conference this year on social justice, advocacy, and inclusion strategies for graduate students and new professionals.

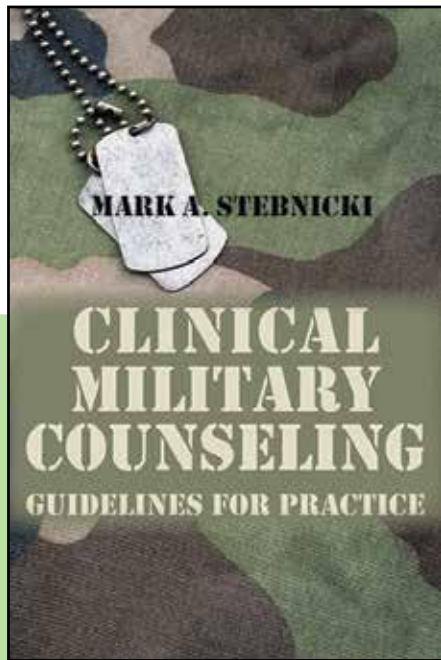
For this academic year, the committee is supporting the current ACA president, Dr. Sue Pressman, in formulating a mentorship program for new professionals. We are very excited to be a part of this initiative to support the growth and development of new professionals in our field.

DIJ: What do you think it takes to be successful in the counseling profession?

SV: I believe it takes an ongoing commitment to awareness, self-reflection and cultural humility to be successful in the counseling profession. We will never stop learning and growing as professionals. As counselors, we must constantly work toward self-and other awareness and reflect on our values, biases and experiences.

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Further, we must strive toward multicultural competency with a culturally humble stance. Cultural humility opens up opportunities to learn and enhance our understanding of individuals who have had experiences vastly different from our own. This is the most effective way to practice culturally competent and responsive counseling and to be a successful counselor.

DIJ: How do you envision the counseling profession in the future, and where would you like to see growth?

SV: For us to best support our marginalized clients and students, we need to have role models in the profession who look like our clients and students. One area of growth for our profession would be to diversify and recruit more students and counselor educators with marginalized identities who can in turn support students and clients in receiving the best training, education and care.

DIJ: Is there anything else you wish to share about you or your work with ACA's more than 50,000 members?

SV: I cannot underscore enough the importance of cultural competency within our field. We risk immense disservice to our clients and students if, as counseling professionals, we are unable to incorporate inclusive practices in our work.

We all have different intersecting identities and blinders. We are bound to enact microaggressions within our classrooms, in counseling sessions and in meetings with our students. Whether intentional or not, it is the impact that matters, not the intent. If each one of us commits to decolonizing our workspaces and practicing cultural humility, we will greatly improve the profession, one counselor at a time. ♦

Danielle Irving-Johnson is the content project manager at the American Counseling Association. Contact her at diring@counseling.org.