

Disclosing and Dismantling the Destructive Impact of Microaggressions in Institutes of Higher Learning

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Abstract

The purpose of this exploratory inquiry was to gain insight into how students from under-represented populations (e.g., African- and Latino American students) experience microaggressions on the campuses of predominantly white institutions (PWIs). Profiled were self-reported anecdotes of microaggressions from graduate- and undergraduate students at two PWIs. The results demonstrated driving forces of microaggressions are still common experiences on university campuses. As a result, to generate safe spaces for all students to experience the maximum gains possible in higher learning, disseminated is a cache of professional resources to understand- and combat microaggressions and the formidable negative effects (e.g., Racial Battle Fatigue), along with the Brinson Introspection Student Self-Assessment Survey, designed to heighten students' consciousness about microaggressions and further guide the prevention of microaggressions and other marginalizing practices at PWIs (e.g., Implicit Invisibility).

Keywords: *Microaggressions, Racial Battle Fatigue, Implicit Invisibility, Self-Reported Anecdotes, Brinson Introspection Student Self-Assessment Survey, and Professional Resources*

1. Introduction

Why should higher levels of bias issues come with students' experiences in higher education? This exploratory inquiry was conducted to gain insight into how students from under-represented populations (e.g., African and Latino American) experience microaggressions on the campuses of predominantly white institutions (PWIs). Profiled were self-reported anecdotes of microaggressions from graduate- and undergraduate students at two PWIs. Disseminated is a cache of professional resources to understand- and combat microaggressions and the formidable negative effects such as Racial Battle Fatigue. Also, disseminated is the Brinson Introspection Student Self-Assessment Survey, designed to heighten

students' consciousness about microaggressions and further guide the prevention of microaggressions and other marginalizing practices at PWIs, such as Implicit Invisibility. Brinson [4] posited that Implicit Invisibility is a detrimental practice of marginalization that can transmute into a multilayered, negative impact such as minimum to no encouragement of some students, or no expectations for said students to progress, advance, and succeed cognitively, socially, emotionally, morally, and/or physically.

2. Literature Review

Microaggressions

Microaggressions are a form of commonplace racism that can be brief and include daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities. Whether intentional or unintentional, microaggressions communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group [17]. The term is a framework for underlying intentions driven by racism; and three major categories of microaggressions identified include microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations [17].

A microassault is a verbal or nonverbal attack that is conscious or deliberate and is meant to hurt the individual (e.g., name-calling, discriminatory actions, and excluding students from under-represented groups). A microinsult is noted by an assumption that is callous and rude to demean an individual. It is more subtle and relays a hidden message (e.g., a student of color is asked, "how did YOU get into the program?"). Lastly, a microinvalidation is when an individual excludes, negates, or nullifies the psychological feelings of an individual from an under-represented group. This type of microaggression is expressly designed to diminish the experience of that individual.

Effects of Microaggressions

Numerous studies support the notion that micro-aggressions are connected with depressive symptoms

[1], [6], [12]. For instance, prior research has shown that individuals who experienced a higher number of microaggressions reported more severe depressive symptoms [6]. Microaggressions have also been correlated with anxiety, binge drinking, and alcohol related consequences in college students implying that microaggressions can negatively impact one's physical health in addition to one's mental health [3]. Whether racial microaggressions are indirect or intentional, they can have considerable negative effects on African American collegians' satisfaction, sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and social connectedness [11], [13], [15]. Microaggressions are particularly harmful to individuals from underrepresented groups attending college and may even lead to dropping a class or leaving the program or department Melendez and Thompson [14].

Racial Battle Fatigue.

Racial battle fatigue is described as race-related exhaustion with both the physical- and psychological toll taken on individuals due to ongoing discrimination, microaggressions, and stereotype threats [16].

Previous literature demonstrates that as a result of racial microaggressions and hostile campus racial climates, Latina/o students frequently state that they experience psychological-, physiological-, and behavioral stress responses during and after racialized issues on campuses [8]. Also, Beatty and Lima [2] examined how undergraduate Student Leaders of Color (mostly Black and Latinx) experienced and coped with Racial Battle Fatigue. Student leaders described feeling frustrated and isolated by the absence of understanding from peers and absence of support from institutional leaders. This contributed to some participants' desire to leave their campus leadership positions.

3. Self-reported Anecdotes of Microaggressions and Reflections

Student Anecdote One and Reflections

Calculated Ignoring and Purposely on Mute

African- and Latino American, university students have been the targets of calculated ignoring by the mainstream while involved in group assignments across various courses. To illustrate, an assigned small group cohort was collaborating on a capstone project. The brainstorming session is going great and ideas shared are acknowledged and embraced with enthused feedback. Well, most of the time anyway. Ariel, a Latino male undergraduate senior

has piped up during several passes of the discussion. Hmm, no acknowledgement whatsoever, let alone enthused feedback. Ariel then shares a beneficial assessment strategy that is also met with silence, and then quickly buried in the shrill enthused feedback of his peers when a mainstream member of the cohort shares her thoughts.

Contemplate the Dismal Implications

1-Was it Ariel's imagination? No. 2-Was it the first time Ariel had said experience? No. Moreover, calculated ignoring was also reported by African American undergraduate and graduate students, who note that typically they when try to interject their ideas during group projects they are purposely met with silence by their peers from the mainstream.

Student Anecdote Two and Reflections

Calculated Ignoring and Purposely on Mute

An African American graduate student also relayed experiences with calculated ignoring by her mainstream peers. To illustrate, while collaborating on an assigned project with four peers from the mainstream, Ursula, an African American doctoral student noticed a misspelled word and pointed it out. The response from the white male responsible for said document was quick, sharp, definitive, and dismissive, "no, it's not misspelled." Likewise, none of the other three group members (also from the mainstream) bothered to check the noted word. However, during the group's PowerPoint presentation, the course professor did indeed note the misspelled word.

Contemplate the Dismal Implications

There were five members in the group, but it did not even occur to one of them to check the spelling of the word Ursula noted. *How would you feel to be totally dismissed by a group of your peers without a second thought?*

Example of Microinvalidations

Actions that negate the thoughts and experiences of people of color.

Student Anecdote Three and Reflections

Racial Ostracizing: Clear and Definitive

An African American graduate student was assigned

to a group project with five peers from the mainstream. During the initial phase Jade went over to her group to establish meeting times, but someone said they would decide group meetings later. During a class break the next week Jade initiated group contact again. But this time Jade was casually told the group decided that instead of meeting as a group, each person would work on their own and then just take turns sharing information during the presentation. Hmm, Jade made a mental note to work double time to ensure mastery of the assignment and evaluation success. Presentation time arrived and surprise. All of the other members of Jade's group had met, and they disseminated their information through their established roles. No matter, Jade's hard work paid off during her turn when she efficiently disseminated a wealth of enlightening information about all aspects of the assigned project.

Contemplate the Dismal Implications

It was not the first time Jade had to work twice as hard as her mainstream peers and it certainly would not be the last time. *How would you feel to be defined as "less than," and then marginalized out of an assigned group?*

Example of Microinsults

Informed by implicit racism that degrades one's social background through rudeness and insensitivity.

Student Anecdote Four and Reflections

Whitesplaining 101

African- and Latino American students (both undergraduate and graduate) noted that on numerous occasions while they were speaking that their white counterparts deemed it their civic duty to gallantly interrupt them with an affectionate touch on the hand, to say a very familiar phrase, "What he/she meant to say was..."

Contemplate the Dismal Implications

How does it feel to be a functioning adult and have someone high jack your conversation with others for the sole purpose of "explaining to others your thoughts? Chronic microaggressions result in far too many students experiencing racial battle fatigue, which is the cumulative psychosocial and emotional impact on black students at predominantly white institutions [16]

4. Discussion

On a serious note, there is an over use of numbers (e.g., enrollment rates, grade point averages, and graduation rates) to gage the state of under-represented groups such as African American students at PWIs. Hence, to gain greater insight it is important to facilitate opportunities for said students to relay their own experiences and related thoughts, feelings, and actions [7]. Self-reported anecdotes revealed that both graduate- and undergraduate students at PWIs do have to contend with bias experiences like microaggressions, and microaggressions can spark a negative domino effect because chronic microaggressions can result in Implicit Invisibility and Racial Battle Fatigue, and Implicit Invisibility and Racial Battle Fatigue can result in both psychological, and physiological impediments for students. The resulting negative impacts hurt students' psychol-emotional well-being, negative impacts impede classroom social dynamics, and negative impacts harm students' learning outcomes [5].

Limitations

A small number of self-reported anecdotes about microaggressions from graduate- and undergraduate students from under-represented populations at two PWIs were included in this exploration. The resulting information was in-sync with research-based evidence of microaggressions. Yet, this exploration cannot comprehensively capture the experience of all under-represented student populations, and it may not be generalized to other PWIs.

Implications

Predominantly white institutions should make concentrated efforts to gain sound insight into microaggressions and the resulting traumatic impact on target students (e.g., students of color and international students). Also, predominantly white institutions should demonstrate a sound understanding of the double duty target students are frequently forced to undergo that in addition to their academic pursuits, includes defense mechanisms to counter the negative effects of microaggressions that threaten their overall well-being. Besides, predominantly white institutions should be proactive in eradicating issues related to microaggressions by expanding related social-, emotional-, and mental health services, as well as eliminating barriers for students to access said services. The objective is not only to eradicate micro-aggressions, but also to help targeted people strategize to avoid associated stress Hall and Fields [9], [10]. Comprehensively, predominantly white

institutions should actively personify accountability actions steps (institutions and individuals) to generate safe spaces to maximize all students' learning in anti-bias environments (e.g., facilitate positive collegiate climates; foster a sound sense of university belonging for all students; and replace monocultural university missions with a sound commitment to fair, balanced pluralism). Addressing microaggressions in educational arenas can provide welcoming, inclusive environments in the classroom and in the field [14].

Future Research Directions

Profiles of self-reported anecdotes provided insight into the microaggression experiences of students from under-represented populations at PWIs. As a result, future research should examine the structural origins- and prevailing factors of microaggressions at PWIs. Moreover, future research should collect data from various PWIs across America's demographic regions to gain deeper insight into the microaggression experiences and resulting impacts on students from various under-represented populations (e.g., African-, Asian-, Biracial / Multiracial, Latino-, and Native American students, students with disabilities, and international students). Likewise, future research should collect data from various PWIs across America's demographic regions to gain insight into the strategies and practices administrators, faculty, and staff utilize to reduce the effects of microaggressions. Additionally, future research is required for a better understanding of how to combat microaggressions across different academic majors to further help PWIs support students from under-represented populations.

5. Recommended Professional Resources

Understanding- and Combating Microaggressions
Results from the self-reported anecdotes demonstrated driving forces of microaggressions are still common experiences at PWIs. Accountability Action Step: Disseminated is a cache of professional resources for university administrators, faculty, and staff to utilize to understand- and combat microaggressions and the negative effects.
Anderson, E. (2022). <i>Black in White Space: The Enduring Impact of Color in Everyday Life</i> . University of Chicago Press.

Banaji, M. R., and Greenwald, A. G. (2016). <i>Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People</i> . Bantam.
Bonilla-Silva, E. (2021). <i>Racism without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial inequality in America</i> . Rowman and Littlefield.
Boysen, G. A. (2012). Teacher and Student Perceptions of Microaggressions on College Classrooms. <i>College Teaching</i> , 60(3), 122-129. DOI:10.1080/87567555.2012.654831
Bunch, M. (2024). <i>The Magnitude of Us: An Educator's Guide to Creating Culturally Responsive Classrooms</i> . Techer College Press.
Cho, C. L. (2022). <i>Global Perspectives on Microaggression- Microaggressions in Higher Education: Understanding and Combating Covert Violence in Universities</i> . Routledge.
Combs, B., and Brachfeld, A. (2024). <i>Talking About Microaggressions: A Resource for Parents and Educators</i> . Independently Published.
Correll, J., Wittenbrink, B., Park, B., Judd, C. M., and Goyle, A. (2011). Dangerous enough: Moderating racial bias with contextual threat cues. <i>Journal of Experimental Social Psychology</i> , 47(1), 184-189.
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Davis, S. M. (2024). <i>Being Black in the Ivory: Truth-Telling about Racism in Higher Education</i> . The University of North Carolina Press.
Durkee, M. I., Perkins, T. R., and Hope, E. C. (2021). Academic affect shapes the relationship between racial discrimination and longitudinal college attitudes. <i>Social Psychology Education</i> , 24(1), 59-74. DOI:10.1007/s11218-020-09602
Eberjardt, J. (2020). <i>Biased: Uncovering the Hidden Prejudice That Shapes What We See, Think, and Do</i> . Penguin Books.
Farber, R., Wedell, E., Herchenroeder, L., Dickter, C. L., Pearson, M. R., and Bravo, A. J. (2021). Microaggressions and psychological health among college students: A moderated mediation model of rumination and social structure beliefs. <i>Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities</i> , 8(1), 245-255.
Hagopian, J. (2025). <i>Teach Truth: The Struggle for Antiracist Education</i> . Haymarket Books.

Halvorson, E., and Vianden, J. (2025) "Professor Oppressors: College Classrooms as Spaces of Racist and Sexist Microaggressions," International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: Vol. 35 Iss 1, Article 3.	Sue, D. W., Alsaedi, S., Awad, M. N., Glaeser, E., Calle, C. Z., and Mendez, N. (2019). Disarming Racial Microaggressions: Microintervention Strategies for Targets, White Allies, and Bystanders. The American Psychologist, 74(1), 128–142. DOI: 10.1037/amp0000296.
Harper, S. R. (2015). Black male college achievers and resistant responses to racist stereotypes at predominantly White colleges and universities. Harvard Educational Review, 85(4), 646-674.	Torres-Harding, S., and Turner, T. (2015). Assessing racial microaggression distress in a diverse sample. Evaluation and the Health Professions, 38(4), 464-490.
Haynes-Baratz, M. C., Metinyurt, T., Li, Y. L., Gonzales, J., and Bond, M. A. (2021). Bystander training for faculty: A promising approach to tackling microaggressions in the academy. New Ideas in Psychology, 100882.	Wynne, J. T., and Delpit, L. (2012). Confessions of a White Educator: Stories in Search of Justice and Diversity. Kendall Hunt.
6. Heightening Students’ Consciousness for the Prevention of Microaggressions	
Brinson Introspection Student Self-Assessment Survey	
Results from the self-reported anecdotes revealed that student group work in PWI courses is a major catalyst for microaggressions. Accountability Action Step: Designed was a student-oriented survey for use as a prerequisite to group assignments to provide students opportunities to be immersed in deep introspections to heighten their consciousness about microaggressions as an action step to prevent them.	
Contemplate the Items Below and Respond Accordingly	
- When all of the other students are verbalizing in response to instructor-directed inquiries during whole group class time, I give all of their responses my careful consideration. Always Sometimes Never - When working with a partner and the other student is sharing his/her/their recommendations in response to the assignment, I give all said recommendations my careful consideration. Always Sometimes Never	

Contemplate the Open-Ended Items and Respond Accordingly

- When working in a cohort on an assignment, what can happen when members of the cohort ignore the corrective feedback of another member?
- When working in a cohort on an assignment, why is it important to do something when members of the cohort ignore the recommendations, inquiries, and corrective feedback of another member?

Contemplate the Compounded Issue and Respond Accordingly: Unfortunately, when working in a group on an assignment, most members are not aware of ill actions like ignoring the recommendations, inquiries, and corrective feedback of another member.

- Question: How do you solve a problem like microaggressions in groups when a member(s) of the group is the source of the microaggressions?

Conclude the Survey Deep in Thought by Contemplating the Deep Dive Thinking Reflections

- Microaggressions: Generally, individuals who are aware of microaggressions can recognize them when they are on the receiving end of said actions-microaggressions. However, sometimes said individuals are not aware of their own acts of microaggressions that are directed towards others.
- As a committed member of a student group assignment, it is important to gage one's own status and tendencies-both overt and covert, by conducting a candid self-assessment to prevent-and/or gain a heightened awareness about microaggressions directed towards others.
- Feel Free to Share Additional Reflections as Desired.

Thank You for Your Thought-Driven Engagement**7. Conclusion**

Highlighted were three forms of microaggressions (microassault, microinsult, and microinvalidation). Profiled were self-reported anecdotes that yielded a wealth of information about the microaggressions that students from under-represented populations at PWIs experienced (e.g., "being whitesplained to," being expressly ignored, and being racially ostracized). Also, to illustrate the magnitude of the menacing effects of microaggressions, spotlighted were harmful mental and physical effects of microaggressions such as Racial Battle Fatigue. As a result, PWIs should engage in concentrated efforts to abolish institutional spaces of microaggressions. In turn, to facilitate safe, welcoming spaces for all university students to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally, the self-reported anecdotes were instrumental in disseminating professional resources tailored to understanding and combating microaggressions for use by administrators, faculty, staff, students, and others. Likewise, the self-reported anecdotes facilitated the Brinson Introspection Student Self-Assessment Survey, which was designed to alert students to microaggressions as a means to prevent them and other ostracizing practices like Implicit Invisibility at PWIs.

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