Understanding Underrepresented Students' Experiences with Microaggressions on a Predominantly White College Campus

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INTRODUCTION

- Research on microaggressions has identified three main types of microaggressions experienced by members of underrepresented groups on college campuses (microinvalidation: interactions that exclude a person's identity and sense of belonging of people from underrepresented groups; microinsults: exchanges that communicate disregard for a person based on their identity; microassaults: explicit derogatory remarks and behaviors that are unintentionally harmful).

- Researchers have identified similarities and differences between groups in the types of microaggressions experienced by identity. For example, Black, Latinx, and Asian participants have reported experiencing more racial microaggressions than Whites, with Black participants experiencing more second-class citizen and criminality microaggressions, Latinx and Asian participants reporting more exocitaztion microaggressions, and Asians reporting more environmental microaggressions.

- Researchers have also identified intersectionality between identities in people's experiences with microaggressions. For example, Black women reported more cultural biases in courses, whereas Black men spoke more about the lack of representation in leadership positions (Mills, 2020). Similarly, members of LGBTQ+ community who also identified as a racial/ethnic minority were particularly likely to rapport invalidation and ostracization based on sexual orientation (Nadal et al., 2015).

- Three major types of outcomes have been associated with being the target of microaggressions. These include: Psychological (e.g., race-related stress, mental taxation), Sense of Belonging (e.g., feelings of rejection, reduced sense of belonging), and Behavioral (e.g., stereotype threat, reduced participation in campus life).

- Our study was designed to understand how identity impacts the experiences of microaggressions, their implications, and the types of support that would be most helpful against the experiences of microaggressions on a predominantly White, heterosexual campus.

Types of Microaggressions
Microinvalidation & Microassaults

Microinvalidation	Microassaults
Rock/tree feeling personal; lack of acknowledgment of meaning	Negative racial comments (general)
Disconnect between communicated values and treatment of minorities	Friend called N word
No change after experience shared with the College	Harassment: barks, not let into parties, singing N word
Opposing BLM with All Lives Matter/Blue Lives Matter	Jokes about slavery
Lack of willingness to change by professors pedagogy/content	"The Africans in your quad are really loud"
In classroom: make comment ignored then white man says it, noticed	"At least we're not hanging you guys on trees anymore"
Underrepresentation: with peers and professors	"That wasn't her real hair/she's bald under there"
Exclusion by peers (e.g., white roommates & teammates)	"You don't qualify for financial aid because you're only half Mexican"
Intersecting identity not allowed/acknowledged	COVID experience: looks/comments toward Asian Americans
Having to look a certain way to be accepted	Greek life not letting in POC but letting in white girls
Invalidation of experience	Derogatory comments about women
Talking about a comment - "I don't really see the issue with that"	Being targeted by staff

METHODS

Participants

43 undergraduate students at SUNY Geneseo
- 27 women, 6 men, 7 Genderqueer/Gender Fluid, 1 Questioning/Unsure, 1 Nonbinary, 1 Agender

Racial/ Ethnic group membership :
- 15 Multiracial , 11 Black/African American, 9 White, 5 Asian/Asian American, 3 Latinx

Sexual Orientation:
- 20 Heterosexual/Straight, 9 Bisexual, 4 Pansexual, 3 Queer, 2 Gay, 2 Lesbian/Queer, 1 Lesbian, 1 Bisexual/Pansexual/Queer , 1 Heterosexual/questioning

Procedure

Participants first completed an online demographics form. Then, they participated in a 45-60 minute in-depth interview via Zoom, where they were asked to discuss their experiences with campus climate, overall, and microaggressions, in particular. We asked the following questions for each theme, with follow-up questions addressed depending on students' responses.

Campus Climate:
- Experiences associated with being a member of an underrepresented group on our campus.
- Students' comfort when navigating different spaces on our campus
- Students' tendency to reach out for support in times of need; who they are likely to reach out to for support.

Microaggressions:
- Types of microaggressions experienced
- Outcomes associated with experiencing microaggressions
- Recommendations and strategies for support

Types of Microaggressions: Microinsults

THOSE INTENDED AS COMPLIMENTS
- Fetishized/Exoticized
- Hair touching
- Praising me or my culture
- English is good

THOSE REFLECTING STEREOTYPES
- Asked ridiculous questions and statements (e.g., do you do drugs?)
- Being accused of being aggressive, loud, intimidating, too much by white peers
- Jabs at sexuality
- RA's family got scared when they were saying hi
- Weird glances and looks from townspeople when speaking in Spanish
- "We don't think that you're capable of performing at the level you want to perform"

MISIDENTIFICATION
- Mispronouned
- Misidentified by professors

SYSTEMIC/INSTITUTIONAL
- Use & abuse of BIPOC images
- BIPOC does the work of change
- Administration: pacification and compliments that feel like placation
- Different treatment towards perpetrator(s)
- Students saying inappropriate things in class/prof does not respond or address
- Lack of being called on by professors in class

DATA ANALYTIC APPROACH

We conducted thematic analysis consistent with the qualitative interpretive phenomenology framework (see Braun & Clarke, 2006)
- *Phase 1*: individual transcripts coded using exploratory/inductive coding via two methods - initial and in-vivo coding to identify categories and issues, making sure to note the identities represented by each transcript. In-vivo coding was used in first-cycle coding to identify quotes and phrases that captured students' experiences in their own words.
- *Second-cycle coding*: Thematic Analysis used to cluster categories into larger themes, with hierarchical themes informed by students' responses and past research on microaggressions. Frequency of each theme across transcripts were noted, examining prevalence/frequency of each theme by identity.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Microinvalidations:
- Most are institutional or structural
- Almost all students noted rock/tree feeling personal, with perceived lack of acknowledgment of meaning or impact AND perceived disconnect between communicated values & treatment of minorities
    - All identities equally represented on these issues (e.g., White students just as likely to note this as Black students)
- When personal/interpersonal issues reported, they centered around having their experiences invalidated/minimized or feeling excluded
    - From faculty as well as from peers in different ways

Microinsults:
- Most are personal/interpersonal, with a few reflecting institutional
- More variability than microinvalidations
- Four main clusters of microinsults: those intended to be compliments, those that reflect stereotypes that exist, those related to misidentification, and those that are institutional

Microassaults:
- Fewest number of incidents reported
- Most were negative racial comments, with some regarding gender
    - Ranged from subtle/indirect to very explicit
- Some behaviors (e.g., harassment) and exclusion were also reported

OUTCOMES WHEN MICROAGGRESSIONS OCCUR
Affect/Emotional
- Frustration, Angry,upset, Resentment, Annoyed, Disappointed
- Discomfort
- Pile up/Exhaustion, Puts me on edge/Stresses me out, Ruins my day
- Crushes my soul (makes me really sad), Depressed, Hurts feelings
Cognitive
- Concern about consequences for challenging/calling out microaggression
- Cognitively taxing, takes emotional and psych toll
- Avoid thinking about it, Try not to acknowledge, Block them out for own self-protection
Behavioral
- Impacted my academics
- Makes me want to give up reaching out
- Makes me want to work harder, show them they are wrong
- Hesitant to report it to the college - perception that nothing will be done
Self
- Makes me feel small; Invalidated, Less than
- Doubting/second guessing; Wondering if making too much out of it, Unsure
- Feel unwanted
Social
- Observed that no one really responds when microagg occcur
- Affects sense of belonging/outcast
- Isolated