

African American College Students and Racial Microaggressions: Assumptions of Criminality

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Abstract

African American college students experience a high number of racial microaggressions related to the assumptions of criminality. Racial microaggressions are subtle racist statements or actions that are intended to denigrate people of color. 240 African American college students who attended a Historically Black University in the South participated. The researchers focused on REMS Subscales 2, Second-Class Citizen and Assumptions of Criminality, with regards to gender and status of work of the college students. The study results revealed a significant difference between African American male and female college students' experience of racial microaggressions related to assumptions of criminality. No difference was revealed when comparing students who worked to students who did not work. The researchers discussed coping strategies to help African American college students' fortify themselves to the deleterious effects of racial microaggressions on their emotional and physical health.

Keywords: racial microaggressions, African American college students, work status, coping strategies

Numerous empirical research studies support the existence of the deleterious effects of racism in the African American community (Jones, 1997; Smedley & Smedley, 2005; Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007). Many people suggest that racism has been virtually eliminated from American society as evidenced by significant gains by African Americans to many educational and social institutions. This notion was further reinforced when President Barack Obama was twice-elected as President of the United States of America. Many of the overt acts or racisms are not as evident as they were pre-Civil Rights era; however, the stinging stereotypes and racial microaggressions are insidious and harmful to African Americans. In 2009, Sue compared racism to the effects of carbon monoxide as being "invisible, but potentially lethal" (p. 88). Overt acts such as requiring African Americans to use the back door of businesses, referring to African Americans as "buckwheat," and asking African Americans to sit in a different waiting room in a physician's office than whites have virtually been eliminated. Even in the face of the many gains to achieve equality, African Americans and other persons of color continue to battle the daily barrage of racial microaggressions (Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2003). These often times subtle behaviors are so embedded in society that many people do not embrace them as being racist in nature. Racial microaggressions are embedded in American society and are many times overlooked or viewed as minor occurrences without harm to African Americans. This thought process implies that America is a "melting pot" where everyone is the same, thus denying or invalidating the unique experiences of the many people of color.

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Sue et al (2007) defined racial microaggressions as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative racial slights and insults that potentially have harmful or unpleasant psychological impact on the target person or group” (p. 273). Likewise, Nadal (2011) defined racial microaggressions as “subtle statements or behaviors, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile or denigrating messages towards people of color” (p.470). Examples of racial microaggressions are, “I am colorblind; color does not matter to me. I treat everyone the same,” “I got you a chittlin’ dinner because I knew you would want that rather than grilled salmon,” and “If everyone worked hard they would have the same opportunity as white people to succeed.” These seemingly innocuous behaviors which are experienced by African Americans on a daily basis can result in harm to their emotional and physical health (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008; Smedley & Smedley, 2005; Pierce, 1995; T. S. Holmes & T. H. Holmes, 1970).

Many well-intentioned white friends of African Americans use racial microaggressions without the knowledge that they have communicated inappropriately or exhibited insensitivity. The white friends are often times not aware that their beliefs and attitudes are negatively biased toward their African American friends (Solorzano et al, 2000; Sue, 2003; DeVos & Banaji, 2005). An example is a white friend of an African American person stating at a dinner party that everyone has a fair chance of succeeding in America. Many times African Americans do not confront their white friends about their beliefs or attitudes because African Americans feel that such a task would be unproductive and yield little to no positive change. These experiences for African Americans can cause significant stress and as well as silent anger toward their white friends (Franklin, 1999; Pierce, 1988). Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder (2008) stated that though “a minor event might not be sufficient to constitute a serious stressor, it has been found that the cumulative impact of many events is traumatic” (p. 329).

Sue et al’s (2006) widely used taxonomy categorized three forms of racial microaggressions: microassault, microinsult, and microinvalidation. Derogatory names and other demeaning language, the expression of offensive nonverbal behavior, and the exhibition of offensive environmental displays that are intended to denigrate African Americans are considered microassaults. Some examples of microassaults include calling a biracial child a “mulatto” and writing “nigger go home” on the snow covered windshield of an African American young man’s car who lives in a predominantly white neighborhood. Such expressions are “most similar to old fashioned forms of racism in that they are deliberate and conscious acts by the aggressor” (Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2009, p.90). In contrast, microinsults and microinvalidations generally operate at the unconscious level and are not intended to be insensitive by the perpetrator, yet those expressions create an unpleasant experience for African Americans or other persons of color (Sue et al, 2009). Microinsults are verbal exchanges or actions that communicate an “insensitive disregard for a person’s racial heritage or identity” (Nadal et al, 2015). A tall, lanky young African American man majoring in Computer Science walks into the Library when a white student asked him what position he played on the College’s basketball team, implying that being an athlete was his only role at the College. Other communication exchanges called microinvalidations essentially “exclude, negate or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings or experiential reality of a person of color” (Sue et al, 2009, p. 90). In many of these encounters, white people do not feel their actions cause the African American person any harm. A microinvalidation is demonstrated when an African American college student wears a colorful head dress to work and was told by her white supervisor to take it off because it was not the employees “silly” day. The young woman was angry at her supervisor’s denigrating comments but felt she could not express her feelings about her attire because she felt she lose her job. The young woman shared the incident with her white coworkers who felt that she was being overly sensitive. This continuous assault of racial microaggressions experienced by African Americans cause a wide range of physical and emotional problems and the reduction of work productivity (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008; Brondolo et al., 2003; Crocker & Major, 1989).

Purpose of the Study

Many studies continue to show that African Americans are emotionally stressed and adversely hurt by the unrelenting racial microaggressions they experience daily, including college students (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009; Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011). Based on numerous in-depth conversations with many undergraduate African American students at a Historically Black University about their daily encounters with racial microaggressions, the researchers wanted to examine the types of racial microaggressions experienced by the students and offer strategies to help fortify them against these negative experiences.

Some of the students expressed their mistrust for their supervisors at work and wished they could quit their jobs due to the constant onslaught of racial microaggressions from both coworkers and supervisors. However, the students stated that quitting their jobs was not a feasible option. Additionally, several students reported to the researchers that they wanted to become invisible at their workplaces based on the almost daily insensitive and demeaning treatment they receive from their supervisors regarding their hair styles, clothing, and food choices among others. Many students who worked off campus informed the researchers that their self-esteem and emotional stability were under constant assault. They reported that their stress level was heightened due to the negative work environment created by white supervisors and white coworkers. Both male and female students indicated that they are frequently made to feel as if they are second-class citizens in their workplace and in their daily lives. The students do not feel that they are embraced as valuable citizens in their own country. They expressed that African American males are under continuous attack by white people. Many of the male students and several of the female students reported feeling as if they are criminals even though they are high-achieving college students and have never committed a crime. The male students suggested that the female students would not experience assumptions of criminality as often as the male students.

Based on the review of the literature on racial microaggressions, the African American college students' personal reports of the effects of racial microaggressions in their lives, and a prevailing perception that African American males are targeted more often with racial microaggressions, the researchers hypothesized that African American male college students would report more racial microaggressions related to second-class citizenship and assumptions of criminality than African American female students. Additionally, the researchers hypothesized that students who worked would report more racial microaggressions than students who did not work.

Method

Participants

240 undergraduate students participated in this study and were enrolled at a Historically Black University in the South. Participants were randomly recruited from general psychology classes and were offered extra credit by their professors for participation. Of the 240 participants, 158 were females (66 %) and 82 were males (34 %). Their ages ranged from 17 to 58 years old, with the mean age of 20. The participants self-identified as African American/Black and the majority was born in the United States and grew up in the South.

Measures

Demographic Information

An open-ended demographic questionnaire was used to collect information about participants' age, gender, student classification, working or nonworking status, country of origin, and race. Participants were not forced to choose from preset responses on the demographic questionnaire.

Racial Ethnic Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS)

REMS is a 45-item instrument that required the participants to respond to statements about their experiences with both racial and ethnic microaggressions in the past six months. It was originally developed by Nadal (2011). Participants used a response format ranging from 0 (I did not experience this event) to 1 (I experienced this event at least once in the past six months). A typical item on the Scale is, "I was ignored at school or work because of my race." Seven items were reversed scored "so that for all items, higher scores indicated a greater amount of experiences with microaggressions" REM has six subscales: (1) Assumptions of Inferiority "Someone assumed that I would not be intelligent because of my race," (2) Second-Class Citizen and Assumptions of Criminality "Someone's body language showed they were scared of me, because of my race," (3) Microinvalidations "Someone told me that they "don't see color," (4) Exoticization/Assumptions of Similarity "Someone wanted to date me only because of my race," (5) Environmental Microaggressions "I observed people of my race portrayed positively on television," and (6) Workplace and School Microaggressions "My opinion was overlooked in a group discussion because of my race." Research has consistently shown REMS to be reliable (Nadal 2011). The researchers' primary focus in this study was on Subscale 2, Second-Class Citizen and Assumptions of Criminality. Respondents are asked to rate seven statements based on the premise that a person is dangerous, criminal, or deviant/more likely to commit a wrong on the basis of his or her race (Sue et al, 2007; Nadal, 2011).

Procedure

The participants completed the Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS) along with a demographic questionnaire. The researchers utilized a trained graduate assistant to administer the REMS scale to the participants. Most administrations lasted approximately 25-30 minutes. The graduate assistant presented basic information about the study. The participants were provided with a consent form and were asked to sign it if they agreed to participate in the study. After consent forms were collected, the participants were asked to fill out the demographic data questionnaire followed by the REMS. The graduate assistant read a debriefing statement at the end of each REMS administration.

Results

Subscale 2 (Second Class Citizen and Assumptions of Criminality) Data for the Second-Class Citizen and Assumptions of Criminality Subscale on the REMS were analyzed by a 2 X 2 Independent Groups Factorial ANOVA with Sex (male, female) and Employment (working, not working) as independent variables and perceived racial microaggressions (i.e., Second-Class Citizen and Assumptions of Criminality) as the dependent variable. Results indicated a significant main effect for Sex, $F(1,193) = 6.03$; $p < .01$. This suggests that African American male college students experienced significantly higher levels of microaggressions involving second-class citizen and assumptions of criminality ($M = .35$, $SD = .31$) than did females ($M = .24$, $SD = .26$). There was no significant main effect for Employment, $F(1,193) = 1.44$; $p > .05$, nor was there a significant interaction between Sex and Employment, $F(1,193) = 0$; $p > .05$. See Table 1.

Table 1 ANOVA Summary Table

Source	SS	DF	MS	F	P
Sex	0.46	1	0.46	6.03	0.01
Employment	0.11	1	0.11	1.44	0.23
Sex X Employment	0	1	0	0	1
Error	14.73	193	0.08		
Total	15.3	196			

Discussion

The researchers' examined African American college students' responses to Subscale 2, Second Class Citizen and Assumptions of Criminality, which included seven statements that elicit their experiences related to someone demonstrating fear of them because of their race. The results of this study confirmed the researchers' hypothesis that African American male college students experience more racial microaggressions surrounding second-class citizen and assumptions of criminality than African American female students. It should be noted that African American female college students also encounter such racial microaggressions; however, somewhat less than those experienced by African American male college students. Despite the working or nonworking status of the African American college students, the students reported high levels of microaggressions on Subscale 2. These findings support the plethora of research that confirms that African American college students experience racial microaggressions daily and the side effects are harmful to both the psychological and physical health of the students. In 1999, Clark and his colleagues found a link between racial discrimination and elevated levels of psychological and physiological stress responses. Thus, individuals' perceived stress may be a determinant of how racial discrimination negatively influences their mental health.

Based on this study's findings, which support the results of similar studies, University administrators and educators must ensure that African American college students, especially males, are equipped with strategies to fortify themselves against the negative effects of racial microaggressions. African American male college students who are under such constant stress may experience poor academic, emotional, and health issues. These issues must be addressed by the universities' counseling and other support services. The importance of Historically Black Universities' preparing African American college students to understand the deleterious effects of racial microaggressions on their physical and mental health and finding ways to help the students to minimize these effects cannot be underestimated.

Without appropriate intervention, these African American male college students will not be able to embrace the higher quality of life they pursue in which a college education should prepare them. They will continue to experience psychological and physical health problems, which will reduce their overall quality of life (Sue et al, 2008). Without an arsenal of strong coping strategies, both African American male and female college students will not be able to perform at their highest level in their studies because the cumulative nature of racial microaggressions “sap the spiritual and psychological energies of recipients even when they represent minor transgressions” (Sue et al. 2008, p. 330). Racial microaggressions may play a significant role in universities’ retention of African American students because students who are more stressed generally underperform in their studies, and hence, are more likely to stop-out and/or drop out from college (Hrabowski & Maton, 2009).

The study’s researchers propose that Historically Black Universities use focus groups as an initial step to begin helping African American male college students to address the adverse effects of racial microaggressions on their lives. In 2008, Sue et al. found focus groups to be quite effective in helping students understand the effects of racial and ethnic microaggressions on their lives. These focus groups allowed the students the opportunity to “share, confirm, and add multiple perspectives to microaggressive incidents raised by any one member” (p. 330). This study’s researchers observed that some of the study’s participants verbally expressed a series of feelings such as anger, frustration, and sadness when they had experienced racial microaggressions. The students expressed that they felt many whites with whom they interact assume their white cultural values were superior to theirs. The students expressed relief that the researchers acknowledged and validated their experiences with racial microaggressions. Focus groups at Historically Black Universities will allow African American college students the freedom to define their own racial experiences in their own language and also learn strategies to increase their self-efficacy beliefs within a safe environment.

Implications of Research

This study’s findings further support the need for administrators at Historically Black Universities to actively prepare their African American college students to navigate the environments in which they are met with constant racial microaggressions. It is also imperative that students learn healthy coping strategies to help them reduce the risk factors associated with negative and damaging emotional and physical effects of racial microaggressions. Evidence suggested that racial microaggressions influence the academic achievement of African American students (Hrabowski & Maton, 2009; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Many African American male college students experience high levels of stress associated with racial microaggressions which negatively affect their motivation and overall academic performance. To help protect the emotional and physical health of young African American college students, Historically Black and predominantly white universities must find ways to help to strengthen their students’ self-efficacy beliefs which will in turn enhance their confidence in their own abilities to navigate the shattering effects of racial microaggressions (Woolfolk Hoy, 2004). These students must be widely supported by faculty, university administrators, and the communities at large in their quest to live happier lives among the daily barrage of racial microaggressions.

Limitations and Future Research

A primary limitation of this study is the generalizability of the results to African American male and female college students who attend predominantly white institutions (PWIs). The students at PWIs may interpret their experienced racial microaggressions differently as a consequence of their frequent interactions with predominantly white fellow students. African Americans who attend PWIs have the opportunity to engage with white students in a variety of settings, *i.e.*, classes, living arrangements, extracurricular activities, etc. These close interactions may change the African American students’ perception toward expressed racial microaggressions. This study’s researchers will attempt to address this question in their next study. Based on previous studies and this study’s results, these researchers posit that these results will be similar for African American college students at both Historically Black Universities and predominantly white universities.

Another limitation of this study is the utilization of only African American college students as participants. In future studies, college students from other racial and ethnic groups should be included for comparative purposes. African American college students may experience significantly more racial microaggressions related to the assumptions of criminality than Hispanic Americans.

Future studies should focus on the age at which African American children should begin learning coping strategies to help buffer the harmful effects of racial microaggressions. These strategies may prevent the onset of negative physical and emotional problems which have long-term effects. Research has shown that young children are affected negatively by racial microaggressions; however, the youngest age of perceived racial microaggressions has not been determined. Pachter, Bernstein, Szalacha, & Coll (2010) surveyed 277 children of color ages 9 – 18 years of age and found a relationship between racial discrimination and depression. Approximately 66 percent of the children were African American or Latino and 19 percent were multiracial. Pachter et al found that the more often children of color encounter discrimination, the more depressive symptoms. 88 percent of the 277 children of color reported that they had experienced racial discrimination and experienced it in numerous settings. This significant finding further supports the need to teach African American children strategies to help them cope with the detrimental effects of racial microaggressions.

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