African American College Students and Environmental Racial Microaggressions

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Abstract

Racial microaggressions are experienced continuously by African American college students in their daily lives. Racial microaggressions are subtle racist statements or actions that are intended to denigrate people of color. Many times the perpetrator is not aware of the insults and sometimes he or she is aware. This study used a sample of African American college students (N=240) who attended a Historically Black University in the South. The researchers examined the effects of racial microaggressions on REMS' Subscale 5 with regards to employment and gender. The study results found a significant difference between African American male college students and African American female students in their experience of environmental racial microaggressions. No difference was revealed when comparing students who worked and students who did not work. The researchers discussed coping strategies to help African American college students' reduce the deleterious effects of racial microaggressions on their emotional and physical health.

Keywords: Racial microaggressions, African American college students, coping strategies

Numerous research studies support the existence of the deleterious effects of racism in the African American community (Jones, 1997; Smedley & Smedley, 2005). 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 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.

Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin (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 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.

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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

Based on the review of the literature and 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 disdain 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 job 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 among others. Many African American students who worked off campus informed the researchers that their self-esteem and emotional stability were under assault. They also reported that their stress level was heighted due to the negative work environment created by white supervisors and white coworkers. 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).

The primary focus of this particular research was to determine the relationship of each REMS subscale when comparing African American male college students to African American female college students. Additionally, the researchers wanted to determine whether work versus non-work status impacted the report of racial microaggressions between African American male college students and African American female college students.

Method

Participants

240 African American undergraduate students participated for this study; they were enrolled in a Historically Black University in the South. Participants were randomly recruited from introductory 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 years old. The participants self-identified as African American/Black.

Measures

Demographic Information

A 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 answer 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 in the past six months) to 1 (I experienced this event at least once in the past six months). Typical items on the Scale are, "Someone assumed that I would not be intelligent because of my race" and "An employer or co-worker treated me differently than White co-workers." Of the 45 items, seven items were reversed scored to ensure that the higher scores would indicate a participant's had more experiences with racial microaggressions.

REMS is divided into six subscales: (1) Assumptions of Inferiority –"Someone assumed that I was poor because of my race", (2) Second-Class Citizen and Assumptions of Criminality - "Someone avoided sitting next to me in a public space (e.g., restaurants, movie theaters, subways, buses) because of my race", (3) Microinvalidations –" Someone of a different racial group has stated that there is no difference between the two of us", (4) Exoticization/ Assumptions of Similarity –" Someone assumed that I ate foods associated with my race/culture every day", (5) Environmental Microaggressions – "I observed that someone of my race is a government official in my state", and (6) Workplace and School Microaggressions – "Someone assumed that my work would be inferior to people of other racial groups." The Scale's consistent reliability is supported by research (Nadal 2011). Procedure

All participants completed the Racial and Ethnic Microaggression Scale (REMS) along with a demographic questionnaire. A trained graduate assistant administered the REMS scale to the 240 participants. Each participant was provided with a consent form and was asked to sign it if he or she agreed to participate in the study. The administration of the Scale lasted approximately 25-30 minutes. The graduate assistant presented basic information about the study. After consent forms were collected, the participants were asked to fill out the demographic data questionnaire followed by the REMS. A debriefing statement was read at the end of each REMS administration.

Results

Subscale 5 (Environmental Microaggressions)

Data for the Environmental Microaggressions 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., Environmental Microaggressions) as the dependent variable. Results indicated that the main effect for Sex did approach statistical significance, $F (1,193) = 3.14$; $p<.10$. This indicates that males tend to experience higher levels of environmental microaggressions ($M = .48$, $SD = .31$) than do females ($M = .39$. $SD = .29$). There was no significant main effect for Employment, $F (1,193) = 2.1$; $p>.05$, nor was there a significant main effect for the interaction between Sex and Employment, $F (1,193) = 1.86$; $p>.05$. See Table 1.

Table 1

ANOVA Summary Table

Source	SS	DF	MS	F	P
Sex	0.27	1	0.27	3.14	0.07
Employment	0.18	1	0.18	2.1	0.14
Sex X Employment	0.16	1	0.16	1.86	0.17
Error	16.58	193	0.09		
Total	17.19	196			

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine if African American male college students who attended a Historically Black University experienced environmental racial microaggressions more often than African American female college students who attended the same university. Additionally, the researchers also wanted to determine if African American college students who worked experienced environmental racial microaggressions more often than African American college students who did not work.

The results of this study confirmed the researchers' hypothesis that African American male college students experience more environmental racial microaggressions than African American female students. Prior to conducting the research, the study's researchers held several discussions with students about their experience with racial microaggressions. Many of the students reported that society was generally structured to diminish and to denigrate the lives of African American people, especially males. Many of the male students also reported that males were under constant attack in all domains of their lives, including their portrayal in all forms of media and their absence in high-level positions in major corporations and other business, educational, and governmental entities, etc. The female students agreed with this observation. Both male and female students indicated that they wanted to be treated as human beings who are valued in this society.

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Based on the results of this study, university administrators are encouraged to find ways to fortify its African American male college students against the deleterious effects of racial microaggressions that occur in their daily lives. These young men are under assault on a daily basis and the frequency appears to be increasing. Historically Black Universities and predominantly white universities must vigorously increase their efforts to prepare their African American college students to effectively navigate their work environments which are laden with racial microaggressions. Sue et al. (2009) revealed that racial microaggressions "have a harmful and lasting psychological impact that may endure for days, weeks, months, and even years" (p.336).

The study's researchers also reported that most of the study's participants expressed a series of feelings including anger, frustration, and sadness when they experienced racial microaggressions. Some students even expressed wanting to be invisible and sometimes they felt they were viewed as being invisible, especially to in white society. African American college students should not have to endure such denigrating behavior in their daily environments, yet they are faced with this behavior daily and throughout their lives. Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder (2008) observed that many African Americans feel they have little control against the constant onslaught of racial microaggressions they encounter. Eventually, the continuous exposure to racial microaggressions will become detrimental to the students' self-esteem and self-efficacy (Nadal, 2015). African American college students must learn effective coping strategies to fortify themselves against the detrimental effects of racial microaggressions. This is especially true in this current negative and divisive political climate in America where African Americans are seemingly targeted and killed by police officers even when their hands are up and/or they are walking away from events. Research does show that 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). Unfortunately, having an extensive array of coping skills will not stop a police officer's bullet once it has been fired. It should be noted that the acquisition of coping strategies may help African American college students to perform better academically, socially, emotionally, and reduce health-related concerns.

Racial microaggressions may also play a significant role in universities' retention of African American students. Students who are more stressed underperform, and hence, are more likely to stop-out and/or drop out from college.

Most African American college students may be aware of racial microaggressions; however, they may not realize the impact the microaggressions have on their physical and emotional health. 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. Focus groups allowed the students the opportunity to "share, confirm, and add multiple perspectives to microaggressive incidents raised by any one member" (p. 330). The use of focus groups at Historically Black Universities will also 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 within a safe environment. A series of ongoing focus groups could be conducted in university settings facilitated by trained professionals who can address racial microaggressions at both the personal and institutional levels (Nadal, 2015).

Implications of Research

Based on the results of this current study, African American male college students experience more environmental microaggressions than African American female college students. It should be noted that the results showed that African American female college students also experience a high number of environmental microaggressions, though not as high as the African American male college students. Evidence suggest that racial microaggressions influence the academic achievement of African American students and negatively affects their motivation (Hrabowski & Maton, 2009; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Male students are more likely to drop out or stop out of college when experiencing high levels of stress and other emotional responses.

Based on this study's results and similar results from previous studies, it is recommended that administrators at both Historically Black Universities and predominantly white institutions include training modules in their college curricula to prepare African American college students with coping strategies to effectively navigate the environments in which they encounter racial microaggressions. Coping strategies will strengthen the students' self-efficacy beliefs which will in turn enhance their confidence in their own abilities (Woolfolk Hoy, 2004).

Some research has revealed that African American children encounter racial microaggressions at an early age which may necessitate teaching these children learn coping strategies much earlier than at the college level (Allen, Scott, Lewis, 2013).

Limitations and Future Research

The results showed a statistical difference in the number of environmental racial microaggressions experienced by African American male and African American female college students enrolled in a Historically Black University. African American male students experienced more environmental microaggressions than African American female. There was no statistical difference found between African American male and African American female college students who worked or did not work. The study's sample size was consistent with other research studies that have examined racial microaggressions in college students.

A primary limitation of this study is the generalizability of the data to African American students who attend predominantly white institutions. The researchers are currently examining the racial microaggressions experienced by African American male and female college students at a Historically Black University with racial microaggressions experienced by African American male and female college students at a predominantly white institution. It is hypothesized that African American College students at the predominantly white institution will experience more racial microaggressions than African American college students at the Historically Black University.

Additionally, it is important that both Historically Black and predominantly white universities prepare their African American students to effectively cope with racial microaggressions by teaching students coping strategies and strengthening their self-efficacy beliefs. African American college students should be encouraged to participate in focus groups to talk openly about the effects of racial microaggressions on their lives. These college students must be supported in their quest to live happier lives amidst the subtle and insidious racism in this country, currently referred to as racial microaggressions.

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