Racial Composition and Perceptions of Microaggressions: Implications for High School Counselors

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Abstract

This study examined the impact racial composition of prior environment (specifically, high school and neighborhood environments) has on reported racial microaggression occurrence among self-identified minority college students in the Midwest. Participating students completed the Racial Microaggression Scale, a survey instrument whose primary domain is intended to assess the frequency of occurrence for racial microaggressions. Findings indicated that racial composition of high school and neighborhood environments has a statistically significant effect on reported racial microaggression occurrence. Additionally, findings indicated that microaggression themes of criminality and undesirability are particularly related to the racial composition of prior environment, with students from a majority minority background reporting incidents of criminality and undesirability themed racial microaggressions more frequently than their peers. Implications will be included for professional school counselors working with these students at the high school level.

Keywords: multicultural counseling, racial microaggression scale, microaggressions, ethnic density, students of color.

Introduction

At institutions of higher-education (IHE), especially many selective IHE, White students are still over-represented, as are White faculty and administrators (Supiano, 2015), and with racial protests and tensions on many college campuses, focus has returned to campus climate issues.

With the legal basis against discrimination and racially motivated acts of violence, some may assume that any observable differences in college experiences for people of color (POC) are not related to race but, rather, behavioral and cultural attributes (Wise, 2010). However, multiple studies suggest racially related incidents are still embedded into the cultural fabric of the United States and contribute to disparities between racial/ethnic groups (Lilienfeld, 2017; Navarro et al., 2009; Sue et al., 2007; Williams et al., 2019).

Discriminatory actions have increasingly been in the spotlight for several years. In 2014, 18-year-old Michael Brown, Jr., a Black male was shot by a Ferguson police officer who was not indicted for the murder, resulting in weeks of violent protests. The following year, a series of events marked by racial discrimination also led to protests (Marans & Stewart, 2015). These events, and others, resulted in a NAACP travel advisory being issued in 2017, alerting people of color to use caution while in Missouri (Moore, 2017). The murder of George Floyd by police officers in 2020 highlighted the violence against Black people (Hill, et al., 2020) and has cast media attention on these occurrences and their frequency since.

Discriminatory actions are also apparent in educational institutions (Lilienfeld, 2017). In Spring of 2019, a high school student in Southwest Missouri posted a racist video to social media in which he threatened to lynch Black classmates (McLaughlin, 2019). In Nebraska, students at a majority Latino high school faced racist remarks and were spit on during sporting events by fans of opposing teams (Djeka, 2018). Unfortunately, these types of reports of discrimination on both high school and college campuses persist. Despite the persistence of blatant discriminatory actions, this study focuses on experiences of students of color with the more subtle forms of racism, such as microaggressions, which also have a powerful impact.

Microaggressions

Negative racial interactions, discrimination, and prejudice are based on stereotypes (Sue et al., 2007). Microaggressions, then, are the outward expression of these stereotypes (Sue et al., 2007). They are defined as brief and commonplace daily behavioral, verbal, and environmental indignities that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights or insults, whether intentional or unintentional (Lilienfeld, 2017; Sue et al., 2007; Williams, et al., 2020). Examples of microaggressions include assumptions of criminality, including being treated as if one is aggressive or dangerous (Torres-Harding et al., 2012). Assumptions of criminality may include being watched closely in a store with the expectation that one is stealing or being avoided on the sidewalk out of fear. This is consistent with findings that Black men are often stereotyped as being aggressive or criminals, (Bridges, 2010) and Black women are stereotyped as being antagonistic (Jacobs, 2017). Another example involves messages of undesirability. This includes being treated as though persons from your racial background are all the same, are incapable, and are low achieving (Lilienfeld, 2017; Torres-Harding et al., 2012). Any successful individuals from that particular race would be seen as special or having received some special treatment rather than being capable, hardworking, and high achieving (Torres-Harding et al., 2012).

Racial microaggressions and their frequency can be easily dismissed due to the unclear nature of the interactions. As stated previously, microaggressions can occur outside of the perpetrator's conscious awareness, and they can be unintentional (Lilienfeld, 2017; Sue et al., 2007). Researchers (Harwood et al., 2012) have found that students of color frequently experience racial microaggressions and, when reporting negative racially motivated incidents on their college campus, students stated feeling that they were quickly dismissed or ignored. Students reported that peers continued to make racist jokes even after being told the comments were offensive (Harwood et al., 2012), and other students have reported that attempts to have conversations about race and racism in classes were shut down by peers or faculty (Bryan et al., 2012). This invalidation can result in the students of color believing that they lack importance and do not belong in

education. Microaggressions have complex dynamics that may be more psychologically stressful than other more blatant forms of discrimination. The subtlety involved leaves the recipient feeling confused and questioning their judgment, which makes a response difficult (Lilienfeld, 2017; Noh et al., 2007; Sue, 2010).

Racial microaggressions can have a lasting impact, and Torres et al. (2010) found that Black college students encountered microaggressions that included having their personal ability underestimated, feeling that they were being treated like criminals, and feeling that they were isolated from others. The students reported increased levels of stress and were at higher risk for depression than other students (Torres et al., 2010). Other studies have reported similar results; McGee & Stovall (2015) stated that many of the Black students they interviewed appeared resilient, but they were also suffering from chronic or acute stress due to the racism they endure on a daily basis. Discrimination has consistently been associated with negative mental health indicators such as anxiety, depression, and lower levels of life satisfaction, self-esteem, and happiness (Franco et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2003). Students experience discrimination and prejudice (Hardwood et al., 2012), then receive messages that they are incapable, incompetent, or dangerous criminals, and all of this has an impact on student life as well as their emotional and psychological well-being and academic success (Torres et al., 2010).

Microaggressions in Education. Though students of color report often experiencing negative, racially motivated interactions with peers, others seem unaware of the problem (Midgette & Mulvey, 2022). A multi-campus study was conducted by Harper and Hurtado (2007) examining racial climate at different colleges, and they found that White students were unfamiliar with negative dispositions minority students held about their institution. Midgette and Mulvey (2022) conducted a study with similar results investigating White students attending predominantly white institutions (PWIs). White students adopting the color blind ideology evaluated microaggressions as appropriate responses. Studies have further shown that PWIs adversely affect the academic achievements of minority students and create social conflicts when faculty and deans remain insensitive to, or unaware of, multicultural issues (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Karkouti, 2016). Thus, it is vital that those in positions of power on college campuses gain awareness of the impact of their actions and address incidences of discrimination directly.

Education and advocacy regarding microaggressions and their impact must start earlier for subsequent changes to be evident before students enter college. There is currently little research concerning high school students and their experiences of racial microaggressions. However, a study by Hunt, et al., (2007) found that students who are part of all minority communities reported the least amount of discrimination, those in mixed communities reported more, and those in majority White communities reported the most. Reported discrimination can be highest for those first moving into all White communities, or from a diverse neighborhood to a PWI (Hunt et al., 2007). Leath et al. (2019) found that the perceived discrimination was higher for Black students in districts where the majority of students were White. Districts where the majority of students were Black was lower, despite the fact that teachers in both districts were predominately White. This further underscores the importance of teachers being trained and demonstrates that having an awareness of a students' background and community experiences can be beneficial in helping that student to prepare for new environments. It is also important to be aware that students still experience microaggressions and discrimination, and to take reports of such events seriously.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine if reported racial microaggression occurrence (overall and among six racial microaggression themes) among self-identified racial or ethnic minority college students differs based upon racial composition of prior environment, where prior environment was defined as school and neighborhood environments prior to college. Research questions posed were:

- Does racial composition of prior environment impact racial microaggression occurrence?
- Does racial composition of prior environment impact racial microaggression occurrence differentially by theme?

Method

Participants

Participants in this study included 41 self-identified racial or ethnic minority college students located on one university campus. All participants in this study were volunteers. Approximately 61% of the participating students were female and 54% identified their race as being African or African American. Table 1 provides additional demographic information for the sample participants.

Table 1. *Demographic Features Representative of the Sample Participants*

Demographic	N	Percentage (%)
Sex	**41**	**100.00**
Male	16	39.02
Female	25	60.98
Race/Ethnicity	**41**	**100.00**
African or African American	22	53.66
Asian, Pacific Islander or Asian/American	4	9.76
Hispanic	8	19.51
Multiracial	7	17.07
Education Level (Class)	**41**	**100.00**
Freshman	35	85.37
Sophomore	2	4.88
Junior	1	2.44
Senior	1	2.44
Graduate	2	4.88
Neighborhood Racial Composition	**41**	**100.00**
Majority Minority	22	53.66
Majority White	19	46.34
High School Racial Composition	**41**	**100.00**
Majority Minority	16	39.02
Majority White	25	60.98

Procedure

After receiving prior approval from the university Institutional Review Board, the researcher contacted professors and representatives of multicultural organizations, requesting permission to speak with students and members. Forty-one students that met the criteria for the current study responded during the data collection period. The researcher notified students that their names and responses would remain confidential and that they could cease participation in the study without repercussions.

Those who chose to participate received an informed consent document and multiple surveys, including a demographic survey and the Racial Microaggressions Scale (RMAS). The participants and all data obtained from them through questionnaires were kept anonymous.

Measures

The study utilized the RMAS, a previously validated instrument, to measure racial microaggression occurrence.

RMAS. The RMAS consists of 32 items rated on a four-point Likert-type scale. Each item is evaluated on two domains: a primary domain assessing the frequency of occurrence for racial microaggressions and a secondary domain assessing

incident-related stress. The instrument is used to assess the secondary domain measure of incident-related stress for each item only if an individual reports having experienced that particular racial microaggression. This necessarily implies that the secondary domain of incident-related stress is not assessed for all individuals across all items. Given that assessment of the secondary domain is contingent upon participants' item-level responses on the primary domain, the current study will focus only on the primary domain of the RMAS.

The primary domain for each item is intended to assess the frequency of occurrence for racial microaggressions and is rated on a four-point Likert-type scale, with 0 = never, 1 = a little/rarely, 2 = sometimes/a moderate amount, 3 = often/frequently (Torres-Harding et al., 2012). Examples of items on the instrument include: "Because of my race, people suggest that I am not a 'true' American", "Others hint that I should work hard to prove that I am not like other people of my race", and "I am singled out by police or security people because of my race".

Responses on the primary domain for all 32 items on the RMAS instrument were averaged to create a scale score (0.0 to 3.0) and subscale scores (0.0 to 3.0) for each of six particular racial microaggression themes (Foreigner, Criminality, Sexuality, Undesirability, Invisibility, and Environmental Invalidations), with higher scores indicating greater frequency of racial microaggression occurrence.

In previous studies, the six microaggression theme subscales were shown to be related yet distinct (Torres-Harding et al., 2012). Torres-Harding et al. (2012) also noted that internal consistency reliability of the RMAS items was found to be adequate for each of the six microaggression theme subscales using Cronbach's alpha values: Foreigner/Not Belonging (α =.78), Criminality (α =.85), Sexuality/Sexualization (α =.83), Undesirability of Culture/Low-Achieving Culture (α =.87), Invisibility (α =.89), and Environmental Invalidations (α =.81).

The internal consistency reliability in the present study was evaluated for agreement with these previous study findings. Internal consistency reliability of the RMAS scale and respective subscales for the study sample was measured with Cronbach's alpha. Table 2 provides the mean, standard deviation, internal consistency reliability (coefficient alpha), and corresponding confidence interval for the current sample on the RMAS overall and each of the six subscales. The internal consistency reliability for the present study was found to be both adequate and consistent with previous studies (see Table 2).

Table 2. *Scale-Level Internal Consistency Reliability for Average Item Scale Score*

Instrument	# of Items	M (SD)	Coefficient Alpha	95% CI for Alpha
RMAS Overall (Likert 0.0 to 3.0)	32	1.25 (0.65)	0.94	[0.92, 0.97]
Foreigner	3	0.94 (0.91)	0.73	[0.59, 0.87]
Criminality	4	1.09 (0.97)	0.88	[0.82, 0.94]
Sexuality	3	0.98 (1.02)	0.86	[0.78, 0.93]
Undesirability	9	1.64 (0.86)	0.91	[0.86, 0.95]
Invisibility	8	0.72 (0.63)	0.85	[0.78, 0.91]
Environmental Invalidations	5	1.74 (0.89)	0.79	[0.68, 0.89]

Racial Composition of Prior Environment. The demographic survey utilized in this study defined the term "Minority" as an individual coming from racial or ethnic groups such as Black/African American, Hispanic, and Asian American. With this terminology provided on the survey, respondents also answered two questions related to the approximate racial composition of the high school the respondent had attended and to the approximate racial composition of the neighborhood in which the respondent primarily grew up. Responses to these two questions were used to determine the racial composition of prior environment. Respondents reported an approximate percentage of minority members in each environment. This reported percentage was then dichotomized such that ≥ 50% minority was considered to be a "Majority Minority" environment and < 50% minority was considered to be a "Majority White" environment. Approximately 60% of respondents attended a "Majority White" high school yet nearly 55% of respondents grew up in a "Majority Minority" neighborhood (see Table 1).

High school and neighborhood racial composition considered together resulted in three emergent groups: (1) individuals that attended both a majority minority high school and grew up in a majority minority neighborhood, (2) individuals that attended a majority White high school but grew up in a majority minority neighborhood or vice versa, and (3) individuals that attended both a majority White high school and grew up in a majority White neighborhood. These three groups serve as three levels for the factor of racial composition of prior environment: (1) All Minority, (2) Minority/White Mixture, and (3) All White.

Data Analysis

Average scale and subscale scores for racial microaggression occurrence overall (and for six microaggression themes) along with coded indicators of the racial composition in each respondent's prior environment were analyzed to determine if a significant relationship exists between background environmental racial composition and reported racial microaggression occurrence among self-identified racial or ethnic minority college students.

In order to assess the statistical significance of differences in reported racial microaggression occurrence among these

college students based upon racial composition of prior environment, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed. All analyses were performed with statistical significance set at the *p* =.05 level.

Results

The primary goal of the present study was to examine the impact racial composition of prior environment (specifically, high school and neighborhood environments) has on reported racial microaggression occurrence among self-identified minority college students.

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to evaluate the relationship between racial composition of prior environment and reported racial microaggression occurrence (overall and for six microaggression themes) among self-identified racial or ethnic minority college students. The strength of the relationship between the variables of interest was also summarized with a measure of effect size, Cohen's *f*, an extension of Cohen's *d* used in settings with more than 2 groups. All analyses were performed with statistical significance set at the *p* =.05 level.

Means and standard deviations of RMAS scale scores were calculated for each of the three racial composition levels ("All Minority", "Minority/White Mixture", "All White"). These descriptive statistics are provided in Table 3 to summarize the relative strength of the observed association between racial composition of prior environment and reported racial microaggression occurrence (overall and for six microaggression themes). RMAS scale scores ranged from 0.0 - 3.0, with higher values indicating greater frequency of racial microaggression occurrence. Students coming from a minority/White mixture environment appeared to report a lower frequency of microaggression occurrence overall and for all six microaggression themes (see Table 3).

Table 3. *Relationships Between Racial Composition of Prior Environment and Reported Racial Microaggression Occurrence*

Instrument	Majority Minority M (SD)	Minority/ Majority Mixture M (SD)	Majority White M (SD)	p-value	Effect Size (f_{Cohen})
RMAS Overall (Likert 0.0 to 3.0)	**1.48 (0.45)**	**1.02 (0.70)**	**1.11 (0.75)**	**0.158**	**0.32**
Foreigner	1.04 (0.71)	0.61 (0.61)	0.96 (1.14)	0.617	0.16
Criminality	1.50 (0.85)	0.50 (0.77)	0.89 (1.00)	0.044**	0.42
Sexuality	0.92 (1.06)	0.61 (1.04)	1.17 (0.98)	0.495	0.19
Undesirability	1.99 (0.49)	1.17 (1.02)	1.48 (0.99)	0.067*	0.39
Invisibility	0.92 (0.60)	0.63 (0.73)	0.55 (0.62)	0.216	0.29
Environmental Invalidations	2.05 (0.76)	1.43 (0.92)	1.56 (0.94)	0.172	0.31

[*]ANOVA is Significant at the 0.10 Level ** ANOVA is Significant at the 0.05 Level

Research Question 1

At the $p =.05$ level, the ANOVA for the overall RMAS scale score was not significant, $F(2, 37) = 1.94$, $p =.158$, $f_{Cohen} = 0.32$. However, the strength of the relationship between racial composition of prior environment and reported racial microaggression occurrence overall, as assessed by Cohen's f, was moderate to large. The RMAS scale score means and standard deviations for each of the three racial composition levels as well as the ANOVA results are provided in Table 3. It appeared that those students from an all minority background (i.e., those students attending a majority minority high school and growing up in a majority minority neighborhood) reported incidents of racial microaggression more frequently than those students attending majority White high schools, regardless of the racial composition of their neighborhood.

Overall, though not statistically significant, self-identified racial or ethnic minority college students that attended majority minority high schools and grew up in majority minority neighborhoods reported more frequently occurring racial microaggressions.

Research Question 2

There were not significant relationships between racial composition of prior environment and reported racial microaggression occurrence for the themes of Foreigner, Sexuality, and Invisibility (Table 3). While the ANOVA for the Environmental Invalidations theme was not statistically significant, the strength of this relationship between racial composition and reported Environmental Invalidations themed racial microaggression occurrence was moderate to large, $F(2, 38) = 1.85$, $p =.172$, $f_{Cohen} = 0.31$. It appeared that those students from an all minority background reported incidents of environmental invalidation themed racial microaggression more frequently than those attending majority White high schools.

There were statistically significant or marginally significant relationships between racial composition of prior environment and racial microaggression occurrence themes of Criminality and Undesirability (Table 3).

At the $p =.05$ level, the ANOVA for the RMAS criminality microaggression theme was significant, $F(2, 38) = 3.39$, $p =.044$, $f_{Cohen} = 0.42$. Additionally, the strength of the relationship between racial composition and reported racial microaggression occurrence, as assessed by Cohen's f, was large. Follow-up tests were conducted to evaluate the pairwise differences among the means. There was a significant difference in the means between students from an all minority environment and those students that came from a minority/White mixture environment. Those students from an all minority environmental background reported incidents of criminality themed racial microaggression more frequently in comparison to others (Table 3).

The ANOVA for the RMAS undesirability microaggression theme was marginally significant, $F(2, 38) = 2.90$, $p =.067$, $f_{Cohen} = 0.39$. Additionally, the strength of the relationship between neighborhood and high school racial composition and reported racial microaggression occurrence, as assessed by Cohen's f, was moderate to large. There appeared to be a significant difference in the means between students from an all minority environment and those students from a minority/White mixture environment. Those students from an all minority environmental background reported incidents of undesirability themed racial microaggression more frequently in comparison to others (Table 3).

Overall, self-identified racial or ethnic minority college students that attended majority minority high schools and grew up in majority minority neighborhoods reported more frequently occurring Criminality and Undesirability themed racial microaggressions.

Discussion

Significant Findings

Overall, a college students' background in terms of racial composition of neighborhood and high school is highly correlated with the frequency of reported racial microaggressions overall, especially for the criminality and undesirability themes. At the 0.05 significance level, despite incredibly low statistical power, the relationship between incidence of microaggressions and background racial composition is statistically significant.

It appears that the more exposed an individual is to majority White institutions prior to attending college, the less frequently racial microaggressions are reported. This could suggest a desensitization to racial microaggressions over time or, perhaps, a lack of awareness of the behaviors. It is interesting to note that, on average, a mixed racial composition background results in the lowest reported incidence of microaggressions. The results of the current study show that students from minority neighborhoods who attend majority minority schools report the highest levels of microaggressions in college. Previous research has, however, indicated that ethnic identity may create a protective role against impacts of discrimination

(Brittian et al., 2015; Leath, 2019; Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009). Living in a majority minority neighborhood thus may increase one's ethnic identity and therefore the ability to cope with discrimination at a PWI. Both may be true as desensitization may, in some ways, offer a way to cope and may be modeled and even taught more in a predominantly minority neighborhood where individuals are accustomed to dealing with racism. Armoring is a term that has been used in the literature to describe the self-protective behaviors or psychological buffer one develops in order to deal with racism (Greene, 1994). Such behaviors are often engrained from birth by Black parents in order to strengthen and equip their children for dealing with racism. The results indicate that armoring may be taking place in minority neighborhoods and families where students attend majority White high schools, making them less likely to report or acknowledge microaggressions later. Woods-Giscombé (2010) used the term *Superwoman* to conceptualize the strong persona embraced by Black women. Participants in her study reported benefits of this role such as self-preservation as well as that of their family and community. They also described liabilities of this role in terms of their inability to express themselves, which can lead to relationship issues and stress related health behaviors, as well as the embodiment of stress. Again, the socialization to be strong or armored in order to survive or desensitization is likely a factor in the lack of microaggressions reported from some students in this study.

Implications for Professional School Counselors

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model (2019) states that one of the responsibilities of the school counselor is to "promote cultural competence to help create a safer more inclusive school environment" (p. 25). Therefore, it is crucial that the school counselor is skilled in recognizing and addressing microaggressions and discrimination. Since they are often the person that students report such occurrences to, it is crucial that they acknowledge and validate the student's experience. The school counselor should conduct needs assessments regarding climate and discrimination and administer to all stakeholders (students, teachers, parents, community, etc.) to gain awareness of the needs in the school. As leaders and advocates, they must also work to increase administration and teacher awareness in these areas so that they are better equipped to help students who are being negatively impacted. Finally, the Professional School Counselor is accountable. Assessing their school data report card, achievement gaps should be identified along with data from the needs assessments, and then interventions created to address the gaps and reported concerns. Specifically assessing Gaps related to students of color is necessary for finding measurable interventions. The interventions can be implemented through direct student services in the form of individual counseling after discriminatory situations occur and by infusing information about microaggressions and racism into their classroom instruction as a part of their counseling curriculum. The outcomes of theses interventions should be reported to the school and community in order to advocate for equity and change. This could also serve as a way to educate stakeholders about microaggressions and their impact on student achievement and overall well-being. The professional school counselor serves as a leader in their school and as such it is also crucial that they advocate for policy change to directly address inequities in student achievement that may be due to discrimination. ASCA (2019) states that the school counselor in fact, has a responsibility to "advocate for equitable school counseling program policies and practices for all students and stakeholders" (p. 25). Therefore, they have to be the leader in identifying and addressing inequities in student learning and have the ability to utilize this information to advocate for needed changes. Examples include addressing the unproportionate number of students of color who receive out of school suspension or by acknowledging inequities in standardized testing and advocating for policy changes to rectify these problems.

Specific to the findings in this study, the professional school counselor at a majority White high school should be especially aware of those students who live in predominantly minority neighborhoods. These students in particular may present with symptoms of anxiety or depression but not directly report an awareness of microaggressions or discrimination. They may also have difficulty expressing their emotions. High school counselors should specifically include in their student assessment, experiences of discrimination with particular attention to those that include microaggressions since these occurrences negatively impact psychological well-being and be cognizant of the trauma that students may have experienced as a result. Individual counseling or providing counseling instruction in a small group format may be beneficial for helping these students feel more connected and understood.

Limitations and Future Research

For this particular study, there is a small N and the focus is on one public college. Expanding the study to include high school students and multiple schools within multiple states would provide a larger sample size and allow for the generalizability of results. Expanding the study would also shed light on differences across geographic areas,

socioeconomic status, metropolitan and rural areas, and other factors that could influence interracial interactions. Given the likelihood that desensitization occurs for students living in a predominantly minority neighborhood and attending a majority White high school, adding other quantitative measurements such as depression and anxiety scales may also be beneficial in better understanding the psychological impact of racial microaggressions. More research is needed to understand how racial discrimination influences behavioral and emotional health, and what factors could promote resilience and interrupt those processes to increase student success.

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