

## **Racial Microaggressions: African American College Students Enrolled at a Historically Black University**

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### **Abstract**

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*Racial microaggressions are experienced by African American college students in their daily lives as well as the workplace. 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 focused on four research questions to examine the effects of racial microaggressions with regards to employment and gender. The study results found that both male and female African American college students experience racial microaggressions in the workplace. A significant difference was revealed when comparing students who worked to students who did not work. The researchers discussed strategies to help African American college students' reduce the deleterious effects of racial microaggressions on their emotional and physical health.*

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**Keywords:** racial microaggressions, African American college students, workplace

A plethora of research supports the existence of the harmful and insidious effects of racism in the African American community (Jones, 1997; Smedley & Smedley, 2005). Sue compared racism to the effects of carbon monoxide as being “invisible, but potentially lethal” (2009, p. 88). The outward expression of racism is not as overt as it was prior to the civil rights movement in America. Some overt acts included requiring African Americans to use the back door of restaurants, referring to African Americans as “niggers,” and asking African Americans to use a different bathroom than whites in the workplace. Though many outward gains have been made toward achieving equality, including gaining access to public institutions and facilities, African Americans and other persons of color continue to battle the daily stream of racial microaggressions, the new racism (Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2003). These subtle behaviors are so embedded in society that many people do not embrace them as being intentionally racist in nature. Racial microaggressions have become entrenched in American culture that they are many times ignored or their significance is diminished.

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).

Similarly, 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 treat everyone the same; I don’t see color,” “I got you a fried chicken meal because I knew you would want that rather than grilled salmon (stated by a white coworker),” and “Everyone in this country has an equal chance of getting a good job.” 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).

It should be noted that well-intentioned white friends of African Americans engage in the use of 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 (2006) created a widely used taxonomy delineating three forms of racial microaggressions: microassault, microinsult, and microinvalidation. The use of derogatory names and other demeaning language, the expression of offensive nonverbal behavior, and the exhibition of offensive environmental displays meant to denigrate African Americans are considered microassaults. Some examples of microassaults include calling a biracial child a “zebra” and writing “nigger” on the snow covered windshield of an African American young man’s car who lives in a predominantly white neighborhood. These 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). On the other hand, 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 young African American man walks into a philosophy class and is asked by the white instructor how did he get into such a prestigious university, *indicating* that he will not be able to compete academically. Microinvalidations are communication exchanges that essentially “exclude, negate or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings or experiential reality of a person of color” (Sue et al, 2009, p. 90). A microinvalidation is demonstrated when an African American woman shares an incident with her white co-workers about being discriminated against because of her skin color and one of the co-workers tell her that she is being paranoid.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Data support that African Americans are confronted with a barrage of racial microaggressions daily; however, research utilizing African American college students to examine racial microaggressions is limited. Several of the studies have shown that racial microaggressions have a negative impact on African American college students (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009; Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011), the researchers in this study addressed four questions specifically:

1. Do African American male college students who work or do not work experience more racial microaggressions than African American female college students who work or do not work?
2. Do African American male college students who work experience more racial microaggressions than African American male college students who are not working?
3. Do African American female college students who work experience more racial microaggressions than African American female college students who are not working?
4. Do African American male college students who work experience more racial microaggressions than African American female college students who work?

## Method

### Participants

The participants for this study were 240 undergraduate students enrolled in a Historically Black University in the South. Participants were randomly recruited from various 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 years old. The participants self-identified as African American/Black and the majority grew up in the South.

### Measures

#### Demographic Information

The researchers utilized a demographic questionnaire 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) 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" Research has consistently shown the scale to be reliable (Nadal 2011).

### Procedure

All participants completed the Racial and Ethnic Microaggression 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

The data were subjected to a 2 X 2 Independent Groups Factorial ANOVA with Sex (male, female) and Employment (working, not working) as independent variables and perceived racial microaggressions as the dependent variable. Results indicated no significant main effect for Sex [ $F(1,237) = .36; p > .05$ ] Thus, there was no significant difference between males ( $M = .302$ ) and females ( $M = .305$ ) in the experience of racial microaggressions. There was, however, a significant main effect for Employment [ $F(1,237) = 6.76; p < .01$ ]. Participants who worked experienced significantly higher levels of racial microaggressions ( $M = .340$ ) than those who did not ( $M = .282$ ). There was no significant interaction between Sex and Employment. That is, both variables combined failed to account for a significant amount of the variability in racial microaggressions. See Table 1.

**Table 1**  
ANOVA Summary Table

Source	SS	DF	MS	F	P
Sex	0.01	1	0.01	0.36	0.549
Employment	0.19	1	0.19	6.76	0.009
Sex X Employment	0	1	0	0	1
Error	6.66	237	0.03		
Total				6.86	240

## Discussion

The results of this study add to the current research on African American college students who attend Historically Black Universities and their experiences with racial microaggressions. Many of these young African American college students' responses on the REMS confirmed that racial microaggressions are committed by people in all categories of African American students' lives including professionals, supervisors, close friends, coworkers, and strangers. The purpose of this study was to determine if African American male college students who attended a Historically Black University experienced 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 racial microaggressions more often than students who did not work.

It was hypothesized that African American male college students would experience more racial microaggressions than African American female college students. The research results revealed no difference in the amount of racial microaggressions experienced between African American male college students and African American female college students. This was a surprising result for the researchers. Results showed that both groups experienced a high number of racial microaggressions within the last six months.

Based on the results of this study, how do we fortify African American college students against the deleterious effects of racial microaggressions on African Americans' emotional and physical health? Historically Black Universities' faculty, staff, and administrators must vigorously increase their efforts to prepare their African American college students to effectively navigate their work environments which are fraught with racial microaggressions. It can no longer be assumed that African American males experience the majority of racial microaggressions. This study's results found that both males and females experience a high number of racial microaggressions daily, including from their supervisors and coworkers. 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). These researchers also reported that their participants expressed a series of feelings such as anger, frustration, and sadness when they experienced racial microaggressions. Young African American college students should not have to endure such denigrating behavior in their workplaces and in other 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 barrage 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).

It is imperative that African American students who attend Historically Black Universities learn a series of healthy and effective coping strategies to fortify themselves from the detrimental effects of racial microaggressions. This is especially true in this negative and divisive political climate in America. Without strong coping strategies, African American college students will not be able to perform at their highest level in their studies or at their workplaces 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. That is, students who are more stressed underperform, and hence, are more likely to stop-out and/or drop out from their studies.

Sue et al. (2008) found focus groups to be effective in helping people understand the effects of racial and ethnic microaggressions on their lives. These focus groups allowed their participants the opportunity to "share, confirm, and add multiple perspectives to microaggressive incidents raised by any one member" (p. 330). 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 within a safe environment. Ongoing focus groups could be conducted in the University setting facilitated by the study's researchers or other 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 study, Historically Black University faculty, staff, and administrators must address how to prepare their African American college students to navigate their work environments which are fraught with racial microaggressions. Also students must learn healthy strategies to help them reduce the negative and damaging effects of racial microaggressions.

Evidence suggest 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). Based on the results of this current study, many African American college students experience high levels of stress 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).

### Limitations and Future Research

The current study produced a surprising result for the researchers. The results showed no statistical difference in the number of racial microaggression experienced by African American college male and African American female students enrolled in a Historically Black University. However, the results showed that racial microaggressions experienced by both African American male and female college students who work were significantly higher than racial microaggressions experienced by African American male and female college students who do not work. Our sample size was consistent with other research studies that have examined racial microaggressions in college students and in the workplace.

A primary limitation of this study is the generalizability of the data to African American students who attend predominantly white institutions when examining the study's four research questions. 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 predominantly white institutions. It is hypothesized that African American College students at predominantly white institutions will experience more racial microaggression than African American college students at Historically Black Universities. Additionally, it is important that the universities prepare their African American students to effectively cope with racial microaggressions by teaching students to strengthen their self-efficacy beliefs and talk openly about the effects of racial microaggressions on their lives through focus groups.

The researchers encourage other researchers to continue to conduct studies that examine the detrimental effects of racial microaggression on African American college students at Historically Black Universities and predominantly white institutions. African American students, both male and female, 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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