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Racial Microaggressions: The Narratives of African American Faculty at a Predominantly White University

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What role does race play in the lives of fourteen African American (7 women, 7 men) faculty on a predominantly White campus? This case study focuses on their narratives which revealed that racial microaggressions were a common and negative facet of their lives on campus. Specifically, their narratives suggest interactions of microinvalidations with White colleagues and microinsults with White students. This faculty responded to racial microaggressions by creating campus change and safe space for students of color. Given the potential negative outcomes of racial microaggression, these findings suggest that work is needed to improve the campus climate for African American faculty.

Keywords: *racial microaggressions, African American faculty, higher education*

Racial oppression continues to be a problem in U.S. society. Oppression includes institutional and interpersonal actions that block access and resources for oppressed groups (Bankston, 2000; Jaggar & Young 2000; Johnson, 2000; Roth, 2005). Oppression may occur as discrete or chronic events; however, its effects are cumulative and widespread (Frye, 1983). In higher education, one illustration of racial oppression is the underrepresentation and distribution of African American faculty. African American faculty makes up only 4.9% of full-time, tenure-track faculty in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). Beyond being underrepresented, African American faculty are concentrated in lower faculty ranks (i.e., 6.2% of assistant professors, 5.4% of associate professors, and 3.2% of full professors) and in community colleges (Agathangelou & Ling, 2002; Gregory, 2001). Their departments confine African American faculty to race-specific roles and expectations (Aguirre, 2000; Benjamin, 1997; Martinez Aleman & Renn, 2002; Moses, 1997). For example, department chairs often expected African American faculty to only teach and research, often marginalized, racial scholarship (Moses, 1997). Furthermore, African American faculty were often assigned high numbers of African American advisees, diversity-related committee work on top of other required service obligations, and teaching loads higher than those of their White peers (Agathangelou & Ling, 2002; Balderrama, Teixeira, & Valdez, 2004; Aguirre, 2000; Allen et al., 2002; Johnson, Kuykendall, & Laird, 2006).

On teaching evaluations used for retention and promotion purposes, students rated African American faculty teaching unfavorably compared to White faculty (DiPietro & Faye, 2005; Hamermesh & Parker, 2005; Rubin, 2001; Vargas, 2002). Students also rated African American faculty as less intelligent than White faculty (Hendrix, 1998; Rubin, 2001; Williams et al., 1999). These factors take time away from research and, therefore, have been posited as contributing to the unsuccessful tenure and promotion of African American faculty (Fields, 2000; Turner, 2003).

While understanding institutional racial oppression is important, one must also attend to *interpersonal* racial oppression. Several scholars have noted the importance of interpersonal interactions. For example, a body of research demonstrates negative mental and physical health consequences of interpersonal racial oppression for African Americans (Dole et al., 2004; Pittman, forthcoming; Watkins et al., 2006; Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2003). In higher education contexts in particular, Gurin and colleagues (2002) noted that interpersonal racial interactions must have particular features (e.g. quality and quantity) to produce positive

outcomes for college students. Other works have illustrated that interpersonal racial oppression has harmed the mental well-being and academic performance of African American students (Chesler, Wilson, & Malani, 1993; Rovai, Gallien, & Wighting, 2005). Despite the potential negative impact of interpersonal racial oppression, it remains an under-researched topic in higher education (Yosso et al., 2009) especially as it relates to African American faculty. As such, this research aims to add to the literature in this area.

Specifically, this research examines the experiences of African American faculty for racial microaggressions in their interpersonal interactions. In line with critical race theory, this research listens to the voices of African American faculty to understand interpersonal racial oppression. Their narratives revealed that racial microaggressions were a common and negative facet of their lives on campus. Their narratives suggest interactions of microinvalidations with White colleagues and microinsults with White students. This faculty responded to racial microaggressions by creating campus change and safe space for students of color.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

Racial Microaggressions

According to Pierce and associates (1977), racial microaggressions are "subtle, stunning, often automatic . . . exchanges which are 'put downs' of Blacks by offenders" (p. 65). One example of a racial microaggression is a White individual holding their belongings tighter when a Black individual approaches. This interaction communicates the White's assumption that the Black person is a criminal meaning to steal their belongings. Another example is a White individual receiving service before a Black individual who was unambiguously next to be served. In this interaction the Black person is rendered "invisible" and unworthy of service while Whites are affirmed as worthy of the merchant's attention. Additional examples of racial microaggressions and their implied meanings are described in Davis (1989), Pierce and others (1977), and Sue and colleagues (2007).

Sue and colleagues (2007) posed three different types of racial microaggressions. Microassaults are overtly racist interactions such as using a racial slur. Microinsults include subtle interactions that "demean a person's racial heritage and identity" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 274). A Black person being told by a White person that they have their job only because of affirmative action is an example of a microinsult. It is an insult because the White person is communicating that they did not view the Black person as qualified for the job and that he or she have it due to race. Finally, microinvalidations are interactions where Black's experiences or reality are invalidated. A White person accusing a Black person of being racially hypersensitive instead of acknowledging racial oppression is a microinvalidation. This is a microinvalidation because the White person denies the person of color's reality when they dismiss a claim of racism as "sensitivity."

While racial microaggressions may seem "innocuous," researchers describe the negative and substantial emotional toll that these frequent and negative exchanges have on African Americans (Davis, 1989; Pierce et al. 1977). Similarly, Solórzano and associates (2000) argued:

> It is important to study and acknowledge this form of racism in society because without documentation and analysis to better understand microaggressions, the threats that they pose and the assaults that they justify can be easily ignored or downplayed. (p. 72)

As such, this research aims to document racial microaggressions in higher education so that they can be better understood and addressed. Specifically, this study examines African American faculty's narratives for microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations.

Critical Race Theory

Sue and others (2008) questioned: If you want to understand racism, do you ask Whites or People of Color?" (p. 279). Their thoughts echo critical race theory which stresses the importance of narratives for overcoming and challenging racial oppression (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefanic, 2001; Stanley, 2007). These narratives are often "storytelling" or "counternarratives" in which people of color name their own raced reality and are important because:

> [Whites' narratives] perpetuate . . . people of color . . . [as] overly sensitive, out of contact with reality, and even paranoid." . . . [Whites] have historically had the power to impose their own reality and define the reality of those with lesser power. (Sue et al., 2008, p. 277)

The narratives of people of color are important as they call attention to and describe racial oppression. This information, from the perspective of the oppressed, is necessary in order to understand and disrupt oppression. For these reasons, this research applies a critical race theory approach using the examination of African American faculty's narratives.

Racial Microaggressions toward African American Faculty on Predominantly White Colleges and Universities

Constantine and colleagues' work (2008) was the only study located that explicitly focused on racial microaggressions for African American faculty. Their research identified seven themes of racial microaggressions in the campus lives of African American faculty. These themes were that African American faculty felt invisible, as though their credentials were challenged, and that they received inadequate mentoring. They also expressed believing that they were assigned raced-based service assignments, an ambiguity about if microaggression were due to race or gender, and feeling self-consciousness about self-presentation (e.g. hair, attire, speech). A final theme was that the faculty described a wide range of coping strategies for dealing with racial microaggressions. While this was the only study explicitly on racial microaggressions, research on interpersonal racial oppression in African American faculty's lives suggests patterns similar to racial microaggressions. African faculty reported White colleagues who interacted in ways that undermined their credibility as competent scholars (Brayboy, 2003; Patton, 2004). For example, White colleagues commented that African American faculty members were unqualified affirmative action hires (Agathangelou & Ling, 2002; Balderrama, Teixeira, & Valdez, 2004; Moses, 1997). These White colleagues also excluded African American faculty from social networks that were crucial for receiving resources, such as mentoring and research funds (Agathangelou & Ling, 2002; Meyers, 2002; Smith & Calasanti, 2005). Classroom interactions with White students also revealed patterns of racial microaggressions. In particular, White students challenged the authority and credibility of African American faculty (Harlow, 2003; McGowan, 2000; Pittman, 2010). African American faculty also reported being threatened and harassed by White students (Pittman, 2010; Pope & Joseph, 1997).

The Current Study: African American Faculty's Narratives of the Role of Race on Campus

Racial oppression exists in the institutional facets (e.g., representation, workload, race-based service and course expectations, tenure decisions) of African American's faculty's campus lives (Aguirre, 2000; Benjamin, 1997; Gregory, 2001 Martinez Aleman & Renn, 2002). While institutional racial oppression is often explored, there is a smaller body of literature that evidences interpersonal racial oppression (e.g., racial microaggressions) in the interactions of African American faculty (Patton, 2004; Pittman, 2010; Pope & Joseph, 1997). This body of

literature must be increased to understand the interpersonal lives of these faculty members to develop strategies that could be used to improve their recruitment, retention and success. Racial microaggression provides a conceptual framework that might be useful for understanding this interpersonal context. However, very few of the articles on interpersonal oppression for African American research specifically examines for racial microaggressions. In fact, the Constantine and associates' (2008) research was the only research located that focused on racial microaggressions among this population.

This study adds to the literature and increases knowledge on campus interpersonal oppression for African American faculty. It also contributes by using racial microaggression as a conceptual framework to their interpersonal campus lives. The study uses narratives in line with critical race theory's goal of using storytelling and counternarratives to challenge racial oppression. Thus, the research question of this study is "Do the narratives of African American faculty at a predominantly White university reveal experiences of racial microaggressions?"

METHODS

Participants

The data used for this research focused on the interview transcripts of 14 African American faculty members from a midwestern doctorate-granting university classified by Carnegie as Research Universities/ Very High Research Activity (i.e., RU/VH, Carnegie Foundation, 2011). At this university people of color comprise 26% of the student population and 23% of this university's tenured or tenure-track faculty. Around 7% of the students and 4.84% of the faculty were African American. This university did not make distinctions between Caribbean, ethnic Blacks, and African Americans in their statistics.

The fourteen faculty members were selected for the study as they had received university awards for their teaching and diversity service or were recommended by the award winners as faculty gifted at teaching or diversity service. Given that their small numbers make them easily identifiable only broad descriptive information (see Table 1) is provided instead of their specific departments and ranks. However, they are representative of the mainstream (i.e. not African American studies) disciplines and schools found at their university. All of the African American faculty members (except one) were tenure-track and in line with national trends —they are overrepresented at the assistant and associate professor level.

Table 1

African American Faculty Demographics

Gender	Department	Pseudonym	Age Range
Female	Humanities	Heather	30-39
	Humanities	Lisa	undetermined
	Natural science	Ericka	40-49
	Social science	Toya	30-39
	Social science	Jordan	30-39
	Social science	Terisa	40-49
	Social science	Michelle	40-49
Male	Humanities	Nate	40-49
	Natural science	Charles	40-49
	Natural science	Robert	30-39
	Social science	Brian	30-39
	Social science	Chris	60-69
	Social science	Justin	30-39
	Social science	Tomas	40-49

Data Collection

The 14 African American faculty members (7 male and 7 female) in this study were interviewed face-to-face by a person of color. Race matching of interviewer and interview was done to reduce the likelihood that the respondents would censor the race-related information they were asked to share for the interview. The interviews lasted one to two hours, were recorded and transcribed. All interviewers followed a structured interview protocol. Given this research's focus on African American faculty's racial interactions on their campus, the analysis for this project used the responses to the question, "What role do you think race plays in your life at [your institution]?"

Data Analysis

The transcripts were analyzed using an emerging theme, cross-case analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Weiss, 1995) where the researcher reviewed each transcript line by line (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Silverman, 1993) taking notes on the following: (1) What are the salient issues in African American faculty's experiences of race on their campus? (2) Do their narratives provide evidence of interpersonal racial oppression (i.e., racial microaggressions) in their interpersonal interactions? The results report the findings of the notes and coding on African American faculty's narratives of their raced experiences on their predominantly White campus.

RESULTS

Do these African American faculty experience racial microaggression in their interactions on their campus? To examine their racial lives on their campus, African American faculty were asked, "What role do you think race plays in your life at [your institution]?" The first finding of this study is that racial microaggressions are common in their interactions. The two settings in which the African American faculty experienced racial microaggressions through their interactions were (a) White colleagues and (b) White students. Specifically, African American faculty members were most likely to report microinvalidations from White colleagues and microinsults from White students. A final theme of the narratives was African American faculty's attempts to create safe (e.g., counter) space for students of color and racial change on their campus in response to racial microaggressions (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Yosso et al., 2009).

Prevalence of Racial Microaggressions

Twelve of the fourteen (86%) African American faculty felt that race played a big role in their experiences on campus. For example, Tomas expressed that on campus, race is "always something you're aware of." Similarly, Michelle believed that for people of color, "race plays a role in your daily life." Toya commented that race "plays out in so many different ways" on campus. These comments illustrate that race is very salient for these African American faculty and is an issue they must attend to on a constant basis.

That race is salient does not mean it is a negative facet of their campus lives. However, 71% of these African American faculty members categorized the role of race on their campus as negative. For example, Jordan felt that on campus "race is a big part of my everyday life in a *very frustrating* way." Nate's frustration was expressed in his feeling that race plays "much more [of a role] than [he] would like it to." Brian argued that race plays a negative role on campus in that he thinks there are a lot of Whites on campus who are tired of thinking about African Americans. He says these Whites' sentiment toward African Americans is, "You've

been thought about, and changed, and apologized to. Enough of that sh!% [expletive].” Chris affirmed this sentiment by Whites by describing the campus as racially alienating.

To the African American faculty, race was a prominent facet of their campus lives. While race could have been a positive aspect of their campus climate, it was not. Instead, these faculty members described their campus climate as one in which race was negative and microaggressions common. In fact, the African American faculty described a range of incidents of racial microaggression.

Racial Microaggressions: Microinvalidations in Interactions with White Colleagues

Seventy-nine percent of the African American faculty discussed the varied ways in which race shapes interactions with their White colleagues. Of these faculty members, 37% noted that Whites made them feel unwelcomed and excluded. Another 37% also thought that White colleagues treated them differently and as tokens of their race. That is, the faculty reported frequent microinvalidations—interactions in which African Americans are treated as “different” and as “excluded”—by White colleagues.

Jordan shared that her White colleagues engage in microinvalidations by excluding her through “a real focus on trying to make sure [I always understood] that [I] am not desired here.” Brian described similar microinvalidations from his White colleagues as a result of his attempts to include African Americans in research and theory. He said, “If someone’s going to have a . . . grand social theory . . . it better explain Blacks in Cleveland, in addition to the ones in Detroit and London.” Brian explained that he is thoughtful and intentional that African Americans are included in intellectual work meant to explain broad social phenomena. However, Brian’s colleagues refer to him as “neurotic” for connecting intellectual discussions to an African American context. These White colleagues have engaged in a microinvalidation by ignoring Brian’s raced perspective and labeling him as “neurotic” instead of as strengthening social theory and its applicability.

Jordan experienced microinvalidations by her White colleagues making her feel excluded and different. She shared that on an almost daily basis, her White colleagues made chiding comments about her natural hair or ethnic clothes. She said, “‘Oh yeah, you see her? She’s all dressed and she looks like she’s going out somewhere.’ I am going out. I came here to teach. This is business attire . . . in many other parts of the world. Just because you do not have a clue is not my problem.” Instead of taking an interest in or learning from her differences, Jordan said that she feels her White colleagues use her racial differences as a reason to exclude and make fun of her.

Tomas explained similar experiences of microinvalidations with his White colleagues: “Once a colleague . . . walked up to me and said, ‘How come there are no Black catchers in baseball?’” Tomas said it was as though his White colleague thought he had a “monopoly” on all information concerning African Americans. Even when Whites intend for these comments to reflect affirmation of African’s American’s expertise and sincere curiosity about them, microinvalidations such as these make African Americans feel like they are “foreigners” and curiosities in their own country. They communicate to African Americans that Whites perceive them as different and not “normal.”

The above examples illustrate racial microaggressions in these African American faculty’s experiences with White colleagues. In particular, these racial microaggressions can be categorized as microinvalidations. That is, the interactions communicated to them that their White peers invalidated their African American raced experiences and their sense of belonging. From insensitivity about one’s appearance to highlighting differences to sweeping misconceptions about what an African American should and should not know, these faculty’s narratives revealed racial microinvalidations in their interpersonal interactions with White colleagues.

Racial Microaggression: Microinsults in Interactions with White Students

Thirty six percent of the African American faculty members in this study described raced interactions with White students when talking about the role race played in their campus lives. Again, the narratives of these interactions were not positive or pleasant. Instead, these African American faculty's experiences with White students reflected microinsults. That is, White students interacted with African American faculty in a way as to insult and challenge their intellectual ability, competence, or authority as a professor.

Heather recounted a microinsult in an interaction where a White graduate student asked her to make copies for her, assuming that she was a work study student. This incident is a microinsult since the White student did not perceive Heather as a faculty member because she was an African American. As Pierce and others (1977) noted and Heather recognizes, racial microaggressions are not rare incidents:

> I was not angry at all because this is common. [This White graduate student] has not learned that every Black person in the hallway is not a janitor or copy maker.

Not being recognized by White students as the professor was common not only for Heather but for other African American faculty in this study. Terisa discusses her experiences of microinsults when White students did not recognize her as the professor:

> I'm looking for the professor . . . You can't possibly be the professor because your hair looks like this [i.e., natural African American hair] or you're wearing that kind of an outfit [i.e., African clothing].

In not recognizing African Americans as faculty, White students relayed that they did not perceive an African American as being their professor since that had a set of implications (e.g., intelligent and authority figures).

Responses to Racial Microaggressions: Safe Space and Change

Nearly 50% of the African American faculty felt that they were viewed as competent or experts in the opinions of Whites on race topics. These interactions could be categorized as a microinvalidations since African Americans were treated as experts on their "foreign" culture (i.e., "Alien in own land", Sue et al., 2007). They could also be considered microinsults since these interactions imply that an African American's knowledge cannot and does not extend beyond race topics (i.e. "Ascription of intelligence", Sue et al., 2007). African American faculty described the additional race-relevant service obligations a result of being viewed as having special race knowledge. Despite these microinsults and microinvalidations, African American faculty used these racial microaggressions as a way to create change and safe space for students.

The African American faculty members in this study were expected by Whites to attend meetings, give talks, and serve on committees relating to race. Even when Whites expected African Americans' participation in these activities as a way to produce positive institutional change, it still demonstrates Whites' assumption that African Americans are experts in race areas. As Nate shared, "I am constantly asked to serve on committees because of my race." Nate understands that he is asked to serve on these committees due to his race. However, his response to this racial microaggression is to view it an opportunity to produce change. He continues by saying,

> At least I have . . . the privilege of . . . making my voice heard on particular issues. So, most of the time, I try not to mind [being asked to serve on race committees] . . . [I view it as doing work for all of the people who fought for [African Americans] to get [to this university].

While Nate said he feels he has the constant additional burden of these race-related service requests, he deals with this racial microaggression by seeing it as an opportunity for structural race change on the university campus.

Similarly, Charles said, "I am called upon to do . . . outreach, and recruiting, and speaking to Black students." Charles notes this same racial microaggression of being viewed as relevant and competent only as it relates to race issues. However, Charles' response to this racial microaggression is "it doesn't bother me much because I think it is important. I try to do as much of it as I can." Like Nate, Charles said he makes the most of the many requests for race-related service he receives by viewing it as work for the larger good.

In addition to using race service obligations as mechanisms for change, the African American faculty chose to be proactively supportive of students of color as a response to racial microaggressions. For example, Ericka mentioned that she spent a lot of time speaking with students of color about issues of racial diversity. Justin similarly chooses to provide himself as a source of support for African American students. He said he realizes that African American students may be navigating an all-White environment for the first time and, thus, does his best to provide support for them. Toya said that as an African American faculty member,

> . . . The students of color, and particularly the African American and some Latino students, come to you as a safe haven because they are often finding that their research ideas aren't supported or they are not getting mentoring or support. They need emotional reassurance.

Even though she knows this support comes at a cost, ". . . You find yourself overloaded with students you are trying to interact with and meet the needs of," Toya still chooses to provide support to students of color.

These African American faculty members experience racial microaggressions where Whites expect them to engage in racial service work on their campus. They perceived this additional service as a burden yet responded to these microaggressions via a commitment to creating change and supporting students of color on their campus. Despite the microinsult and microinvalidations of these racial service requests, the faculty chose to take on these requests in the hopes that it might produce changes to improve the racial climate on their campus. Additionally, they chose to support students of color as they navigate an unfamiliar and sometimes hostile campus climate. In this manner, they are providing students of color with the safe space that is critical to their success (Harwood, Brown-Huntt, & Mendenhall, 2010; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998; Yosso et al., 2009).

CONCLUSION

The analysis in this research examined the narratives of African American faculty at a predominantly White university. In particular, this research sought to examine if these faculty depicted racial microaggressions when describing the role of race on their campus. The African American faculty in this study varied in age and rank, although they were overwhelmingly assistant and associate professors. They were also representative of the academic disciplines and schools found at their university. Despite the diversity among these faculty members, their narratives demonstrated a common experience of a range of racial microaggressions. Thee African American faculty also strove for institutional change and safe space for students of color in response to these racial microaggressions.

African American faculty's narratives suggest that interactions with White colleagues are marked by microinvalidations. These racial microaggressions reinforced that African Americans were different from the 'norm of Whiteness' and thereby should be excluded and alienated. Their narratives of interactions with White students included examples of racial microaggressions that were microinsults. That is, White students interacted in ways that challenged African American faculty's intelligence and positions as faculty members. For example, they felt that White students viewed African Americans in stereotypical ways such

that they often did not believe that African American faculty members were professors. While racial microaggressions also resulted in an extra load of race-related service, the African American faculty viewed these opportunities as a chance to make race-related change and provide support to students of color.

These findings suggest that work is needed to improve the campus climate for African American faculty on predominantly White college campuses. The foundational work of getting diverse faculty on these campuses is only the first step. This particular institution had racially diverse student and faculty populations. These results suggest that institutional features may have limited influence on the interpersonal dynamics highlighted in these faculty's accounts of racial microaggressions. As critical race theory suggests, future quantitative and qualitative research should be conducted to give voice to African American faculty's experiences in higher education. This research should aim to identify the types of policies and programs that produce the most support and least racially oppressive experiences for African American faculty. Such work is essential to the equal participation of and success of African American faculty at predominantly White institutions.

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