Thin Brown Skins?:

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Microaggression Experiences of Students of Color at a Small PWI.

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Abstract

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Keywords: racial microaggressions, college students of color, interpretative phenomenological analysis, coping with racism

Introduction

Thanks in part to counseling psychologists, the literature on racial microaggressions has grown rapidly over the past couple of decades. Still, to the dissatisfaction of some, we seem no further along in ratifying the construct as a real empirical phenomenon despite the harm they have been said to cause people of color. What counts as empirical evidence seems at the crux of the problem here. The present research aims to contribute to other literature that shares the voices of the racially underrepresented people themselves and treats them as valid evidence of an experiential phenomenon. For now, "microaggressions" best fits the label for these experiences, although some have come forth to point out the term's inadequacy, preferring terms such as "exclusionary behaviors" instead (Tulshyan, 2022).

The origin of the term and concept of microaggressions as "subtle" forms of "cumulative pro-racist…offensive mechanisms" can be traced back to psychiatrist and professor Chester Pierce (1970a; 1970b; 1974), but its definition has evolved into "brief, commonplace daily…indignities…that communicate negative or derogatory slights (Sue, et al., 2007, p.217)." Over the decades, the crucial aspect of Pierce's point that these are insidious injuries might have gotten lost, especially by those against what has been called the "microaggressions research program" (MRP; e.g. see Lilienfeld, 2017). The fact that these phenomena seem ethereal does not mean that they are any less harmful. Indeed, the fact that they are sometimes difficult to identify makes them harder to combat. But they are vestiges of racism nonetheless. This despite the fact that they are generated by people who generally have no intention of being racist. Though the term macroaggressions is separated from the world of microaggressions in the literature, for the purposes of the present study I consider *macro*aggressions to be more overt assaults on a broader scale, such as institutional displays, policies, decisions, and other

communications. This differs from the framework posed by Sue, et al., who see these communications and actions also within the framework of microaggressions, as "environmental microaggressions" (2007; Steinfeldt, Hyman, & Steinfeldt 2018). Even revisions of Sue's original taxonomy place these more overt assaults within the realm of "microaggressions" (Torino, Riverra, Capodilupo, Nadal & Sue, 2019; Williams, Skinta, & Martin-Willett, 2021). With previous collaborators the author has identified what may be a third form of these aggressions: "mesoaggressions." Mesoaggressions are similar to microaggressions except that they are persistent and generally non-transient [Anonymous]. They are similar to macroaggressions except that they are not as overt. In the revised taxonomy proposed by Torino, et al. (2018b), these would also fall under environmental microaggressions given the refined qualifiers. For the sake of parsimony in this study, I include these "mesoaggressions" under macroaggressions. In any case, because microaggressions are transient or, in the case of macroaggressions, part of the cultural fabric, communities might not recognize them as offensive and unacceptable. This lack of awareness may leave vulnerable populations to fend for themselves when encountering these negative interactions.

Alongside the increase in the study of microaggressions, several instruments exist to measure the extent of microaggression experience according to different populations. The plight of African Americans who have experienced microaggressions has been documented in the psychological literature (e.g. Hall & Fields, 2015; Henfield, 2011; Hotchkins, 2016; Keith, Nguyen, Taylor, Chatters & Mouzon, 2017; Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008). The current study continues the work on investigating the experience of racial microaggressions, in the specific context of a small, predominately White liberal arts college.

Coping strategies have been studied as well. Among mostly behavioral strategies include, broadly: ignoring incidents, confronting the offender, vigilance, and talking with others (Gardener, Luben & DaCosta, 2017; Hall & Fields, 2015). Some studies focus specifically on immediate responses to the incidents, some of which include the behavioral responses mentioned above but also emotional responses, such as anger, with which they must further cope (e.g. Gardener, Luben & DaCosta, 2017; review by Wong, Derthick, David, Saw & Okazaki, 2014). Studies addressing coping with microaggressions tend to be focused on clinical or counseling populations or contexts (e.g. Constantine, 2007; Hall & Fields, 2015) although some have focused on the college context (often the college counseling context). Among other findings, authors have found that stress is an outcome of these daily assaults (Hall & Fields, 2015), and longer-term mental health outcomes might include depression and suicidal ideation (e.g. Review by Wong, et al., 2014). Intervention is needed before the effect of microaggressions has these types of impact on mental health.

What might an interaction involving a microaggression look like? Pete might comment to Jared that he always sounds "so articulate" in class. If Pete is White and Jared is a person of color, this could come across as insulting, implying that Pete didn't expect Jared to be intelligent—likely on the basis of his race, given historical circumstances. This encounter showcases a microinsult, a type of microaggression further explained below.

Yet scholars disagree that such an interaction would be a phenomenon of note. Some researchers cast doubt on the extent or even existence of microaggressions. To the extent that they might exist, they question the harmfulness of such encounters.

Take, for example, MacDonald (2014), whose article was entitled "The Microaggression Farce." This is a bold title, as it belittles the testimonies of countless microaggressive

experiences of marginalized people. Obviously, the article implies, such experiences are blown out of proportion and downright silly. Either some type of mockery is taking place or these people of color, for instance, have really thin skins (which colleges and universities are apparently contributing to). In her article she calls these testimonies "specious" claims. She also perceives them as "misapprehensions" in need of correction. The term "race card" also makes its way into her narrative. But perhaps these are not thin-skinned students, after all, as she also uses terms like "militant" to describe them. Perhaps one of the more curious phrases she uses is "self-professed 'students of color.'" Is it not okay for students to self-identify? Even the U.S. Census has allowed individuals to self-identify for decades.

MacDonald's article is important, however, because the current author believes MacDonald voices an opinion that many in the college community might be reluctant to admit: microaggressions are not a valid complaint. She tries to acknowledge the existence of racism, at least, although it is by saying that the UCLA administration should have helped its triggered students to correct their misperceptions and gain some perspective on what constitutes a true racial offense. What MacDonald would consider real evidence of the harm of microaggressions is not clear because she appeared also not to give much stock to implicit bias, which has been soundly established through empirical research (e.g. Davido, Pearson & Penner, 2019).

In a relevant issue of *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, Scott Lilienfeld takes on the concept of microaggressions and what he refers to as the microaggression research program (2017). He combs through some of the microaggression research claims and holds them up against extant evidence. First, he claims, the operationalization of the term remains problematic. Second, he refers to social cognition research, which predicts that individuals perceive the same event differently, to negate the claim that microaggressions are interpreted negatively by most or

all people of color. Third, he states that there is no research support for any claim that microaggressions reflect implicitly prejudicial and aggressive motives. Fourth, that microaggression researchers give validity to their subjects' reports and generally believe this is the best way to assess microaggressive experience, Lilienfeld argues, prevents others from assessing robustness and generalizability. Finally, he takes issue with the claim that microaggressions have harm on mental health, stating that there is little research evidence and what does exist might be contaminated by personality factors rather than indicative of true external harms. His focus on the lack of correlation between microaggressions and aggression and prejudice is distracting. The current author has not encountered racial microaggression research that claimed that microaggressions would predict physical aggression or anything of the like. Rather, the claim is that the experience itself is harmful, regardless of its intent. It is this latter statement that microaggression detractors might struggle with the most. To his credit, Lilienfeld at least clarifies that it is their perceptions of microaggressions rather than any microaggressions, per se, that minority individuals might be responding to (2020). This is an important point, not because it ends the conversation, but because it highlights that this is as an epistemological problem. As many scholars have observed, and clinical and counseling psychologists well know, perception is lived reality. When trying to understand students' experiences, their realities seem paramount as opposed to some singular "objective" reality that has been empirically validated via triangulation and experimental design. This is not to say that triangulation and experimental design has no place in microaggressions research; on the contrary, the more methods elucidating the same phenomenon, the better.

Beyond the scope of the present study, Lilienfeld also suggests that microaggressions "may sensitize minority individuals to subtle signs of potential prejudice, leading them to

become hypervigilant to trivial potential slights. Such hypersensitivity might engender confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998), predisposing minority individuals to perceive subtle signals of prejudice in their absence." Lilienfeld's suggestions remind one of the common claim that certain people of color tend to be "paranoid," especially over issues of race.

Haidt (2017) chimes in within the pages of the same journal issue, noting the institutional exacerbation of the "problem": "It's bad enough to make *the most fragile and anxious students* (emphasis added) quicker to take offense and more self-certain and self-righteous (177)." He then speculates that training a diverse community of students to be aware of microaggressions would result in "pain and anger to ever-smaller specks that they learn to see in each other's eyes (177)?" So, the current author questions not only what we're talking about, but whom we're talking about. Are these "fragile and anxious" students of color with thin skins who learn to defend themselves by becoming "militant" and crying "microaggression!" every time they're uncomfortable? Will they minimize the attention given to more overtly racist acts through crying "microaggression!" one too many times? I toss this out to readers, as the answers are beyond the scope of the present study. However, they are worth keeping in mind as they encounter some of the narratives below and proceed to understand microaggressions.

Williams (2019) assembled a rebuttal to Lilienfeld's claims, to which Lilienfeld (2020) astutely responded, modeling what he desires as a rich scrutiny and critique of science and conversation around its elements. To his credit, Lilienfeld does not seem to view students of color as weak-minded or thin-skinned; on the contrary, he encourages robust dialogue and even debate around the subject beyond the scholarly journals (2020).

The microaggression landscape and purpose of the study

Torino, et al. (2018a) divide racial microaggressions into three main categories (based on Sue, et al.'s original categories, 2007), although all three categories can contribute to what they term environmental microaggressions (what I call macroagressions, and perhaps some mesoaggressions;[i])—see above and results. Microinsults are generally unconscious gestures or comments that come across as rude, insensitive, and generally demean a person's racial identity. Microassaults are, on the other hand, often conscious gestures that are explicit derogations and marked by aggression intended to hurt the victim, such as name-calling, avoidance, or purposeful discrimination. Some might consider microsassaults as simply racist behavior that might be separate from the generally unintentional world of microaggressions. Finally, there are microinvalidations, again generally unconscious, which tend to negate or nullify the experiential reality of a person of color. This last microaggression category is particularly interesting given the voices of those scholars who deny the existence/seriousness of microaggressions. The authors further break down microinsults and microinvalidation into common categories, such as ascription of intelligence and alien in one's own land.

Taken together, these readings lead to the objective of the current qualitative study. Does the present group of college students of color perceive and experience microaggressions? Do such microaggressions (or the perception of them) cause distress? How do students cope with microaggressions and any resulting distress? According to Sue (2017):

> Microaggressions are about experiential reality and about listening to the voices of those most oppressed, ignored, and silenced….People of color, for example, often have their lived racial realities about bias and discrimination met with disbelief by our society. They are often told that they are oversensitive, paranoid, and misreading the actions of others.

> They are asked, "Aren't you mind-reading? Aren't you distorting the truth? Where is your evidence?" (p.171)

As a science, psychologists appropriately approach problems with skepticism, and the current issue is not exempt. The problem is, how far should such skepticism go, while allowing for the validation of the lived experience of people of color?

This challenge lends to the qualitative methodology used in the current study, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The goal of IPA is to understand the subjective experience of each participant (Smith & Osborn, 2008). As Hunsberger has suggested, the study of some psychological phenomena are not for quantification, objectification and logic/rationality (2007). Contrary to the data scientists have traditionally worked with, microaggressions present us with intense emotions and subjective values, beliefs and reality. Thus, the present research is not concerned with describing an "objective reality" so much as individual experience. Given the research questions as an answer to Sue's questions, methods such as interpretative phenomenological analysis make sense (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Method

Sample

The term "people of color" can be nebulous, but generally includes people of African, Caribbean/West Indies descent, native/indigenous descent and Hispanic/Latinx descent. To specify this further, the term BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) is sometimes used in order to center the experiences of historically underrepresented and discriminated peoples in the U.S. The original sample included nineteen traditionally-aged college students attending a small, residential liberal arts predominately White institution (PWI). Three of the interview

recordings were unsuccessful/missing. Thus, the current sample contained thirteen Black students (including one who identified as Ghanaian-American, one who sometimes identified as biracial, and one who also identified as Caribbean) and three Latinx students (one of whom identified as Dominican). In terms of gender, there were eleven females, three males, and two gender non-conforming/non-binary students.

These students attended a small (population fewer than 1500 students) liberal arts college located in the Northeast United States, less than an hour away from a major city, and attended by approximately 70% exclusively White students. Faculty of color are underrepresented, particularly in the social sciences.

Procedure

The study methods were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the college. To capture the interest of some of the small population of BIPOC students, we used a flyer distributed via email to all students, inviting them to take a short screening survey. This survey screened for people who identified as members of any Black, Latinx, or Indigenous peoples communities. We also used snowball sampling, which yielded a purposive sample through word of mouth. The initial sample comprised nineteen students. Three interview recordings were unusable due to digital corruption or incompletion/absence. There were three interviewers, all Black women. Interviews were held individually in a private room.

These interviews followed a separate procedure, part of another study, in which participants needed to complete two surveys (one testing for microaggression experiences, one testing for stereotype threat) and a list of riddles. Participants received a $10 Amazon gift card.

Instruments

The researchers used a semi-structured interview guide that opened with the general question "What is your typical day at [PWI] like when it comes to being around people who don't share your ethnicity or race?" If needed, interviewers could follow up with prompts such as: "in class? Cafeteria or [on campus eatery]? In the dorm? Elsewhere?" A following question probed about coping strategies if problems were mentioned in the first responses. They were then asked if they felt as comfortable around people that did not share their race or ethnicity, and to explain their answer. Next, to address a tangential research question, they were asked about whether they ever felt nervous about taking a test out of fear that their race or ethnicity might be seen as a factor in their performance (stereotype threat). This was followed by a question regarding stereotypes that concerned the individual. Finally, to directly address microaggressions, a table of examples of common racial microaggressions (Sue, et al. 2007) was presented to participants and they were asked whether they were familiar with any of them and in what context. This was a more structured approach to the discussion of microaggressions, but not as organic as the preceding narratives.

Analysis

Rooted in psychology (Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2022), IPA involves reading through interview narratives and immersion in them to detect the ways in which each participant makes sense of the phenomenon under study (in this case race-based experiences and particularly microaggressions). The second run begins to refine for themes, and using NVivo 12, these themes were coded and generally overlapped across students. We coded not only for these emerging themes but also for a priori themes of note such as microaggression[1] (which was sub-

[1] Organic versus structured discussions of microaggressions were distinguished by separate codes

coded into microinsult, microassault and microinvalidation), coping, and stereotype threat. We did not intentionally code for distress because of the debate over whether distress is even present. IPA is an iterative, inductive process, but this deductive process of looking for a priori codes was a way of situating the study within the literature. The decision to use both inductive and deductive processes likely led to reification of existing themes as well as emerging themes.

A hierarchical chart was created, which displayed the relative extent of codes across narratives. As a back-up, a frequency chart was also created, although this quantification is not consistent with the goals of IPA. The author saw her job as to recognize and highlight these thematic experiences rather than to "correct" them or assign pathologizing labels.

Results

Mapping the various aggressions, it appeared that emerging theme of ***macroaggressions*** (institutional or cultural insults, slights or invalidations) accounted for at least half of the talk about the phenomena under investigation. Within the category of ***microaggressions***, microinsults accounted for most of the talk, followed respectively by microinvalidations and microassaults.

In the words of a Black female we hear an example of what was labeled a macroaggression:

> I think that…coming to this school [laughs sarcastically] everything is just White. [chuckling] everything is just White. And I didn't expect for it to be any other way, but I also thought that maybe coming to a liberal arts community that there would be acceptance of other…you know, um…lifestyles and backgrounds? ….and…*I was really*

> *excited to have a space like the [Multicultural House[2]], which I feel has been stripped away because it's been moved to a centralized location?* [emphasis added] Um…and I say that because I've done psychological studies where Black people or People of Color or minorities in general feel most, uh…what is the word—belonging to a community when they have their own space and a house, so like…for example, [[3]Main Street House], or the [Multicultural House], like, those two spaces were sacred for Black people and minorities, People of Color, etc. etc., and I feel like now that those spaces—…more specifically the [Multicultural House], now that it's, uh…immersed within… Lower [[4]PWI Center], I think that it really takes away from the comfortability [sic] of Black people because…like they don't find comfort immersed in Whiteness? I think? And so I think that's what's taken away….

This is a student narrative that the author heard beyond the scope of the study. Namely, some students of color felt robbed of their safe space, which was relocated to a busy student center. Though the institution might have had good intentions for this relocation (e.g. greater visibility for this center promoting inclusion and equity), the students appeared to interpret the move as insensitive to their needs and a cultural misstep. Was the relocation a better look for the college, and the shiny new center a PR win? Perhaps, but it left disgruntled students in its wake.

And in the words of another Black female we hear what suspiciously sound like more macroaggressive acts of a different nature:

[2] Former building that served as a meeting place and lounge for minoritized students
[3] (Name changed for anonymity) Residence/"dorm" traditionally inhabited by Black students
[4] The College student center, housing various offices serving all students

> My freshman year was probably the worst, because I'd never dealt with those situations before? {mhm} So, it was just really hard to cope with, I didn't know who to speak to, I'd even experienced someone like coming up to me while I was doing laundry and saying "f**k you," like this White guy, and I told like a professor and they brought me to a dean rather than, trying to like reprimand the person who said it to me? {mhm} they told me to go to wellness, to go speak to a guidance counselor…things like that—that had nothing to do with me, you know what I mean {yeah} obviously like race issues here are constantly pushed to the side…. cuz they do not handle racial issues well. {mhm} Yeah. Yeah.

Again, this sentiment had floated around in the atmosphere by various students before being caught on record. That is, students were frustrated with the college's slow and often inefficacious responses, if any, to reported racist or homophobic incidents on campus. So, when this female was directed to counseling, it appeared to her another attempt to divert the real problems. In her mind, she did not need the help; the whole campus did.

Macroaggressions were embedded in the very structures and policies of the school, as in the curriculum:

> …there's no reason why we shouldn't have an Africana studies major. My friend [B] will be the first one, if the college approves it {mmm} this spring, because Africana studies has the most min—like most classes in any department, that can count toward the minor {I see}, so there's no point {right}, there's no reason why it shouldn't be a major? {OK} And, so the idea of, like, classes that center Blackness being electives and not {right} be substantial enough to earn a major is like…a macroaggression…It's ridiculous.

Yet, as will be seen in the case with microaggressions, macroaggressions weren't always obviously harmful:

> [PWI] is really quick to exploit people of color—people that came, have some sort of success especially going into the school? {mhm} A couple of articles were published about me before I even stepped on campus so people, like, knew about who I was before I got a chance to say "this is who I am"?

That her story was used to "sell" the school was viewed with a jaundiced eye by this female. She admitted having given permission for them to use her story, but clearly felt ambivalent.

The sheer "Whiteness" of the school (in terms of students of color-to-White students ratio, although other symbols of Whiteness could have played into this, as came up in other narratives) was overwhelming at times:

> Because I do not live in a house or a dormitory where non-Af—where non-Black people live? That chunk of my day is OK? So, waking up, moving about the house in the morning. Once we get outside the house then the [laughing] issues begin. Um, three of my classes at the moment are AAAS [Africana/African American Studies] courses, so, they're predominantly Black {mmm}. And the professors that teach them are also Black {oh, ok}. So there's that. That was also on purpose because there have been courses that stressed me out because of the students of color to White ratio.

These feelings of alienation at PWI were shared among participants, although some managed to navigate the campus in a way that somehow allowed for less racial tension.

In addition to these themes discussed emerged an additional code we called ***mesoaggressions***, that were a form of macroaggressions, but more part of the "ether". They

were marked by behaviors that were not specifically directed at any one individual but rather cultural norms at a group level. They could come across as unwelcome "vibes" whenever students of color were present in a predominantly White context. Such an example is below:

> Well, specifically one class I have…it's a public speaking class I have, so it's media and communications {yeah}, which is my minor, and I have to, you know, publicly speak in this class {mhm} and this class is full of White men. {mhm} And [it's a] specific type of White man because these men are all from [Notorious party dormitory]. {ohhh} So, I've been speaking publicly, doing an assignment that I have to do, and maybe [they] like make faces at me or they'll be like, talking amongst each other, laughing, doing jokes—I just feel that I'm not expected in that class? {mhm} Um, yeah. Their body language during my presentation it's like you just don't care about what I'm saying. At all, do you? {mmm} But this is like the class where I feel, like, the most uncomfortable? Because of these men? And, you know, because they have each other, but like, I feel like they'd be nothing on their own {mhm}. It's really weird, when they come together [as] a group.. I just feel…I don't know, I just feel uncomfortable {yeah} I haven't, um, talked to the professor about it, I don't know how she would take it. So I was actually in her office hours yesterday, I didn't even bring it up {mhm}. But I've been feeling like this, I've been talking to my friend about this {mhm}. I just don't feel comfortable in that class at all. And it's already enough anxiety because I have to speak publicly {mhm} and get up there in front of class and speak an allotted amount of time {mhm}, and it's extra pressure because I'm the only Black girl and sometimes I am speaking on topics of race {mhm} and speaking that to a whole group of White men who have the whole, you know {mhm}, fraternity, [party dorm] culture…it's just…[chuckles]

It is notable that she cannot figure out how to bring up the subject to her professor, despite that this is a public speaking class in which such factors are important to consider. But are they "real" enough, or all in her head? That is, can anyone but she do anything about her discomfort?

In the world of ***microinsults***, which was most represented among the microaggression narratives, again some were more subtle than others, as shown in the words of this Black female:

> Like, I feel like I am very pro-Black, so when people say things like oh, you're pretty for a Black girl, you know, like…Black women are pretty, to me. {mhm} And I know that, like, I know that not everyone's gonna be pretty to other people, that's fine, but as a—as a race or as an ethnicity or as whatever the case may be, like, *there's just certain things you don't say, um, just out of respect* [laughing; emphasis added] just out of respect…but I feel like the construction of our society allows for people to interact through stereotypes rather than real, inquisitive interaction.

Another Black female seemed particularly vigilant regarding these barbs:

> They will say things that they think are going under the radar…or even do things that they think are going under the radar? {mhm} That we pick up on. {Right} And, we might not always…articulate that, we might not speak up when we see things like that, but it is something that we file it away {right} in our, in the cabinet, right?

Professors were cited as responsible for some infractions, as this Black female conveyed:

> Like, you are a scholar, PhD, a professor. You have, I'm sure, an expansive vocabulary. So there is a way to say, "oh, you're a talented student." {mhm} You should be looking at this thing as a college path or career path versus this thing. So, okay, that would be sensible. See, where "you have a good brain," is implying, what are you saying about

> everybody else that looks like me? Or people that you come in contact with that look like me? {uh huh} What does it have to do with my brain [laughing] {right}. What does that have to do with my biology…*and then…to just …to think I'd be flattered about it* [emphasis added]**.**

In other words, microinsults pervaded student experiences and offended their sensibilities..

Microinvalidation was also represented across several narratives, and, as with ***microinsult***, this could be subtle or more direct. They could, to many people, even seem like positive, inclusive things to say, as shown in the words of this Latinx student:

> When they say they don't see color? {mhm} Um, it's a form of erasure {mhm} like, quite simply {mhm}, um, when people say they don't see color, um, it's like…I don't know, it's weird, because, um…it's not that I want to be treated as a White person, it's that I want you to acknowledge my race and not treat me differently for it {mhm, right} um, and *saying "I don't see color" is erasing an identity* because I am a Person of Color and saying that you don't see that, um, it's not the correct stance…. [Emphasis added]

The same student says, in response to the template:

> Oh my god, [sarcastically] yeah, "Everyone can succeed in society if they work hard enough," you know? …. it's incredibly…you can tell that people who are from a social position of privilege {mhm}, they don't understand, sort, of, how economics and socieoeconomics work {mhm} Um, the idea of working hard enough and you'll get where you want, or will succeed, is a complete fallacy {mhm}, *and it discredits a lot of hardworking people of color or people who are poor regardless of race* {mhm} I feel

> like that's an incredibly classist and privileged position {Mmm} for people to take {ok} [Emphasis added]

Intersectionality is an area where much ***microinvalidation*** can take place given multiple marginalized identities. This can be difficult for the non-person of color to perceive, as in the words of this Black female (in response to the template):

> And, uh, this one is "As a woman I know what you go through as a racial minority", a lot of White feminists have said this to me {mhm}. Um, it's not the same [hm mm} at all? There's intersectionality to all of that, uh, and both of these statements like, erase Blackness, and it makes me, and people like me feel like we're overreacting….

This position of being made to feel melodramatic is significant. If an individual's struggles are invalidated, so are the associated feelings and consequences. If this individual then believes that her concerns are unwarranted, she might not seek help or cope in adaptive ways.

A theme that emerged for which we were unprepared, was the ***need to perform***—especially in public after a microaggression was committed. It was a real and oppressive experience for some students. In the words of this Black male:

> And then, going into classrooms such as [first-year seminar course] where you talk about things like the [The] New Jim Crow and…students are allowed to say ignorant things, right? {mhm; chuckles} And it just depends on if you have a good professor to say "hey you shouldn't be saying that; you should think about it like this" and blah blah blah blah blah. And, like, sometimes you don't have that professor to, like, do that. So, it makes me uncomfortable because…*most of the time you're the only Black person in the classroom?* {mhm} *And, it kind of leaves it on you—the burden's on you* to say "well,

> you can't really say that because of this," and most people don't really agree with you and they're not gonna listen to you, so. That happened in my classroom, in [first-year seminar course], as well as in sociology {mmm} where I was told that, the only reason why I'm here is because of affirmative action, like, to my face, and my professor didn't say anything, so, things like that are what makes me feel really uncomfortable to be here. [Emphasis added]

This Black male was even more explicit about this demanding situation:

> … whenever you have a situation where someone says something they're not supposed to say {mhm} people will immediately look toward the person who was offended or violated by whatever they said. {right} And so like, *that makes me so uncomfortable because I feel like that puts me in a position where I need to perform.* {right} For the people onlooking, or I need to say to people, speak up. [Emphasis added]

As revealed in other narratives, this demand had negative consequences. It was exhausting.

Finally, ***microassaults*** were actually identified by participants, but not as often as the other microaggressions. Again, these were more explicitly racist encounters, as the story of this Black female suggests:

> So, freshman year I had a roommate. You know, you're given like a random roommate. And, um, we were exchanging pictures through text message. And, like, after she got my picture the first thing she replied was: don't smoke weed in the room and don't steal my stuff. {gasps} And that whole year her mom would constantly come {mhm} visit her, and like, just be like, very…just the things she would say were borderline, just like rude? About me? Like, it was really…uncom—I felt constantly uncomfortable in that living

> space as well as, like, {mhm} in my hall living because, like no one would acknowledge me or talk to me, even after I'd say hi? It just really made me uncomfortable to be here, cuz, that was my first year of college, my first year being by myself without my parents, and then, I have to deal with, like, racism in a sense.

Interestingly, this student qualifies her use of "racism," as if she is uncertain that her experiences actually fall within the realm of the racism she has learned about elsewhere. Perhaps this is an insidious effect of microassaults: commitment of racist behaviors without direct blame as racism. This could leave the recipient in a state of ambivalence.

Throughout the narratives, the theme of ***distress*** emerged. It manifested mainly as stress but also as a condition that could have been depression. These students told tales of suffering, as in the words of this Black male:

> And I've noticed recently is what I've done is… I go back home and I get like very deeply depressed when I'm at home {mmm} not because I'm not happy at home but because all that time of just acting and performing for people--it's exhausting. That's my only time to rest, at home, you know, let all my emotions out.

This distress was always referenced in the context of talking about racial encounters or microagressions. Given the varying degrees of distress experienced by the students, the researchers inquired about the methods of coping. Mainly, their strategy was avoidance, as in not going near the source of stress (e.g. White peers). This was on par with confiding with trusted others, which was also a well-used strategy.

Note how this Black female, whom the reader encountered earlier, discusses her maneuvering campus, and her desire to avoid having to perform:

> Q: Ok, so it's really the White people who are, sort of excluded by you {mhm}, but you feel like they exclude you as well. {mhm} To some degree {mhm}, is what I'm hearing….why have you chosen to operate like that?
>
> A: Cuz they stress me out. {OK} And there's a lot of…I have to be cognizant of my behavior when I'm around them. Cognizant of what I'm saying when I'm around them, and cognizant of how I'm enacting my racial identity when I'm around them. How I dress, how my hair looks when I'm around them. And I'm just not {it's tiresome} I don't feel like doing that all the time. I don't! Like having a teacher tell me freshman year "you have a good brain," well I'm making sure I'm getting myself into classrooms where I have a brown teacher in front of me because this isn't gonna work {right}. [laughs] {right}. So, I made the conscious decision to move about the campus in a way that doesn't involve them.

This avoidance strategy was echoed time and time again, as evidenced by a Latinx student:

> Yeah, I'm very hesitant to just be outwardly friendly and trusting of White people? Not that they're all inherently bad, but it's more of, like a safeguard for myself {mhm*} I don't wanna put myself in a situation that just wastes my time, energy and, you know, really tests my emotional capacity.* So, yeah. That's just {ok} how I interact. [Emphasis added]

And a Black female:

> Q: Cool. So, um, what's your typical day at [PWI] like when it comes to being around people who don't share your ethnicity or race?

A: Um, it's pretty uncomfortable. I don't really like being around them, for the most part…I'm just really tired of hearing a lot of ignorance and I'm just like stay with people who look like me, so…that's what a typical day is like.

Confiding in trusted others was also a well-used strategy, and mainly entailed talking with friends or even faculty and staff the students trusted. Often these trusted others were found in safe spaces, as the interview with this Latinx female exemplified:

> Like, the [Dorm traditionally occupied by students of color] was like my savior because I felt like sometimes in the dorm rooms, like my freshman, sophomore year, I couldn't play music that was in Spanish. I couldn't walk out of the shower with my hair being frizzy and stuff. I had to compose myself. I had to do this code switching. And it was so hard because I would go home and at home I would listen to Spanish music. My food was smell [sic] a certain way. And then going back to those dorm rooms, it was just very, like, my mind. I couldn't wrap it around. So my friends, after sophomore year, I felt like they really helped me find my place and they helped me appreciate my ethnicity and my heritage a little more because here I felt like I had to hide it because it was a target on my back.

Yet students did not feel constrained in keeping their confidences to the campus setting:

> Having a relationship to [Northeast Coast City], too, is really, really important and integral to like, keeping me sane on this campus {OK}. So, I had an internship with [City] Playwrights from my freshman through my sophomore year, {mmm} Um, and then I had an internship with the [City theater #1], all throughout my junior year and I have, currently have an internship with [City theater #2], uh, and all three of those

> organizations I still have a really, really vibrant relationship with….And, so—and there's people in [City] that are like me? That are more like me {mhm}, uh, and I found, and that's a community of people that I love….That I cherish. You just learn to be independent and you just learn to, I guess the coping mechanism is finding those few people that you can trust, and, uh, to not, like, belabor them with all that emotional labor {right} and that's a hard line to walk.

A couple of students specifically mentioned the college counseling center, as in the case of this Black female:

> Well, I am a regular at Wellness [student counseling] and I talk to…I don't know if we can mention names—my therapist, I guess [laughs] {laughs} Um…she's really sweet, I really like her. I'll talk to her about it. She's really understanding—actually, she has her Ph.D. [softly, unsure] I think in Psychology or something? Or the study of…. yeah, something along the lines of that. Um, and she also, she specifically studied, like, the Black family {mhm}…and religion and Black family in different contexts, so I feel as though she can understand me, so I do speak with her sometimes about these situations.

Thus, despite being an all-White staff, counseling provided safety for at least this student.

One Black male, however, cut to the chase regarding such coping mechanisms, and the issue he raises shines a light on the problem with putting the onus on the students themselves:

> Like, I don't have an answer for that {hmmm} I haven't found a way to cope with it. Um, I mean the easiest way would be to go and talk to my Black friends or my friends who are people of color {mhm} that have similar experiences. But for me that's not…a solution, that's just me trying to fend and it doesn't really address the problem {mhm}?

> Like, it makes me feel better temporarily but now I get a little upset and I don't know how to deal with it.

There were at least a couple of students, however, who also used these opportunities to educate their peers. As one Black male stated, "I have like a certain acceptance level {right} It's an arbitrary… like there are certain microaggressions that I'm willing to accept (mhm} In this day and age no one can be perfect, so… {right} I'll try to correct them." Yet, this was not the norm:

> Q: …do you have someone to confide in, or something you can throw yourself into, uh, do you respond right away, try to educate people?
>
> A: No. {OK} I don't educate people. Um… the internet is a thing? If you really want to be aware there are videos, there are podcasts, there are books. {mhm} I'm not going to educate you, it's not my job. I think that I have done that enough that I'm tired of it and for the most part I don't really care enough. I don't care. You can find the information on your own and if you have questions you can obviously ask me or ask someone else, who's probably more willing, but I don't care. Um…I just talk about it with my Black friends, I mean we've all had experiences like that and we all relate to each other on that level, so it's just like, yeah. {mhm} "They're at it again?" I'm like, "yeah, pretty much."

There were other cited ways of coping, such as finding safe spaces or losing themselves in their studies, but the aforementioned strategies were discussed most often. As these stories unfolded and the themes within emerged, so did a picture of what appeared to be happening. Macro- and microaggressions lead to forms of distress which, for some students, demand performance

around their White peers and perhaps professors, which in turn causes more distress. The hope is that they cope well with this distress. One such way is through confiding in a trusted other—including a counselor--who might give constructive feedback and advice. A favored survival strategy, however, is avoidance (see figure 1 for a visual of the processes).

Conclusion

Microaggressions are an ambiguous area for some, scholars and laypersons alike, and this causes great discomfort, particularly when race and racism is at the crux. Here the author used the definitions of Sue, et al. (2007), expanded upon them and coded micro- and even macroaggressions (e.g. environmental microaggressions) along with other a priori phenomena of interest to explore these experiences in students of color at a small PWI. Along with the a priori codes, given the phenomenological method, codes based upon participants' experiences, thoughts and feelings also emerged and added to the story. To be sure, each story was unique and had its own narrative, but the major themes cohered around a few significant areas as outlined above. To begin to wrap up, next is a response to some exceptions Lilienfeld and others seem to take with the "microaggressions research program." It would be an oversight to pretend as though these valid concerns do not exist.

Those skeptical of the MRP might see a certain "double-bind" in related situations. For instance, for the young lady who was targeted for having a "good brain", is this not a compliment? Are instructors not supposed to comment especially on the outstanding qualities of students of color? Yet, from the young lady's perspective, commenting on her "biology" seems to reduce the matter to that of genetics and race, and implies that she is one of the fortunate ones. A simple word choice might make all the difference in the world. And perhaps this is what disturbs the detractors, for they ought not to feel as though they have to walk on eggshells.

Next, the naysayers protest the self-reported nature of microaggressions in the research, and it is true that this comprises the majority of the research as opposed to, say, observational, naturalistic research. The current study is not exempt from this criticism. Indeed, the method used celebrates the fact that these are self-report data and no less valid. However, it is not enough to dismiss a concern about mono-source bias, and in the future perhaps multiple methodologies can converge to produce more information regarding microaggression experiences. For the present, the current author can state that there is a participant-observer quality to the present research as well, as the author is a Black professor at this PWI, attuned to racial nuances in interactions. The author has both witnessed and experienced racial microaggressions on campus, although previously not in the systematic way that research entails. Again, this added bit of information might unsettle some readers, as they might see the author as "too close" to the subject and therefore not unbiased.

Causal assumptions is another problem raised by the MRP critics. How can one easily make the leap from microaggressions to distress (i.e. harm) when a third variable could be causing the problem, like personality? From a Five factor model perspective, negative emotionality, neuroticism, is the trait of interest (Lilienfeld 2017; 2020), and this point criticizes researchers for conflating something like neuroticism, which would be correlated with high levels of depression, with microaggressions, which perhaps highly neurotic people are simply more likely to perceive given their tendency to interpret ambiguous cues negatively. Lilienfeld seems particularly interested in the role of hostile attribution bias (2020). Making causal inferences is a fair criticism. In the current study, the inferences were made by the students, themselves. It is difficult to believe that all the students in the study are high in neuroticism.

The current clinically-trained psychologist did not see indicators of neuroticism in general. However, longitudinal research would help clarify relationships.

Another problem mentioned by Lilienfeld refers to the institutional implications of the conclusions of the research. Finding that microaggressions exist and are harmful might prematurely lead institutions to enact training programs that work against these racist practices. Such programs might result in a reactive stance rather than compliance, which is against the goals of administrators basing practices on the MRP. However, as with any program, the process is as important as the content. A well-led and designed program need not promote reactance but rather steadily become part of an inclusive culture (see, for instance Dunn, Chambers, Cho & Cheng, 2022 for a discussion of program designs for future counselors).

At the end of the day, it's hard to say that the differences can be resolved beyond epistemology. The best way to move forward is to continue acknowledging and addressing the criticisms while also extending the research into further areas (e.g. the longitudinal and naturalistic research suggested above and by others such as Ong & Burrow, 2017, and Torino, et al., 2019b.) Microaggressions are a complicated matter, deserving of a complex array of interdisciplinary approaches. This study provided unadulterated narratives and transparent interpretations of these narratives. Understandably, it might add more questions to detractors' minds rather than settle them.

So what now? Should college faculty and staff working with distressed students of color address distorted cognitions, as the naysayers seem to suggest, or rather adaptive ways of coping with microaggressive experiences and/or a micro-/macroaggressive environment? Would either or both of these approaches be feeding into microaggressive transgressions on the part of these "helpers"? Certainly suggesting that the distressed students have distorted perceptions is going

up that alley, and just by virtue of being an individual intervention rather than an environmental intervention, there is the danger that students feel that the problem is being located within themselves, as one of the participants intimated above. The larger question is whether the onus should be on the students of color. Should attention be given to macro-level changes and attempts to change campus culture (as would be a disaster, according to some naysayers, e.g. Haidt, 2017)? If so, how might college faculty and staff (e.g. student affairs) be involved?

After the author reviewed the literature on microaggressions, listened to the anecdotal stories of microaggressive suffering, and then systematically gathered and analyzed her own data on the subject, her conclusion is that they are real, harmful and need to be addressed immediately. This despite that others (e.g. Lilienfeld 2017a) conclude there is inadequate evidence to show that impacts are harmful. One can only surmise that they are viewing the issue from the perspective of "the hunter" and this author from that of "the lion" (Sue 2017). Both perspectives have validity, but must be tempered with balance. Empirical and experiential reality need not be an either/or choice. If institutions of higher education want to create inclusive environments, then it seems that a blind eye cannot be turned to microaggressions.

Though this study contributes to the ongoing discussion on microaggressions, it is limited by several factors. The sample size is small, limiting generalizability, as in the case with many qualitative studies. Because of timing issues, interrater reliability could not be established, nor could member checking take place. Future, larger studies should also examine some of the personal correlates of and responses to microaggressions, such as the role of gender and ethnic or racial identity. Furthermore, it might be worth knowing whether there is a causal relationship between microaggressions and stereotype threat. Previous research has shown that microaggressions have a negative cognitive impact (Carter, 2017; Nadal, et al., 2014; Torino, et

al., 2018a), and perhaps stereotype vulnerability plays a role in this. Avenues for intervention should be explored, and the meso- and macrolevels should not be ignored in these investigations.

Macroaggressions comprised nearly 50% of the talk about aggressive acts. This suggests that this is an area that is probably more complicated than we have been treating it, and perhaps studies should look more closely at these harmful environmental elements. Mesoaggressions, particularly, are so culturally embedded they are likely taken for granted. The revised taxonomies (e.g. Williams, 2021) are steps in the right direction. More research is needed to fill in the blanks.

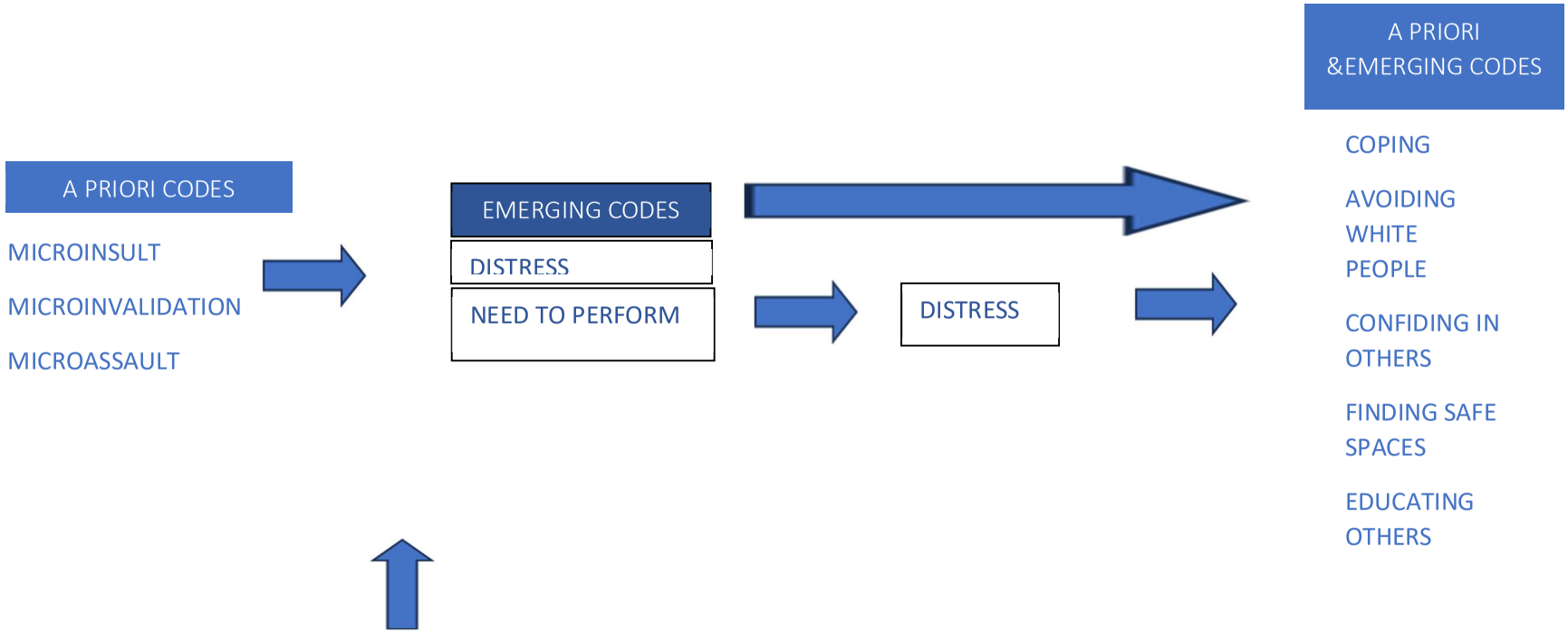

Figure 1

Students of Colors' Experiences with Microaggressions

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