

African International Teaching Assistants' Experience of Racial Microaggressions in a Canadian Higher Education Institution

William Ankomah

Brock University, Canada

Abstract

Pervasive racial microaggressions (subtle and everyday racist acts) continue to challenge African international teaching assistants (AITAs) who strive to create conducive learning environments for students in a Canadian university. This qualitative study drew from racial microaggression theory and gathered data through semi-structured individual interviews to examine seven former AITAs' experiences of racism in their teaching assistant (TA) duties. Findings indicated that non-Black students doubted AITAs' subject-matter expertise, undermined their English communication skills, and often exhibited aggressive behaviours. Suggestions were made for current and future AITAs, course instructors, and universities that hire them to help improve the quality of AITAs' duties and their students' learning experiences. As previous studies largely overlook AITAs' experiences with racial microaggressions, this study makes significant contributions to the literature that, in turn, can inform policy.

Keywords: racial microaggression, racism, Black African, international teaching assistants, human rights

Background of the Study

This study considered racial microaggression—subtle and everyday racist acts (Sue et al., 2007)—theory to investigate the racism encountered by former African international teaching assistants (AITAs) while fulfilling their teaching assistant (TA) duties. In this paper, I use racial microaggression and racism interchangeably because, like Ramjattan (2020), I believe that all racial microaggressions are racist acts. TAs' contributions to the university students' overall academic and social development are well documented (Dawson et al., 2013; Jones et al., 2020; Korpan, 2014; Piccinin et al., 1993), and despite the 20-year gap between Piccinin et al.'s (1993) and Korpan's (2014) respective studies, they agree about the complexities involved in learning in a graduate program and fulfilling TA duties. For instance, Piccinin et al.'s summary observation that TAs “conduct quiz sections or laboratories for lecture courses, provide tutorial sessions, grade exams, review tests and answer questions, hold office hours, and, less frequently, hold total responsibility for courses” (p. 105) are confirmed by Korpan's and the current study's findings. Considering TAs' workload and their intrinsic human rights, it is troubling that AITAs are subjected to racial microaggressions (and concomitant psychological effects) that hinder their job performance. Fitch and Morgan (2003) and Jones et al. (2020) observe that universities continue to rely heavily on TAs to facilitate undergraduate courses which enhances institutions' capacity to increase student enrolment and reduce faculty members' workload. Therefore, TAs are an asset for universities, and it is crucial that institutional leaders do more than merely train new TAs (including AITAs); they also must address the racial microaggressive encounters of TAs and AITAs moderating seminars, labs, and classes of predominantly White undergraduate students.

Racial microaggressions in White-dominated institutions are well documented in the literature (e.g., Bowden & Buie, 2021; Houshmand et al., 2014; Jones et al., 2020; Sue et al., 2007; Wong et al., 2014). In addition, because of phenotypical differences, Black bodies in White-dominated institutions and societies continue to experience racial injustices and oppression regardless of their qualifications (Bowden & Buie, 2021; Creese & Kambere, 2003; Dei, 1999; Hemens, 2022; James, 2012). Regrettably, racial microaggressions experienced by AITAs in Canadian higher education institutions are subsumed under the general umbrella of the racism faced by international students and international teaching assistants (ITAs). For example, in their respective studies of racial microaggressions in Canadian higher education settings, Agbaire (2019) and Houshmand et al. (2014) point out racist behaviours among dominant (i.e., White) students, such as the mockery of accents and avoidance of racialized students. Ramjattan's (2020) study of ITAs' experience in an Ontario university's engineering program noted similarly racial microaggressions attributed to ITAs' so-called “unintelligible” accented English. Due to the lack of literature on how AITAs experience racial microaggressions in their TA duties, this paper is important because it sheds light on how

former AITAs in a Canadian institution encountered racial microaggressions in their practice because of their Black identities.

In Rao's (1995) paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association, the "oh no! syndrome" (p. 3) was used to describe the reactions of domestic students in the U.S. when they became aware that their TAs were international students. Also, in the US, Yook and Albert (1999) highlight how undergraduate students' "perceptions of the communicative competencies of ITAs in their second language, English" (p. 16) are interpreted as the "ITA problem" (p. 15). Again, in the US, undergraduate student participants of Fitch and Morgan's (2003) study constructed the identities of ITAs as TAs who "couldn't speak a lick of English" (p. 302). Although some of the literature cited above is more than two decades old, the findings are still relevant in today's context. Indeed, more recent studies of racial microaggressions in White-dominated institutions (e.g., Agbaire, 2019; Houshmand et al., 2014; Jones et al., 2020; Ramjattan, 2020; Wong et al., 2014) confirm that the racial encounters of minoritized students and groups rage on. For instance, in a recent news release by New Canadian Media, Hemens (2022) shares the racial microaggression stories of three racialized immigrant professors who recount experiencing microaggressive behaviours such as mocking of accents and the everyday belittling of their intelligence by students and colleagues (faculty members) alike.

To expose racial injustices for redress, the current study asked: "How did former AITAs experience racism in their work?" This question identified the specific ways seven former AITAs encountered racial microaggressions while fulfilling their assigned TA duties, the results of which generated suggestions for how current and future AITAs, course instructors, and universities could improve the ITA experience both for TAs as well as for students. As already pointed out, this study sought former AITAs' experiences of racism in their TA work. Therefore, the study aims to remind non-Black students and higher education leaders about various ways AITAs experience racial microaggressions in their work and the negative impact such racialized aggression has on these student-teachers. Also, the study aims to empower AITAs to prevail despite the pervasive racial microaggressions in their TA environment.

Theoretical Framework—Racial Microaggression

Racial microaggression theory provided the lens to identify relevant literature, frame the research question, collect and analyze data, and discuss the findings of this study. In addition, the theory effectively provided the knowledge and language to identify, understand, and interpret the racism experienced by AITAs in their TA work.

In their article titled "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice," Sue et al. (2007) advanced the concept of racial microaggression initially theorized by Chester Pierce in the early 1970s. According to Sue et al. (2007), "racial microaggressions are brief and

commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group” (p. 273). On their part, Delgado and Stefancic (2001) explain the general meaning of microaggressions as “one of those sudden, stunning, or dispiriting transactions that mar the days of women and folks of color” (p. 1). From the literature, regardless of the context and the scholars involved in defining racial microaggression or microaggression of any kind, the message remains the same: Microaggressions are ugly, unwarranted, and dehumanizing. Therefore, it is crucial that the dominant group whose values, beliefs, and practices determine how knowledge is constructed and used (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017) actively participates in addressing microaggressions encountered by minoritized folks to create a healthier society in which, for example, race, gender, and/or orientation do not cause one to be mistreated or discriminated against.

Participants in the current study, all former AITAs, endured the burden of racism from the same undergraduate students whose learning they were assigned to facilitate. According to all seven participants, regardless of how welcoming and approachable they tried to be for students in their seminars, the teaching and learning environment was always imbued with racial microaggression. The racially toxic learning environment made the AITA participants in this study bear never-ending racism directed at their work. Through the prism of this study’s racial microaggression lens, I argue that consciously and/or unconsciously disrespecting AITAs merely because they were Black and from Africa, and had so-called heavy accents, constitutes racism and should be named as such. After all, one would expect that in an official multicultural country like Canada, non-Black undergraduate students are aware of the different races, cultures and accents that share the same space with them. However, amid an unwelcome and sometimes hostile learning environment predicated on the fear of difference (Dei, 1999, 2014; Ghosh & Galczynsk, 2014), ridiculing ITAs’ accents is summarily a racial microaggression (Gautam et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2020; Kim & Kim, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007; Ramjattan, 2020). Hence, I argue that such embarrassing racist occurrences in higher education teaching and learning spaces should be condemned in no uncertain terms as they infringe on the human rights of AITAs. The negative experiences of this study’s participants require Canadian institutions to ensure that “the everyday slights and insults that minoritized people endure and dominant people don’t notice or concern themselves with” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 72) are named and transformed to promote better interracial and cultural relationships.

Method and Methodology

This qualitative study used snowball sampling to recruit seven participants who identified as former AITAs at a Canadian university. Snowball sampling (Creswell, 2013) helped identify participants who had the stories needed to answer the research question. After participants gave their verbal consent, pseudonyms were assigned to protect their identities and maintain confidentiality. Four of the participants identified as

men, and three identified as women. All participants identified as Black people from Africa who had been in Canada two years prior to data collection and had completed their TA work eight months before the interviews.

Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews, which ensured that the scope of the information was broad, and the depth was adequate to answer the research question. Participants narrated their experiences of racial microaggression in their TA work and were probed for emphasis and clarifications. The interviews were conducted in the participants' respective homes (at their request) because they felt more comfortable sharing their stories at home. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and all respondents participated in member checking to confirm accuracy of the information (Tilley, 2016). The duration of each interview was an average of 40 minutes. Data were coded in NVivo qualitative software (Welsh, 2002) to establish the study's key themes discussed in the next section.

Findings and Discussion

Using the literature on ITAs, international students, and the theoretical lens of racial microaggression, this section presents and discusses the study's key findings. The study's primary research question—How did former AITAs experience racism in their work?—generated three key themes: (a) doubting AITAs' subject-matter expertise, (b) non-racialized students undermined AITAs' English communication skills and (c) student aggression.

Doubting AITAs' Subject-Matter Expertise

Undergraduate degrees in countries such as the US and Canada come with significant financial costs (e.g., students' tuition and ancillary fees). Hence, students have a right to demand high-quality education from course instructors and TAs. Given that premise, although Piccinin et al.'s (1993) study is nearly three-decades old, their argument that “those who pay the fees expect to find a qualified instructor [and TAs] in the laboratory or classroom and, at a minimum, effective TA training and evaluation may allay some of their concerns” (p. 116) is still valid. As an educator, maintaining high-quality education and pedagogical practices are things that I believe should not be compromised so students (and their relatives and friends) can be satisfied with the years-long investments they made. Unfortunately, the literature reveals dissatisfied undergraduate students taught by ITAs (Fitch & Morgan, 2003; Jones et al., 2020; Korpan, 2014). Fitch and Morgan (2003), for example, shared how participants “complained that their own and their family's investment was being lost by the ITA experience” (p. 306) because of ITAs' perceived incompetence in the subject matter.

The findings of the current study confirm those of previous studies that indicate a lack of appreciation of the knowledge of different cultures and backgrounds by undergraduate students in White-dominated institutions. Richard's comment illustrates this point:

Obviously, my students needed help, but at the same time, they preferred going to different labs where the lab assistants were White Canadians rather than coming to mine. Meanwhile, I was the lab assistant assigned to facilitate a course I am really good at.

The narrative of Richard, a former AITA of science courses, exemplifies how some undergraduate students might have felt the “oh no!” syndrome (Rao, 1995) because they doubted their AITA’s intelligence. From Richard’s account and the racial microaggression theory informing this study, I argue that such mistrust is borne out of racism (Agbaire, 2019; Bowden & Buie, 2021; Hemens, 2022; Ramjattan, 2020) which motivates some White students to avoid having any learning relationship with AITAs. Again, from a racial microaggression perspective, the actions of White undergraduate students who ask to be switched from Black/African lab assistants to White lab demonstrators smack of racism and should be handled with the contempt it deserves for redress.

Racial prejudice toward AITAs is beyond the fear of difference (Ghosh & Galczynski, 2014) and aligns well with the denial of racism and anti-Black racism (Bowden & Buie, 2021; Dei, 1999, 2014; James, 2012) in Western institutions. Whatever the motivation is for undergraduate students living and studying in culturally and racially diverse societies and institutions to distrust the competencies and subject-matter expertise of AITAs is not something that could be thoroughly discussed and understood without considering racism as a central factor (Bowden & Buie, 2021; Dei, 1999, 2014; Hemens, 2022). The data revealed that participants in the current study had love and admiration for the institution that admitted them and provided partial funding and part-time TA positions to sponsor their international studies. Therefore, they were poised to give their best to their students as an expression of gratitude. For instance, Joyce, who was a TA for math and statistics courses, shared that

leaving for further studies overseas was a dream, and the fact that the institution provided partial funding and offered an opportunity to work and earn money while studying was fabulous, and I will forever be grateful despite the racism I experienced in my TA work.

For David, who provided TA duties in several sociology courses, the racial microaggression and anti-Black racism he encountered in his assignments disturbed him a lot. According to David, he developed a positive rapport with the students he taught during his TA duties at a university in his home country (Ghana) and was shocked by his Canadian undergraduate students’ adverse reactions. David noted in our interview:

My international TA colleagues told me similar stories about how hard they tried to build better relationships with their students to create a conducive teaching and learning environment, but they ran into difficulties, and we all believe that our Black and international identities were the main reasons. You know, it hurts; it really hurts to realize that about a third of your students have no confidence in your abilities to facilitate their learning because of who you are and where you come from.

From David's narrative, AITAs' inability to build positive teaching and learning relationships and create safe spaces for both students and TAs to thrive does not promote AITAs' well-being, which is not suitable for the institution's image nor that of the country that hosts them. Moreover, what is baffling is that although the AITA participants in this study had the requisite knowledge and were willing to support their students, anti-Black racism crept in to prevent students and TAs from fully engaging in and benefiting from the teaching and learning process.

To ensure that TAs, including ITAs, are well prepared for the task of facilitating and moderating seminars and labs and sometimes teaching undergraduate courses, it is important to point out that there are TA preparatory programs such as the Teaching Assistant Training Program (TATP) and Teaching in the Canadian Classroom (TCC) offered in many Canadian institutions to TAs and ITAs (Dawson et al., 2013). According to Dawson et al., the latter two programs include 10-minute micro-teaching blocks and the chance to receive and give feedback to improve TAs'/ITAs' pedagogical practices while improving intercultural communication. While I agree with these scholars that all TAs need adequate preparation to do quality work in their assigned duties, it is also vital to point out that regardless of the competencies and subject-matter expertise of the former AITAs in the current study, many of their students doubted the quality of their knowledge. The data also revealed that all seven participants participated in workshops similar to the TATP and TCC to learn about the institution's (Canadian) classroom cultures, including navigating the challenges of facilitating lessons in seminars and labs of diverse student populations and providing constructive feedback. In addition, all seven participants took advantage of free two-hour TA seminars on Saturday mornings to hone their teaching skills. Thus, the "oh no!" syndrome and complaints about ITAs' incompetence are products of racial microaggression that communicate to non-racialized students that they are superior to their racialized TAs, explaining why they rather would have people who look phenotypically like them to facilitate their classes and labs.

Non-Racialized Students Undermined AITAs' English Communication Skills

According to Dawson et al. (2013), "international graduate students preparing to teach at Canadian universities face a challenging task. They are preparing to teach in a second language and ... communication style may differ significantly from expectations in their home culture" (p. 7). In other words, Dawson et al. are reminding ITAs whose first language is not English or whose English language is vastly different from how the dominant White Canadian undergraduate students speak and use it in their academic work to be aware of potential communication challenges with the students they will be assigned to TA. Congruent with Creese and Kambere's (2003) study in which African-born Canadian women experienced racism in their workplaces due to their accents, respondents in the current research shared that they knew of differences in accents. Still, they thought that would not pose significant communication challenges or induce racism in their TA duties—an experience shared by the Canadian immigrant professors in Hemen's (2022) news

article. From the data, participants believed in their English language capabilities because, like Creese and Kambere's study's participants, all respondents of the current study came from former British colonies (Ghana, Kenya, and Nigeria) where the official language and medium of instruction remain the Queen's English.

Unfortunately, all participants shared that some students openly made fun of their accents and imitated them to create laughter during seminars, confirming the findings of Brown and Jones' (2013) study and Hemen's (2022) news article. For example, in my interview with Joyce, she shared the following:

Sometimes when I was responding to questions, students winked at each other, and some passed comments like ... "what's that" to create laughter. Some disrespectfully told me that my accent was too thick and heavy and made no sense. What was striking was that I understood every word they spoke, but some of them claimed they did not understand a word I said in seminars.

Joyce draws attention to the ridiculing of her accent and students' uncooperative attitude and lack of effort to appreciate and understand the English language spoken by a Black African TA because of cultural and racial differences, confirming the findings of Creese and Kambere's (2003) study in which Canadian employers found the African-English accents "heavy," limiting the employment chances of African-born Canadian women. The experience of Joyce and other participants in the current study is documented in the racial microaggression literature as subtle but hurtful encounters of ITAs (Gautam et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2020; Kim & Kim, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007). Gautam et al. (2016), Jones et al. (2020), Kim and Kim (2010), and Lee and Rice (2007) all argue that ridiculing ITAs' accents is racial microaggression directed at the nationalities and cultures of the targets.

James, a former TA of undergraduate science courses, tried to play down the effects of student mockery of his accent:

It didn't really affect me that much, probably because I have some experience in teaching. I had been a TA for 3 years in my home country, so I dealt with university students for a while. The racism and microaggression I encountered because of my so-called heavy accent, I will say, are just some of the occupational hazards.

Unfortunately, James' reaction to the blatant racism he encountered for having a different accent indicates how easily victims of racism can internalize racial injustices and oppression (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017), which ultimately serves to keep racism in place. I wonder how acts of racism could be classified and accepted as occupational hazards that the victim could tolerate. Again, James' approach to dealing with racism is why scholars such as Dei (1999, 2014) argue that the perpetrator and victim of racism are both complicit and implicated in the racism that continues to devastate people's lives because of different phenotypical features and cultural backgrounds.

Student Aggression

In Fitch and Morgan's (2010) research about the perceptions undergraduate students at a university in the U.S. had about ITAs, they identified that students often misbehaved towards ITAs during classes to express their frustrations of not learning with domestic TAs; some of Fitch and Morgan's participants admitted engaging in "derisive laughter, disrespectful gestures like throwing hands in the air, disrespectful comments, and general noncompliance" (p. 302). In other words, rather than embracing the linguistic styles, pedagogical approaches, and cultural and racial backgrounds of their ITAs to advance their own learning, such students engaged in all kinds of racial microaggressions (Houshmand et al., 2014; Jones et al., 2020) to make their ITAs' experiences miserable. The current study's findings align with those of Fitch and Morgan's because AITA participants narrated how some of their students exhibited aggressive behaviours towards them because of their deficit thoughts about Africans and Black people. For example, according to John, before students went for reading week during his first semester as a sociology TA, he asked them to evaluate his performance and offer suggestions for improvement. As John recounted,

About 50% of the students said they were okay and encouraged me to give them more chances for group discussions. However, the other half made me regret asking for their feedback. They ripped me into pieces with comments like ... "you are the most boring TA I ever had," "you are too slow for us," "how did you become a TA?" and "You suck!" These students did not give me a single suggestion to improve seminar activities.

John's experience is not shocking to anti-racist scholars (Dei, 1999, 2014; James, 2012; Solomon et al., 2003) because they know the ongoing racial injustices experienced by Black students in North American institutions. As John noted, some students could not wait to have him out of their sight, and their comments demonstrate the cruelty and inhumane treatment of fellow humans who are not part of the dominant group. Also, Amelia, Anna, and John recounted how they felt threatened and insecure in their respective seminar sessions because students were incensed at them for scoring low on some assignments.

From this study's findings and the racial microaggression literature, I argue that anti-Black racism has made undergraduate students insensitive to the vulnerable positions of AITAs who are studying and working without a support network—that is, away from their relatives and friends. Regrettably, anti-Black racism continues to dehumanize Black bodies and intelligence well into the 21st century, making it easier for non-Black students to treat AITAs with impunity. For example, if not for racism, how could a TA trying to use data to improve his practice receive such unwelcome comments from the same students whose feedback was intended to foster their learning?

Recommendations

From the findings of the current study, I offer the following suggestions to help current and future AITAs navigate the tropes of racism they will encounter in their TA duties because of their race and

nationalities:

Current and Incoming AITAs in White-Dominated Institutions

1. AITAs should be aware of racial microaggression in their TA work. It would help if, during their first interactions, AITAs reminded students that, like themselves, everyone had a different English accent, and no accent is superior to another. Therefore, it is crucial that they all work in concert to ensure that communication promotes understanding.
2. AITAs should be aware that they temporarily live and study in a social environment that is rife with racism (Dei, 1999, 2014; James, 2012); therefore, they should not be distracted from delivering quality TA services to their students. Instead, they should model love by retaining their composure and maintaining positive attitudes in the face of adversities.
3. AITAs are encouraged to involve their course instructors, unions, and department/faculty leaders in dealing with the sarcasm, prejudices, and racial microaggressions they experience in their TA work. They should also document all instances of racism to support their case.
4. AITAs are encouraged to respectfully draw their students' attention to any racial prejudices and racist actions they identify in their interactions with them. Ignoring racial microaggressions in the classroom may fuel its spread. Therefore, AITAs should act decisively without fear in order to promote and protect their own mental health and dignity.
5. Finally, AITAs should prioritize a student-centered approach whereby students do not spend an inordinate amount of time listening to AITAs lecture. Instead, AITAs should encourage students to engage in group work to address well-thought-out questions that challenge and motivate students to learn and discover knowledge for themselves.

Course Instructors Who Work With AITAs/ITAs

1. In addition to the institution-sanctioned TA training, course instructors are also encouraged to discuss course content with their AITAs and discuss the possible cultural shocks and challenges that new AITAs will encounter in their TA duties.
2. Course instructors are also encouraged to share the credentials, backgrounds, and biographies of AITAs to the students they are assigned to TA. Participants believe that sharing their qualifications and experiences ahead of time may allow students to appreciate and build better relationships with their AITAs.
3. Course instructors are encouraged to clearly discuss the TAs' duties at the outset of courses. This will reduce students' unrealistic expectations, such as expecting their TAs to teach them instead of being facilitators of the learning process. It is never advisable to allow TAs to begin their job without clarifying their duties.

4. Given North American classrooms' growing diversity, the university should encourage course instructors to incorporate culturally relevant resources and human rights components into their courses.
5. Course instructors should check in regularly with their AITAs to find out specifically about TA–student relationships. These conversations should focus on assisting AITAs, regardless of the challenges, to create safe spaces for teaching and learning to happen while the mental health and well-being of all actors is prioritized.

Universities Employing AITAs to Augment the Work of Instructors

1. Universities are encouraged to empower departments that are directly in charge of TAs to organize various asynchronous workshops beyond the few synchronous ones currently offered to ITAs and domestic TAs, such as the TATP and TCC (Dawson et al., 2013). Also, some of the workshops should be mandatory for all TAs. These workshops could cover topics such as microaggressions due to race, gender, religious and sexual orientations, ability, and nationality. The above should not replace the language support and classroom management practices given to new TAs.
2. Also, universities are encouraged to provide large and small group cultural and racial sensitivity education (Yook & Albert, 1999) to all students. Such workshops should be organized at least a week before classes begin, and another one immediately after reading week. Topics should include racism and its effects on Black and other racialized ITAs and how students could contribute to building safe, supportive, and caring seminars, labs, and classrooms for themselves and their ITAs.
3. Universities are encouraged to include Black and racialized faculty members in policymaking and governance. Because Black faculty members face similar anti-Black racism and racial microaggression (Jones et al., 2020), they have adequate knowledge and experience to help institutions formulate robust policies and programs to inform, educate, support, and reprimand students and faculty members who knowingly make life difficult for AITAs and other racialized groups on campus.
4. Also, universities should pay attention to challenges AITAs and other ITAs encounter to help them navigate their new environment with fewer difficulties. Dealing with culture shock, adjusting to a new academic environment, and preparing to facilitate seminars and labs could be intimidating; hence, all ITAs can benefit from institutional leaders' proactive support. For example, support could come from the committees in charge of teaching assistantships, the unions, and the department administering TA training to respond to ITA questions and concerns.
5. Finally, university authorities are also encouraged to establish student justice centers and ensure that employees of these centers reflect the diversity of the student population. This will encourage racialized students encountering racism to seek support without fear.

Conclusion

In this paper, using microaggression theory to explore how former AITAs encountered racism in their practice, I have shone a light on how former AITAs experienced racism in their TA assignments. I also have offered suggestions to current and prospective AITAs, course instructors who work with AITAs/ITAs, and institutional leaders on how to support all ITAs regardless of background to enjoy a successful TA experience with their predominantly White undergraduate students. Therefore, this paper joins scholars who have asked for better training for ITAs and domestic TAs (Dawson et al., 2013; Fitch & Morgan, 2003; Jones et al., 2020; Korpan, 2014; Piccinin et al., 1993; Rao, 1995; Yook & Albert, 1999) to better facilitate the learning of the students they are assigned to support.

Based on the findings of this study and the literature, the “training should move past individual interactions to address the structural inequities that affect ITAs’ success” (Jones et al., 2020, p. 496). Expanding the scope of the current ITA and TA training to include equity, diversity, inclusion, social justice, and human rights issues and initiatives in the teaching and learning process will promote the well-being of AITAs, as well as that of all TAs and their students. As Williams (2021) observed, “microaggressions and everyday discrimination have been linked to numerous mental-health problems as well as physical health problems and poor quality of life” (p. 881), and it is deplorable that AITAs in this study experienced mental duress in their TA duties. For Amelia and Joyce, the psychological effects of the racism experienced in their respective seminars weighed on them to the point that no matter how prepared they were for class, both wished the seminars were already over before they even began. From the literature (Fitch & Morgan, 2003; Yook & Albert, 1999) and findings of the current study, I argue that students taught by AITAs have a role to play in fostering a safe and respectful learning space for themselves and their TAs, and regardless of how they feel about AITAs, they have a lot to gain by becoming more receptive to the intelligence, language, and different but equally valid pedagogical approaches of their AITAs.

Disclaimer

Initial findings of this study were presented at the Decolonizing Conference CIARS 2016, OISE, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON.

References

- Agbaire, E. (2019). *Microaggressions: Black students’ experiences of racism on campus* [Master’s thesis, University of Ottawa]. uO Research. <https://ruor.uottawa.ca/handle/10393/39694>
- Bowden, A. K., & Buie, C. R. (2021). Anti-Black racism in academia and what you can do about it. *Nature Reviews Materials*, 6(9), 760-761. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41578-021-00361-5>

- Brown, L., & Jones, I. (2013). Encounters with racism and the international student experience. *Studies in Higher Education, 38*(7), 1004–1019. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.614940>
- Creese, G., & Kambere, E. N. (2003). What colour is your English? *Canadian Review of Sociology, 40*(5), 565–573. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1755-618X.2003.tb00005.x>
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). SAGE.
- Dawson, D. L., Dimitrov, N., Meadows, K. N., & Olsen, K. (2013). *Bridging the gap: The impact of the “Teaching in the Canadian Classroom” program on the teaching effectiveness of international teaching assistants*. Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario. https://heqco.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/ITAs_ENG.pdf
- Dei, G. J. S. (1999). The denial of difference: Reframing anti-racist praxis. *Race Ethnicity and Education, 2*(1), 17–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332990020103>
- Dei, G. J. S. (2014). Personal reflections on anti-racism education for a global context. *Encounters in Theory and History of Education, 15*, 239–249. <https://doi.org/10.24908/eoe-ese-rse.v15i0.5153>
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2001). *Critical race theory: An introduction*. NYU Press.
- Fitch, F., & Morgan, S. E. (2003). “Not a lick of English”: Constructing the ITA identity through student narratives. *Communication Education, 52*(3–4), 297–310. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0363452032000156262>
- Gautam, C., Lowery, C. L., Mays, C., & Durant, D. (2016). Challenges for global learners: A qualitative study of the concerns and difficulties of international students. *Journal of International Students, 6*(2), 501–526. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v6i2.368>
- Ghosh, R., & Galczynski, M. (2014). *Redefining multicultural education: Inclusion and the right to be different*. Canadian Scholars’ Press.
- Hemens, A. (2022, May 5). *Immigrant professors say they need to “act white” in Canadian academia*. New Canadian Media. Retrieved from <https://newcanadianmedia.ca/immigrant-professors-say-they-need-to-act-white-in-canadian-academia/>
- Houshmand, S., Spanierman, L. B., & Tafarodi, R. W. (2014). Excluded and avoided: Racial microaggressions targeting Asian international students in Canada. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 20*(3), 377–388. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0035404>
- James, C. E. (2012). Students “at risk” stereotypes and the schooling of Black boys. *Urban Education, 47*(2), 464–494. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0042085911429084>
- Jones, V. A., Kim, Y., & Ryu, W. (2020). Intersecting roles of authority and marginalization: International teaching assistants and research university power dynamics. *Journal of International Students, 10*(2), 483–500. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v10i2.757>

- Kim, S., & Kim, R. H. (2010). Microaggressions experienced by international students attending U.S. institutions of higher education. In D. W. Sue (Ed.), *Microaggressions and marginality: Manifestations, dynamics, and impact* (pp. 171–191). Wiley.
- Korpan, C. J. (2014). The apprenticeship of teaching assistants: Time to change? *Transformative Dialogues: Teaching and Learning Journal*, 7(3), 1–17.
<https://td.journals.psu.edu/td/article/view/1185>
- Lee, J., & Rice, C. (2007). Welcome to America? International student perceptions of discrimination. *Higher Education*, 53, 381–409. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-005-4508-3>
- Piccinin, S. J., Farquharson, A., & Mihiu, E. (1993). Teaching assistants in Canadian universities: An unknown resource. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 23(2), 104–117.
<https://doi.org/10.47678/cjhe.v23i2.183164>
- Ramjattan, V. A. (2020). Engineered accents: International teaching assistants and their microaggression learning in engineering departments. *Teaching in Higher Education*.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2020.1863353>
- Rao, N. (1995, May 25–29). *The Oh No! syndrome: A language-expectation model of undergraduates' negative reactions toward foreign teaching assistants* [Paper presentation]. Annual meeting of the International Communication Association, Albuquerque, New Mexico.
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED384921.pdf>
- Sensoy, Ö., & DiAngelo, R. (2017). *Is everyone really equal? An introduction to key concepts in social justice education*. Teachers College Press.
- Solomon, R. P., Levine-Rasky, C., & Singer, J. (2003). *Teaching for equity and diversity: Research to practice*. Canadian Scholars' Press.
- Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A., Nadal, K. L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice. *American Psychologist*, 62(4), 271–286. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066x.62.4.271>
- Tilley, S. A. (2016). *Doing respectful research: Power, privilege and passion*. Fernwood.
- Welsh, E. (2002). Dealing with data: Using NVivo in the qualitative data analysis process. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 3(2). <http://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-3.2.865>
- Williams, M. T. (2021). Racial microaggressions: Critical questions, state of the science, and new directions. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 16(5), 880–885.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/17456916211039209>
- Wong, G., Derthick, A. O., David, E. J. R., Saw, A., & Okazaki, S. (2014). The what, the why, and the how: A review of racial microaggressions research in psychology. *Race and Social Problems*, 6(2), 181–200. <https://doi.org/10.1007%2Fs12552-013-9107-9>

Yook, E. L., & Albert, R. D. (1999). Perceptions of international teaching assistants: The interrelatedness of intercultural training, cognition, and emotion. *Communication Education*, 48(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03634529909379148>

Author

William Sarfo Ankomah is a Canadian educator. He completed his PhD in Educational Studies at Brock University, and his research interests include international education, teacher education, anti-racism, social justice, and appreciative inquiry.