Introduction

Exposure to racial discrimination can lead to negative physiological and psychological effects. Research has shown that exposure to racial discrimination and elevated diastolic blood pressure levels (Guyl & Bromberger, 2001), heightened stress responses (Sawyer, 2012), depression and drug abuse (Torres, 2015), as well as suicide ideation and attempts (Castle, 2011). Generations of direct discriminatory actions have evolved into racial microaggressions, which are unintended discrimination in daily life by subconsciously-prejudiced peoples.

Racial microaggressions are divided into numerous subtypes: (a) cultural inferiority, (b) assumptions of criminality, (c) microinvalidations, (d) exoticization and sexualization, (e) assumptions of foreignness, (f) environmental microaggressions, and (g) workplace and school microaggressions (Nadal, 2011; Torres-Harding, 2012). Racial microaggressions are a timely subject of study because, of recent events involving the controversial murders of more than a dozen African-American men and women by law enforcement officials in 2015. What if these events are acts of racial microagression gone too far? Examining the occurrence and ramifications of implicit bias and racial microaggressions could increase awareness of their existence and their negative effects on society and the individual.

The present study will examine the occurrence of racial microaggressions experienced by a diverse sample of students enrolled in community college in Southern California. In addition, we will examine the frequency of the racial microaggression subtypes among specific racial/ethnic groups.

Research Question I: In a diverse sample of college students, do certain types of racial microaggressions occur more frequently than others?

Research Question II: How frequently do racial/ethnic groups experience various types of racial microaggressions?

Method

- Participants consisted of 13 men and 24 women (n = 37) at San Diego Mesa Community College. Participants ranged in age from 18 years to 41 years (M = 21.8, SD = 3.93).
- Our sample population consisted of: - 38% White - 32% Latino - 13% Multiracial - 11% Asian/Pacific Islander - 3% Middle Eastern - 3% Black students
- Students provided socioeconomic information, and ‘yes’ or ‘no’ responses to a twelve-question survey about racial microaggressions experienced in the last month.
- The survey items related to microaggressions were modified items from the Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS-I; Nadal, 2011), and the Racial Microaggressions Scale (RMAS; Torres-Harding, 2012).

Results

- 36% of students in the White subsample experienced exoticization/sexualization and microinvalidation
- Environmental microaggression is nullified for White subsample
- Asian students most often experienced assumptions of foreignness, exoticization/sexualization, and microinvalidation
- 100% of Latino students experienced exoticization/sexualization
- The only Black student in the sample experienced approximately 42% of the listed microaggressions.
- The only Black student in the sample experienced 100% of all listed microaggressions
- 80% of Multiracial students experienced exoticization/sexualization and workplace/school microaggressions
- Multiracial students experienced 83% of listed microaggressions
- • 38% White: 2. An employer or co-worker treated me differently than White co-workers.
- • 32% Latino: 5. Someone assumed that I spoke a language other than English.
- • 13% Multiracial: 7. I observed people of my race portrayed differently than White co-workers.
- • 11% Asian/Pacific Islander: 9. Other people deny that people of my race are important.
- • 3% Middle Eastern: 11. Other people deny that people of my race are important.
- • 3% Black: 12. Someone assumed that I would have a lower education because of my race.

Discussion

Results indicate that, in general, exoticization/sexualization and environmental microaggressions occur more frequently than others; and Latino and Multiracial students were more likely to experience racial microaggressions. Among our subsample of White students, 36% reported experiencing exoticization/sexualization, indicating that microaggressions are not restricted to minority populations. However, 100% of the Latino subsample reported most often experiencing the same subtype of microaggression. Among Multiracial students, 100% most often reported the occurrence of environmental microaggressions. For our subset of Asian students, 75% most often reported occurrence of assumptions of foreignness and exoticization/sexualization. Data indicates sufficient evidence to confirm both hypotheses.

The present study has several limitations. The study had a small sample size, especially for particular racial/ethnic groups (one Middle Eastern student and one Black student). It is imperative that future studies on racial microaggressions employ a larger, representative, sample of community college students in the United States. The second limitation is the ‘yes’ and ‘no’ response format of the survey questions. Future studies should use a response scale similar to that of the REMS-I and the RMAS, which both use a Likert response scale.

Future studies on racial microaggressions should identify underlying factors influencing the occurrence of the microagressions. In addition, future studies should examine how aware individuals who commit racial microaggressions are of their actions. It would also be interesting to determine if racial microaggressions lead to negative physiological and/or psychological effects. Furthermore, it is important to study the experiences of microaggressions among women, sexual minorities, and people with disabilities. By conducting more studies in regards to microaggressions, we will be able to better provide education and training to faculty, staff, and students at colleges with the hopes of increasing awareness of racial microaggressions, and decreasing their occurrence.

References


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