



## **Offensive or Not? Examining the Impact of Racial Microaggressions**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Although the literature suggests that there exist harmful consequences of microaggression, some researchers argue that the state of the current literature lacks evidence that these indignities are in fact offensive to individuals holding marginalized identities. To address this gap, researchers sought to examine the perspectives of university students, as individuals at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) provided ratings to indicate their experiences with and interpretation of verbal racial insults that had been previously identified as microaggressive by previous researchers. Results of the study demonstrates that there are differences in how university students interpret microaggressions. Specifically, the obtained data suggest that race, gender, sexual orientation, and prior exposure to the microaggressions are significant predictors to one's interpretation of them as offensive or insulting. Implications regarding the state of the literature and the experiences of individuals at PWIs and future directions surrounding the research methodologies that are employed to study microaggressions are discussed.*

**Keywords:** microaggression, racism, higher education, identity

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## **BACKGROUND**

Although the term microaggression was coined by Pierce (1970) to explain the everyday racism that African-American individuals experience, researchers have only recently turned their attention to the topic. Further, much of the current literature involves qualitative investigations, as very little quantitative research has been conducted to examine the phenomena. As part of the current study, researchers sought to address gaps in the literature by applying quantitative examination to statements that have been previously identified as microaggressive via qualitative research.

## **REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE**

Microaggressions are unintentional verbal, behavioral, or environmental insults directed at individuals from underrepresented backgrounds that have been categorized as microassaults (e.g., intentional and conscious behaviors), microinsults (e.g., insensitive, rude, or demeaning actions or comments), and microinvalidations (e.g., slights that exclude or negate an individual's feelings or experiences; Sue et al., 2007). Microaggressive insults can be further categorized into themes, with the following having been identified in the literature through qualitative examination: alien in one's own land, ascription of intelligence, color blindness, criminality/assumption of criminal status, denial of individual racism, myth of meritocracy, pathologizing cultural values or communication styles, second-class status, and environmental invalidation (Sue et al., 2007). For example, an American Latinx individual being asked if they are legal is an example of the alien in one's own land theme, whereas a professor making the assumption that an Asian student is good at math is an example of the ascription of intelligence theme. Microaggressions are often based on the stereotypes that exist for a particular group, and therefore may be relevant to any identity an individual holds about oneself (e.g., race, gender, sexuality, disability). The focus of the current study involves race-based microaggressions.

Although racially microaggressive exchanges are not limited to any particular setting, students of color report frequent experiences on the campuses of Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). Harwood and

colleagues (2012) collected focus group data from participants who identified racial jokes and verbal comments, racial slurs written in shared spaces, segregated spaces and unequal treatment, and denial and minimization of racism as microaggressive themes that they often experience on their campus. Microaggressive exchanges may influence student perceptions of campus climate, as ample research exists to support the claim that students from underrepresented backgrounds perceive PWIs as unwelcoming and hostile (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2017; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). It is also known that these perceptions may negatively impact the future retention of underrepresented students at these institutions (Garvin & Rankin, 2016; Love, 2009).

Experiences of microaggression that bring about negative perceptions of campus climate may also have more immediate hindering effects on underrepresented students. In the moment, one's interpretation of microaggressive exchanges can be difficult to manage, as individuals are tasked with determining their conversational partner's intent, and must deliver a response that is not considered paranoid or hypersensitive (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008). Although some may feel that these interactions simply result in hurt feelings, researchers have demonstrated that microaggressive exchanges may also be associated with symptoms of anxiety and depression, sleep difficulties, tension headaches and backaches, extreme fatigue, elevated blood pressure, and diminished cognitive functioning (current authors, in press; Donovan, Galban, Grace, Bennett & Felicié, 2013; Nadal, Wong, Griffin, Davidoff, & Sriken, 2014; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007; Wang, Leu, & Shoda, 2011).

## THE CURRENT STATE OF LITERATURE

Microaggressions are relatively new to the literature, as researchers have only recently directly focused on their impact. Some have argued that because the current state of the literature is underdeveloped, it may be precipitous for administrators on college campuses to have already acted on this paucity of research to inform policy, such as requiring the implementation of microaggression trainings on campus (Lilienfeld, 2017). For example, one problem surrounding the conceptualization of microaggression lies within its very definition as *micro*. Specifically, microassaults are not *micro* at all, as the overt or intentional nature of these comments suggest that these are *macro-level* insults (Wong, Derthick, David, Saw, & Okazaki, 2014). Microinsults and microinvalidations better fit the provided definition and have received the bulk of the attention in the research literature. They are, therefore, the focus of the current study.

Researchers have also noted concerns with methodological rigor and reliability of studies that have been conducted on microaggression. Lilienfeld (2017) offers several criticisms, one of which includes the difficulty of determining whether or not a behavior is in fact microaggressive, as he argues that the examples of microaggression provided in the literature are ambiguous at best. For example, take the case of a student with a Hispanic-sounding last name who is asked by their professor to translate a word into Spanish during lecture. Lilienfeld (2017) argues that some identifying as Latinx may take offense to the assumption that all individuals with Hispanic-sounding last names speak Spanish, whereas others may not have this view. He further asserts that researchers have failed to obtain reliability data surrounding whether or not a specific behavior is interpreted as microaggressive by a significant number of people identifying with a particular affinity group. Regarding the provided example, we might wonder if a significant number of Latinx people would actually find the above behavior offensive.

This particular concern regarding ambiguity was a major focus of the current study, as the authors sought to examine how individuals interpret verbal behaviors that have been previously labeled as microaggressive in the research literature. Using developed survey measures, such as the *Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale* (Nadal, 2011), *The Racial Microaggressions Scale (RCMAS)*; (Torres-Harding, Andrade Jr., Diaz, & Crist, 2012) and *The LGBTQ Microaggressions on Campus Scale* (Woodford, Chonody, Kulick, Brennan, & Renn, 2015), we are able to quantitatively assess the frequency of participant experiences with microaggression. However, there only exists one measure that provides insight into whether or not individuals actually view these statements as offensive. The *Acceptability of Racial Microaggressions Scale (ARMS)*; (Mekawi & Todd, 2018) was recently developed to assess attitudes surrounding the acceptability of making microaggressive statements. As part of their development of the *RMAS*, Torres-Harding and colleagues (2012) asked participants to rate how stressed or bothered they felt in response to each item they had endorsed as having experienced. However, these data were not reported, as researchers asserted that their focus surrounded the frequency of microaggressive occurrences, rather than the degree of insult. We cannot assume that holding a marginalized identity or frequent exposure to microaggressions necessitates feelings of offense, as different individuals will interpret these exchanges differently. As such, another purpose of the current study was to determine the extent to which individuals from underrepresented backgrounds identified microaggressive statements deliberately selected from the literature as offensive. We were also interested in learning whether participants of color would more likely rate statements as offensive if they reported previous

occurrences with microaggressions. Given the impact of Sue and colleagues' (2007) study, we were particularly interested in utilizing the examples of verbal microaggressions that were provided in their widely cited research.

Although the focus of the current study involves race-based insults, it is important to note that individuals holding subordinate or marginalized identities outside of race (e.g., gender, sexuality, or disability status) also experience microaggressions relevant to the identities they hold (e.g., Capodilupo et al., 2010; Keller & Galgay, 2010; Nadal, 2013). Further, research demonstrates that individuals holding more than one marginalized identity may experience microaggressions at the intersection of multiple identities (e.g., race and gender) that can be even more difficult to manage (Balsam, Molina, Beadnell, Simoni, & Walters, 2011; Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, & Hunt, 2013). Research has yet to provide evidence that this is the case, but we might guess that individuals from underrepresented backgrounds may be more likely to label behaviors as offensive or microaggressive when the slights they receive are not relevant to the identities they hold, because it is likely that they have had personal experiences with microaggressions relevant to their own marginalized identities. For example, White men who identify as gay may be better able to detect race-based microaggressions if they report frequent experiences with microaggressions based on their sexuality. Again, the current microaggression literature does not offer specific evidence that this is the case. Nonetheless, we know that women and individuals holding marginalized sexual identities show greater empathy and perspective-taking when compared to men and straight individuals. (Rueckert & Naybar, 2008; Sergeant, Dickins, Davies, & Griffiths, 2006; Vad der Graaff et al., 2014). Also, the hypervigilance-avoidance hypothesis suggests that individuals initially notice and pay particular attention to aversive stimuli (Bögels & Mansell, 2004). Applied to microaggression, those having experienced gender- or sexuality-based microaggressions may be more likely to notice and label those that are racial as such. In other words, these underrepresented individuals may be more likely to view the comments and behaviors in question from the perspective of people of color as opposed to those holding dominant identities. This represents another purpose of the current study, as we were interested in determining if White individuals holding marginalized identities relevant to their gender or sexuality would be more likely to label the selected race-based statements as offensive when compared to their male and straight counterparts. We were particularly interested in the experiences of college students enrolled at PWIs, due to the implications of microaggressive exchanges on students' perceptions of campus climate.

## THE CURRENT STUDY

Given the discussed gaps in the research literature, the following research questions were posed: (1) do university students from underrepresented racial backgrounds interpret selected statements from the microaggression literature as more offensive or insulting than White students?; (2) do students of color who report more frequent experiences with microaggressions find them more offensive or insulting than those reporting less experience?; and (3) are female and/or LGBTQ White students more likely to label microaggressive behaviors as offensive when compared to their male and straight counterparts?

Given the apparent ambiguous intentions of microaggressions, we hypothesized that students of color would find the same statements more offensive than their White counterparts. We also hypothesized that students of color reporting more frequent experiences with microaggression would report greater offense than those reporting fewer experiences. Finally, we predicted that White women and White participants reporting LGBTQ status would find the statements more offensive than White men and straight White participants. This hypothesis was based on the notion that White participants holding marginalized gender or sexuality identities may have had their own experiences with gender- and sexuality-based microaggressions, making them better able to detect race-based microaggressions even if they are hold the dominant racial identity.

## METHOD

### Participants

Survey data were obtained from 631 undergraduate students. Participant age ranged from 18 to 42 years ( $M = 19.92$ ,  $SD = 2.71$ ). Participants' year in school was as follows: 34% freshmen, 18% sophomores, 26% juniors, and 22% seniors. Demographic data were also gathered surrounding race/ethnicity (i.e., 480 White, 51 Latinx, 38 Bi/Multiracial, 43 Black/African American, 17 Asian, 1 Middle Eastern, and 1 Native American), gender (i.e., 468 women, 158 men, 4 non-binary or gender fluid, and 1 transgender man) and sexual orientation (i.e., 530 straight and 101 bisexual, lesbian, gay, pansexual, asexual, or demisexual). At the time of data collection, students of color at the sampled institution made up 8% of the student body, as it was a PWI.

Prior to conducting analyses to address the primary research questions, researchers recoded variables to facilitate analyses. A racial status variable was created that was coded as 0 for White participants and 1 for

participants who reported their racial or ethnic background as Latinx, Black/African American, Asian, Middle Eastern, Native American, or Bi/Multiracial. Similarly, a dichotomous variable was created to indicate sexuality, with the new variable coded as 0 for straight sexual orientation and 1 for bisexual, lesbian, gay, pansexual, asexual, or demisexual orientation.

## Measures

**Microaggression Items.** Via data gathered from qualitative research, Sue and colleagues (2007) defined, categorized, and provided examples of racial microaggression that people of color reported experiencing in everyday life. Many of the examples these authors provided included statements or questions that are often directed towards people of color. For the purpose of the current study, 11 of these statements and questions were selected to represent 7 of the 9 microaggression themes listed by Sue and colleagues (2007; see Table 1). The criminality/assumption of criminal status and environmental microaggressions themes were not included, because statements that would be directed at an individual were not offered as examples by the author (e.g., “a store owner following a customer of color around the store” and “a college or university with buildings that are all named after White heterosexual upper-class males”).

Table 1

*Microaggression Survey Items from Sue et al., 2007*

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1. You are a credit to your race
  2. You are so articulate
  3. I don't see color
  4. America is a melting pot
  5. There's only one race, the human race
  6. I'm not racist, I have several Black friends
  7. As a woman/gay person, I know what you go through as a racial minority
  8. I believe the most qualified person should get the job
  9. Everyone can succeed if they work hard enough
  10. Why do you have to be so loud and animated? Just calm down.
  11. You people...
- 

Participants were exposed to each of the 11 items twice. First, they were prompted to use a 5-point Likert scale (i.e., *not at all* to *very much so*) to rate the degree to which each statement had previously been said to them (i.e., *never* to *very often*) and second, the degree to which they felt the statement or question was insulting or offensive. Using the average of the

responses on the 11 items, separate *Experience* and *Offensive* composites were created, and reliability coefficients were found to be acceptable for each ( $\alpha = .83$  and  $\alpha = .89$ , respectively).

## Procedure

Following approval from the university Institutional Review Board, participants were recruited through a mass email to university students who had opted into being contacted for university research. Using the online survey tool *Qualtrics*, participants completed an online survey that first assessed their demographic characteristics (i.e., year in school, age, gender, sexual orientation, and race). The remaining survey items involved the microaggressive statements described above that were selected from the work of Sue and colleagues' (2007). As incentive, participants were offered the opportunity to enter a raffle to win 1 of 75 \$10 gift cards at the conclusion of the study.

## RESULT

Missing data were only relevant for the *Experienced* composite, as one participant failed to complete these items. Given these participants completed all other items, these data were not removed from the dataset for analyses. Analyses that examined gender differences were only conducted for participants who self-identified as a man or woman ( $n = 626$ ), as the number of participants who identified as non-binary ( $n = 3$ ), gender fluid ( $n = 1$ ) or transgender ( $n = 1$ ) was not large enough to examine. Bivariate correlations were computed on the 11 microaggression items. A high degree of association was found across all items (see Tables 2 and 3).

Table

2

*Bivariate Correlations for items on the Experience Composite*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1	-										
2	0.3										
3											
3	0.2	0.2									
		9	6								
4	0.2	0.3	0.5								
		2	2	0							



5	0.2	0.2	0.5	0.5							
	4	7	2	7							
6	0.2	0.2	0.5	0.4	0.5						
	6	4	2	9	0						
7	0.3	0.2	0.4	0.3	0.3	0.4					
	8	6	5	4	8	7					
8	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.4	0.3	0.3	0.2				
	7	9	8	0	6	8	6				
9	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.6			
	2	2	8	3	0	9	2	3			
10	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.1		
	2	6	5	6	7	1	2	6	5		
11	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.4	0.4	0.2	0.2	0.2	-
	8	1	5	5	7	1	1	3	6	2	

Note. All listed coefficients were significant at the 0.01 level.

Table 3

*Bivariate Correlations for Items on the Offensive Composite*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1	-								
2	0.50								
3	0.50	0.55							
4	0.32	0.51	0.58						
5	0.35	0.43	0.61	0.58					
6	0.57	0.45	0.57	0.41	0.51				
7	0.52	0.39	0.49	0.37	0.46	0.70			
8	0.28	0.41	0.44	0.51	0.49	0.35	0.31		
9	0.31	0.48	0.49	0.49	0.49	0.40	0.34	0.68	
10	0.31	0.34	0.27	0.27	0.30	0.31	0.28	0.23	0.23
11	0.54	0.38	0.34	0.25	0.27	0.54	0.51	0.17	0.17

Note. All listed coefficients were significant at the 0.01 level.

Linear regression was conducted to test the remaining hypotheses, in which researchers offered predictions surrounding which groups would find the statements most offensive. First, participants' racial status explained a

significant portion of the variance for the *Experience* ( $R^2 = .14$ ,  $F(1, 629) = 97.80$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and *Offensive* ( $R^2 = .01$ ,  $F(1, 629) = 8.58$ ,  $p < .01$ ) composites. Not surprisingly, participants of color reported more frequent experiences with microaggressive statements, ( $\beta = .37$ ,  $t(628) = 9.89$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and greater feelings of offense, ( $\beta = .12$ ,  $t(629) = 2.93$ ,  $p < .01$ ) when compared to White participants. We conducted follow-up analyses to further explore the relationships among the composite and demographic variables. Specifically, racial status and the *Experience* composite were entered into the first step of the analysis and accounted for a significant proportion of the variance in offensive ratings,  $R^2 = .03$ ,  $F(2, 637) = 9.60$ ,  $p < .01$ . The interaction term between racial status and the *Experience* composite was entered into the second step of the regression analysis and also accounted for a significant portion of the variance in offense ratings,  $\Delta R^2 = .04$ ,  $F(3, 626) = 15.95$ ,  $p < .01$ . Specifically, one's history of exposure to the microaggressive statements moderated the degree to which racial status predicted feelings of offense, such that participants of color who reported more frequent experiences with microaggressions were more likely to report feeling insulted, when compared to White participants and participants of color who reported limited experiences,  $\beta = .77$ ,  $t(626) = 5.28$ ,  $p < .01$ . The assumptions of regression were tested for each model and indicated no concern.

To answer the final research question surrounding the ratings of White participants holding marginalized gender and sexual orientation identities, we only examined data collected from White participants. Our hypothesis was supported, as gender and sexuality,  $R^2 = .09$ ,  $F(2, 473) = 22.03$ ,  $p < .01$ , significantly predicted feelings of insult, as women ( $\beta = .25$ ,  $t(473) = 5.70$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and those reporting LGBTQ status ( $\beta = .16$ ,  $t(473) = 3.73$ ,  $p < .01$ ) found the race-based microaggressive statements more offensive than White men and straight White participants. The assumptions of regression were met for these analyses as well.

## DISCUSSION

Some researchers have complained that institutions of higher education may prematurely require employee engagement in workshops and trainings to combat negative campus climate outcomes associated with microaggression (e.g., Lilienfeld, 2017). In the current study, researchers sought to address refuted gaps in the literature by applying quantitative examination to statements that have been previously identified as microaggressive via qualitative research. Specifically, we sought to address Lilienfeld's (2017) ambiguity claims by validating statements that have been

labeled microaggressive resulting from focus group research studies. In this study, 11 microaggressive statements were selected from Sue and colleagues (2007) widely cited study. Participants were exposed to these statements twice, as they first rated the degree to which they had personally experienced each and second the degree to which they found each offensive.

Research hypotheses were supported. First, race, gender, and sexuality produced differences in how offensive participants found the statements. Consistent with the definition of racial microaggressions as insults directed toward people of color, participants from underrepresented racial backgrounds reported greater exposure to the items and rated them as more insulting than White participants. Further, participants of color who reported more frequent exposure to the microaggressive statements were more likely to feel they were insulting, as compared to White participants and those participants of color reporting limited experiences. This represents an important finding that should inform future research. Specifically, in agreement with Lilienfeld's (2017) arguments, we cannot assume that all individuals holding marginalized identities will have the same responses to microaggression. As such, race should not be the only participant factor used to in this type of research, as we must be sure to consider individuals' unique experiences with such aggressions among other factors that may influence interpretation of a situation as microaggression (e.g., racial identity).

The last finding suggests that White participants holding gender- and sexuality-based marginalized identities were more likely to identify racial microaggressive statements as offensive when compared to their male and straight counterparts. These results are consistent with prior findings that support that notion that men and those holding marginalized sexual identities may be more empathic and better at perspective taking regarding others who are also marginalized and that individuals are more likely to attend to aversive or threatening stimuli (Bögels & Mansell, 2004; Rueckert & Naybar, 2008; Sergeant, Dickins, Davies, & Griffiths, 2006; Vad der Graaff et al., 2014). However, although not directly tested, this finding may also imply that those from non-racial underrepresented backgrounds (e.g., gender and sexuality) are more likely to detect race-based microaggressions because of their own experiences with microaggressions relevant to their own marginalized identities (e.g., women and those identifying as LGBTQ). This finding has implications for how future research should examine non-race based microaggressions and bystander behavior. Regarding the latter, given the findings of the current study, we might expect White individuals holding non-racial marginalized identities to be more active bystanders and better allies in situations when they bear witness to race-based microaggressions. This also implies that those holding more privileged identities may benefit from

additional opportunities to detect microaggression, as it seems it may be more difficult for these individuals to detect the impact of these harmful behaviors.

Several limitations exist surrounding the generalization of obtained findings. First, the current study only examined the experiences of college-age participants at a PWI. As such, results may not be generalized to the experiences of students on other campuses (e.g., Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic Serving Institutions, Tribal Colleges), given the very unique experiences of students attending PWIs. Next, although the use of the selected 11 items obtained from Sue and colleagues' (2007) study was intentional for the purpose of this study, the inclusion of these few items represents a limitation. The current results do not validate the offensiveness of other microaggressive statements that have been identified in other research or those that have not yet been studied at all. Although the task at hand is daunting, future research should seek to employ similar methodologies to determine the appropriateness of other microaggressive statements before they are used in research. As Lilienfeld (2017) points out, consensus on the insulting nature of these statements cannot be assumed, as people from underrepresented backgrounds have individualized experiences. In the same breadth, microaggressions that are race-based are not the only type necessitating examination, as those geared towards other marginalized identities must also be examined. In sum, next steps should involve continued examination of other verbal statements identified in the literature as microaggressive, including those that are relevant to other stereotyped identities. Further, non-verbal exchanges (e.g., environmental microaggressions) must also be examined, as literature focused on these experiences is minimal.

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