

EXAMINING HOW MICROAGGRESSIONS IMPACT AFRICAN AMERICAN
COLLEGE STUDENTS STUDYING AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE
INSTITUTIONS

BY

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES.....	iii
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.....	iv
ABSTRACT.....	v
INTRODUCTION	vi
CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	1
CHAPTER 2: METHODS	21
CHAPTER 3: RESULTS	27
CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION.....	35
REFERENCES	44
APPENDIX.....	50
CURRICULUM VITAE.....	52

LIST OF TABLES

Themes from RQ1: What do students' narratives reveal about over-accommodation in intercultural interactions? 31

Themes from RQ2: What types of face threatening acts do African American students report and how do they perceive these as limiting their expression of voice? 34

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CAT.....	Communication Accommodation Theory
CRT.....	Critical Race Theory
HBCU	Historically Black College/University
IMT	Identity Management Theory
PRDD	Perceived Racial Discrimination Distress
PWCU	Predominately white College/University
RMAS	Racial Microaggressions Scale
RQ1	Research Question 1
RQ2.....	Research Question 2

ABSTRACT

Microaggressions, or subtle forms of racial discrimination, are making campus climate increasingly uncomfortable for minority students. Inclusion is stressed in collegiate education yet instances of discrimination still occur. Focus groups were conducted to examine the relationship African American students who study at predominately white institutions have with microaggressions. Reactions were classified into six major themes: benefit of the doubt, power judgments, stress from subtly, institutional overaccommodation, stereotypical assumptions, burden of confrontation, and fear as aggressor.

INTRODUCTION

Colleges and Universities in the United States are admitting racial and ethnic minority students at a record high rate (Boysen, 2012). Although more students in college are coming from different ethnic, cultural and racial backgrounds, campuses continue to struggle with offering an accepting diversity climate (Boysen, 2012). For example, Ancis et al. (2000) examined students' perceptions of campus cultural climate and found that minorities reported lower satisfaction with campus climates than white students. The leading cause that drives minority students' dissatisfaction with their college campuses is the experience of prejudice (Boysen, 2012). Studies suggest that these prejudices do not occur blatantly during encounters with minority students; instead they are subtle and largely unintentional (Bourke, 2010). These events are known as microaggressions and act as a key variable in analyzing minority students' experiences on a predominately white college campus (Boysen, 2012).

Prior research has found three subcategories of microaggressions that help to determine the specific types of bias minority students may encounter on campus (Boysen, 2012). The first subcategory, microassaults, consists of "traditional" forms of prejudice and discrimination such as attacking another student verbally (Boysen, 2012). For instance, students who use words such as "gay" to substitute for "bad" are participating in microassaults (Boysen, 2012). The second subcategory is microinsults, or actions that disrespect an individual because of his or her social group (Boysen, 2012). Stereotyped assumptions fall under this subcategory: for example, when a person uses "illegals" in reference to all immigrants (Boysen, 2012). Lastly, microinvalidations work to deny the experiences of minorities; color blindness, or claiming to be unbiased because one does

not see skin color, would be an example of this subcategory (Boysen, 2012). Despite the subtleness of microaggressions, their social significance is becoming increasingly hard to ignore (Boysen, 2012).

With the number of minorities attending college on the rise and inclusion on campuses still lagging, it is crucial to understand how microaggressions can impact how nonwhite students perceive campus climate (Boysen, 2012). Prejudice has been known to be a serious stressor on both physical and psychological health (Clark et al., 1999). Recent research conducted on African American undergraduate and graduate students has confirmed that microaggressions trigger psychological stress (Mercer et al., 2011). Furthermore, microaggressions have the ability to interfere with academic performance as research has exposed that subtle prejudice limits African American students' ability to process information cognitively (Bair and Steele, 2010).

To create an environment on college campuses that celebrates diversity, we must first become educated on the current conditions minorities students face while studying at predominately white institutions. This begins with familiarizing ourselves with the broader concept of racism, the social construct that places certain individuals or groups above others in society, in which microaggressions fall under (Grosfoguel, 2016). Racism has not remained static throughout time; instead as society evolves and becomes more modern, racism does the same (Sue et al., 2007). Rarely do individuals partake in overt racist attacks. Microaggressions allow racism to thrive with subtle insults that still carry the same weight, if not more, than earlier forms of racism (Sue et al., 2007).

This study seeks to build a theoretical foundation for understanding microaggressions by incorporating identity management theory, communication

accommodation theory, and muted group theory to help explain how and why microaggressions occur from a communication perspective. Additionally, I will be conducting focus groups to identify narratives that will work to further examine the relationship between microaggressions and students of color through a communication framework.

CHAPTER 1

LITERATURE REVIEW

RACISM

Racism is a social construct that places certain individuals or groups above others (Grosfoguel, 2016). Specifically, Grosfoguel (2016) breaks down racism in terms of viewing people as human and non-human. Those who are viewed as humans are granted access to their human, civil and labor rights in addition to being recognized throughout society for their humanity (Grosfoguel, 2016). Grosfoguel describes the opposing phenomenon as “sub-human,” where certain individuals are refused basic human rights because of their skin color or ethnic identity (2016). Although skin color may be perceived as the most common marker of racism, ethnicity (the state of belonging to a social group that shares a national or cultural tradition), language, and religion can all be reasons behind racism (Grosfoguel, 2016). This thesis will look to determine how those who might be considered “sub-humans” based on their minority status in the United States have a shared college experience that may be unique from other segments of the college population. Racism is not a new concept and continues to impact the lives of minorities; particularly those studying at predominantly white institutions.

IMPLICATIONS OF RACISM

Research shows white college students’ attitudes on race on paper conflict with their views when discussing racial issues in real life (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000). In Bonilla-Silva (2000) three key issues arose from surveying and interviewing white college students: affirmative action, interracial marriage, and the significance of

discrimination. In all four-topic areas, participants displayed more prejudicial views during the interview process. For instance, the acceptance rate on the issue of interracial marriage ranged from 80-90 percent in the survey but dropped to only 30 percent in the interviews (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000). Furthermore, researchers noticed that participants used a variation of semantic moves during the interview process to “save face” when asked about their thoughts on racial issues (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000). These moves included phrases such as “I am not sure,” “I am not prejudice,” “I don’t know,” and “I agree and disagree” instead of clearly stating their views on race (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000). Researchers deemed this to be the new “*racetalk*” where whites no longer express their racial views without filters as they did prior to the civil rights movement (the Jim Crow period) (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000). Instead, whites now express their views on race in a more sanitized way (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000). These conflicting findings show that it’s not enough to simply generate numerical data on the issue of race, particularly with the younger generation of white college students because when pressed on racial issues in a more realistic setting, such as an interview, their true feelings of potential prejudice emerge. This study shines a light on potentially problematic encounters with white students and their minority classmates since personal interactions are where participants struggled the most with their views on race. Studies have shown the toll racism takes on how minority students experience living on college campuses.

Racial minority students tend to have a more negative view of general campus climate than their white counterparts (Reid & Radhakishnan, 2003). Specifically, findings from Reid and Radhakishnan (2003) showed that African Americans and Latinos

reported the most negative perceptions of general campus climate. The study additionally analyzed the data collected by separating undergraduates from graduate students. These results found that of the undergraduates sampled, students of color (African American, Latino and Asian American) regarded general campus climate to be more negative than white students (Reid & Radhakishnan, 2003). For graduate students, however, all groups recorded similar feelings of general campus climate except for African American students, whose feelings were more negative than the other groups who were sampled (Reid & Radhakishnan, 2003). Additionally, African American graduate students expressed negative perceptions of how their university dealt with keeping a positive racial climate on campus, more so than any other group (Reid & Radhakishnan, 2003). These findings suggest that minority students, particularly African American students, feel neither comfortable nor taken seriously in comparison to white students.

Perceived racial discrimination is an additional stressor for minority college students and has been shown to have adverse effects on their campus lives (Chao et al., 2012). The racism-related stress model argues that not only do minorities experience general stress like all people but also are faced with stress that is unique to people in a minority group (Chao et al., 2012). For example, all college students experience general stress in the form of academic stress but African American students are also faced with racial discrimination, which causes additional racism-related stress (Chao et al., 2012). Research has shown various concerning outcomes of perceived racial discrimination distress (PRDD) (Chao et al., 2012). Factors that can impact college students include: relationships with peers, concerns about dating, problems making friends, trouble sleeping, difficulty studying, time management and adjusting to the university (Chao et

al., 2012). Specifically, African American students who attend historically Black colleges have reported lower levels of stress related to being a racial/ethnic minority than African American students studying at a predominantly white university (Greer & Chwalisz, 2007).

African American students enrolled at predominantly white colleges/universities (PWCUs) are faced with race-related stressors that result in poorer academic performances in comparison to their counterparts studying at historically Black colleges/universities (HBCUs) (Greer & Chwalisz, 2007). Unlike the African American students studying at PWCUs, those enrolled in HBCUs were found more likely to solve, endure or eliminate their problems by talking with others on campus (Greer & Chwalisz, 2007). The increased level of stress due to race-related issues coupled with the inability to relieve the added pressures has left African American students at PWCUs at an academic disadvantage. Statistics show that in 2012-13 African Americans received 84 percent of the 33,700 bachelor's degrees given by HBCUs (National Center of Education Statistics). There is a clear difference between PWCUs and HBCUs in how incidents of racial discrimination affect students of color. It is crucial for PWCUs to work to achieve a more inclusive climate for all students, one that replicates a campus where most students resemble each other. The issue of racism carries a multitude of effects for those who experience it.

As mentioned previously, instances of racial discrimination impact how minorities view campus climate. This can cause added stress in an already intense academic environment, but racism also may impact the lives of minorities after graduation. Racism-related stress has been identified as a career barrier for African

American college students (Tovar-Murray et al., 2012). Career barriers were defined as “events or conditions, either within the person or in his or her environment, that make career progress difficult” (Tovar-Murray, 2012). Additionally, results from a Fouad and Byars-Winston (2005) study found that minorities were more likely to face career barriers that make it difficult to meet their occupational goals due to experiencing racism that triggers racism-related stress (Tovar-Murray et al., 2012). Researchers define *racism-related stress* as “the race-related transactions between individuals or groups and their environment that emerge from the dynamics of racism, and that are perceived to tax or exceed existing individual and collective resources or threaten well-being” (Harrell, 2000). Tovar-Murray (2012) found when analyzing their survey data that as racism-related stress grew in their participants, career goals dropped. Findings for this study are aligned with previous research that has identified racism-related stress as a significant predictor in the career aspirations of African American college students (Neblett et al., 2004). Unfortunately, racism can have more of an effect on the lives of minority students than just what occurs during a single interaction. Racism can disrupt the futures of the college students who are targets of this behavior.

Racism may be increasingly difficult to spot, because as times change racism has evolved to become a subtler form of discrimination (Sue et al., 2007). This contemporary racism emphasizes that racism (1) will now usually be hidden and (2) is no longer overtly displayed in public forms of bigotry but harder to identify due to the subtle nature (Sue et al., 2007). This present-day take on racism may seem as though it is less harmful but it can have a host of problematic ramifications for minorities.

MICROAGGRESSIONS

Microaggressions are defined as “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 (Torres-Harding et al., 2012). In relation to people of color, microaggressions have been defined as “racially related acts or attitudes that are perceived as hostile, or as subtle verbal, nonverbal, or visual racial insults that are experienced repeatedly” (Torres-Harding et al., 2012). The concept of microaggressions is centered on an unintentional racist act; it overlaps with similar constructs such as ambiguous/covert and perceived everyday discrimination (Torres-Harding et al., 2012). There are three different forms of microaggressions: *microassaults*, *microinsults*, and *microinvalidations* (Sue et al., 2007).

Microassaults are the most explicit of the three and consists of “verbal or nonverbal attacks meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions” (Sue et al., 2007). In other words, microassaults are “old fashioned” racism, for example calling an African American “colored” or referring to a person of Asian descent as an “oriental” would be considered a microassault (Sue et al., 2007). Microinsults differ in that they are subtle snubs that work to belittle a person’s identity or racial background (Sue et al., 2007). The perpetrator of microinsults may not always be aware that he or she is delivering these understated attacks. However, there are clearly buried insults within the messages (Sue et al., 2007). An example of a microinsult includes asking a person of color, “How did you get your job?” because the underlying message implies to the recipient that he or she is not qualified to be in their current position (Sue et al., 2007). Microinsults can be nonverbal

such as if a white teacher does not acknowledge students of color in the classroom, or communicating through actions (or lack thereof) that those students' contributions to the class are worthless (Sue et al., 2007).

Finally, microinvalidations are “communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color” (Sue et al., 2007). A common instance of microinvalidations include complimenting Asian Americans on their ability to speak good English when they were born and raised in the United States (Sue et al., 2007). By doing this people are negating their American heritage and constantly forcing Asian Americans to be viewed as foreigners (Sue et al., 2007). Additionally, microinvalidations come in the form for African Americans when they are told, “I don't see color” because it denies and delegitimizes their racial and cultural experiences (Sue et al., 2007). Although microaggressions differ from flagrant racial attacks, they still carry with them various concerns for people of color.

IMPLICATIONS OF MICROAGGRESSIONS

Experiencing microaggressions has been shown to cause a variety of both mental and physical problems for minorities (Pascoe & Richman, 2009). These problems occur because unlike generic stressful situations, microaggressions are often uncontrollable, unpredictable, and categorized as a social stressor, which in turn creates negative outcomes for health (Pascoe & Richman, 2009). Physiological responses include increased heart rate and blood pressure and studies have shown a possible link to cardiovascular disease because of instances of discrimination (Pascoe & Richman, 2009). Furthermore, experiencing microaggressions can decrease a person's self-control

resources, possibly leading him or her to increase participation in unhealthy behaviors (Pascoe & Richman, 2009). For example, research suggests that individuals who are victims of microaggressions have a more damaged ability to practice self-control than those who are not victims (Inzlicht et al., 2006). The stress of these discriminatory situations has the possibility of negatively impacting an individual's ability to make beneficial behavior choices, which may lead to abusing substances such as drugs and alcohol (Pascoe & Richman, 2009). Although microaggressions can impact a variety of individuals in regard to gender, race and sexuality, there is compelling research on how microaggressions affect the everyday experiences of minorities.

Research suggests that even though microaggressions are subtle, their presence is crucial enough to disrupt the lives of African Americans (Sue et al., 2008). Specifically, it is the cumulative impact of microaggressions that is particularly harmful to African Americans because although these attacks are small they occur almost every day (Sue et al., 2008). Sue et al. (2008) found that for their participants, reacting to a microaggression conjured behavioral and emotional reactions such as healthy paranoia and rescuing the offenders. Due to the overwhelming number of times participants received microaggressions daily, many of them discussed a commonality of a sense of paranoia prior to and/or just following these incidents (Sue et al., 2008). This paranoia stemmed from stressing over where to place the interaction in their minds, trying to decipher if they were in fact victims of a microaggression and if it required them to act (Sue et al., 2008). A frequent method to reacting to microaggressions for a number of participants was rescuing the offenders (Sue et al., 2008). Several African Americans felt the need to take care of the white individuals who had administered the microaggression (Sue et al.,

2008). Although the participants were the victims in these situations they often put the white person's feelings before their own (Sue et al., 2008). A key takeaway from the research was that African Americans felt a strong sense of a "catch-22" when deciding how they should react to a microaggression (Sue et al., 2008). For example, participants reported that questioning *every* situation involving microaggressions would characterize them as either "hypersensitive" or "angry" (Sue et al., 2008). This study highlights how microaggressions place the burden of responsibility and stress on the African American victims rather than the perpetrators. Although it is beneficial to view this issue in scholarly literature, it is also essential to know how microaggressions are being discussed in popular culture as it relates colleges and universities because of the unique culture aspects present with a variety of students.

Microaggressions are a hot topic of conversation currently taking place on college campuses (Saul, 2016). Saul (2016) discusses how a growing number of colleges across the nation are incorporating the discussion of racism and diversity into orientation programming (Saul, 2016). Instances of racism on college campuses have been gaining an increasing amount of attention in the media, most notably the University of Missouri's multiple issues of racial taunts to African American students, which ultimately led to the resignation of President Timothy M. Wolfe (Saul, 2016). Universities such as Wisconsin-Madison are spending upwards of \$200,000 for a diversity pilot program geared toward incoming freshmen (Saul, 2016). However, some members of college communities are opposed to the financial cost involved in educating people about racial tolerance and diversity. Wisconsin Senator Stephen L. Nass was quoted as saying that the money spent on "political correctness" was "wasteful" (Saul, 2016). Regardless, in the past 18 months,

colleges and universities have hired nearly 75 diversity officers to address the concerns of insensitivity (Saul, 2016). Administrators know racial issues impact the enrollment, as was the case for the University of Missouri, which saw a decrease in enrollment last fall (Saul, 2016). Perhaps to see a rise in racial tolerance on campuses, people's overall understanding of microaggressions must evolve. Explicating microaggressions from a theoretical perspective may help to comprehend why these situations occur; however, research on microaggressions lacks a theoretical focus that is rooted in communication.

IDENTITY MANAGEMENT THEORY

Identity Management Theory (IMT) helps provide a lens for viewing how microaggressions may affect minority students on college campuses (Imahori & Cupach, 1993). IMT states that communication competence requires the "effective management of relations as well as cultural identities" (Imahori & Cupach, 1993). The universal standard for intercultural competence are people's ability to behave effectively (such as achieving personal goals) and appropriately with individuals from differing cultural backgrounds (Imahori & Cupach, 1993). However, different cultures have various expectations on what is deemed socially appropriate and effective. Therefore, the act of communicating with various cultures (intercultural communication) is also culture-synergistic, meaning each person can negotiate his or her own way of behaving competently during the interaction (Imahori & Cupach, 1993). IMT builds from the idea of culture-synergistic and additionally is heavily influenced by other identity-based theories rooted in intercultural communication (Imahori & Cupach, 1993). Like these theories (such as identity negotiation theory and culture identity theory), IMT argues that for individuals to

be communicative competent, they must have the ability to “successfully negotiate mutually acceptable identities in [the] interaction” (Imahori & Cupach, 1993). IMT breaks away from identity-based theories, however, in two specific ways.

First, IMT argues that competence can only be acquired if both cultural and relational identities are effectively managed throughout the interaction (Imahori & Cupach, 1993). To have a successful culturally competent interaction both parties must remain true to their individual cultural values while simultaneously maintaining a positive and productive intercultural interaction. Second, the face reflects the relational and cultural identities of people. Therefore, for identity management to be effective, efficient facework must be conducted (Imahori & Cupach, 1993). The “face” of a person in this context refers to one’s socially situated identity that serves to maintain the status quo. A person will support the face of another to ensure that the same support is given back to one’s own face (Imahori & Cupach, 1993). IMT argues that there are two faces that people possess (Imahori & Cupach, 1993). Positive and negative faces are two distinct socially situated identities of IMT that help explain the way people act when placed in intercultural interactions (Imahori & Cupach, 1993). Positive face is assigned when individuals desire the acceptance and approval of others, while negative face is employed when someone craves freedom and autonomy from a situation (Imahori & Cupach, 1993). Researchers have used additional theories to help explain the gravity of microaggressions regarding minorities.

CRITICAL RACE THEORY

Minikel-Lacocque (2013) incorporates critical race theory (CRT) as a structure to argue the importance of colleges and universities using the term racial microaggressions more frequently. The article cites Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, and Crenshaw (1993) as the researchers who described the following as the six core themes of CRT:

1. Critical race theory recognizes that racism is endemic to American life.
2. Critical race theory expresses skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy.
3. Critical race theory challenges a historicism and insists on a contextual/historical analysis of the law...critical race theories...adopt a stance that presumes that racism has contributed to all contemporary manifestations of group advantage and disadvantage.
4. Critical race theory insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color and our communities of origin in analyzing law and society.
5. Critical race theory is interdisciplinary.
6. Critical race theory works toward the end of eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression.

Minikel-Lacocque (2013) describes how racism should not be a nameless act but instead calls on the use of CRT to identify racism and celebrate the perspectives of those individuals who experience racism. Furthermore, Minikel-Lacocque explains that CRT embraces the resilience of the students of color that experience racism rather than looking at them as victims (2013). A salient component of CRT is that the theory could be used to

combat racism by encouraging students of color to highlight their experiences with rich details on how the encounters impact their college experiences (Minikel-Lacocque, 2013). These insights could help colleges and universities increase their knowledge of what is occurring by incorporating the perspectives of students in determining the best ways to stop these situations (Minikel-Lacocque, 2013).

INTERSECTIONALITY THEORY

Another element of microaggressions is intersectionality theory, which is based on the notion that oppressive values within a society, such as racism and sexism, don't act separately; instead they are continuously shaping one another (Lewis & Neville, 2015). Intersectionality theory is used to explore the best approach to study the effects that microaggressions have on a specific gender (Lewis & Neville, 2015). Lewis and Neville chose to incorporate intersectionality theory into their research regarding microaggressions because of the lack of information that analyzed racial and gender microaggressions as interconnected rather than individually construed variables (2015). To do this the authors highlight four intersectional approaches examined in interdisciplinary works that best describe African American women's experiences (Lewis & Neville, 2015): Black women could experience each of the following:

1. Racism and sexism similarly to Black men and white women.
2. Double oppression or double jeopardy.
3. The interaction of race and gender oppression. (Or)
4. Specific oppression that is unique to Black women based on the intersection of their race and gender.

Lewis and Neville argue that the intersectionality approach is the most beneficial of the choices because it does not try to separate race and gender (Lewis & Neville, 2013). Instead, this approach analyzes race and gender simultaneously, which allows for a more accurate depiction of how instances of race impact women of color (Lewis & Neville, 2013). Although this study uses intersectionality theory as a framework to reduce the overlooked experiences of how microaggressions affect African American women, the theory is primarily needed when analyzing data. Furthermore, critical race theory was employed in the previous study as an aid to dealing with racism on college campuses. However, microaggressions are an act of communication and yet there seems to be a theoretical gap exploring the communicative context. Therefore, I proposed two possible communication theories that could work to build a theoretical framework for microaggressions.

COMMUNICATION ACCOMMODATION THEORY

Certain communication theories such as communication accommodation theory (CAT), can work to fill the theoretical gap when explaining microaggressions. CAT helps explain why/how people make adjustments during a communication interaction and the perceptions of the adjustments by others in the interaction (Gasiorek, 2015). The motive behind the adjustments of the speaker varies from trying to help with comprehension to “[managing] social relationships” (Gasiorek, 2015). These accommodations from the speaker can include changes in speech behavior that can either work toward bridging or expanding the social distance from the listener (Gasiorek, 2015). The accommodations made by the speaker are evaluated by their sense of appropriateness from the listener’s

point of view (Gasiorek, 2015). When a listener perceives a speaker's accommodations to be appropriate they are characterized as *accommodative* (Gasiorek, 2015). Conversely, if a listener deems a speaker's accommodations as inappropriate then they are labeled *nonaccommodative* (Gasiorek, 2015). There are two ways a speaker can express nonaccommodative communication: *overaccommodation*, where the speaker oversteps what is considered to be the appropriate level of adjustment by the listener and *underaccommodation*, which occurs when the speaker fails to adjust his or her communication for the listener (Gasiorek, 2015).

Several aspects of CAT can be valuable when attempting to breakdown why microaggressions occur from a communication standpoint. CAT is particularly essential in instances where individuals are not aware that they have delivered a microaggression. Miscommunication from the speaker and misinterpretation from the listener occur during instances of overaccommodation. For example, if a white college student was introduced to a tall person of color and was eager to create a friendship he or she might overaccommodate and generate a microaggression by asking the student of color, "What sport do you play?!" Although the white student was not aware of the microaggression, this statement could have a negative impact on how the student of color experienced the situation, finding the encounter inappropriate. Colleges and universities can employ CAT to alert people to their problematic communication skills and better equip them to alter their communication if they should ever find themselves in similar situations.

While the incorporation of CAT would be beneficial to universities from an administrative standpoint, first there must be more information on how these instances of over-accommodation impact students of color. As the literature suggests, acts of over-

accommodation occur when a person seeks to adjust their communication based on the stereotypical assumptions of the other individual in the interaction (Gasiorek, 2015).

Additionally, we've learned that being the victim of discrimination can cause both mental and physical harm, specifically for African Americans (Pascoe & Richman, 2009).

Therefore, Black students may internalize these over-accommodations, making it more difficult to manage their academic and social lives. Specifically, they might begin to withdraw from class participation or isolate themselves from their peer group. However, it is also possible that Black students could be unaffected by white students use of over-accommodation. One way to explore this tension would be through the examination of Black students' accounts of these experiences. Thus, the first research question asks:

Research Question 1: What do students' narratives reveal about over-accommodation in intercultural interactions?

MUTED GROUP THEORY

In addition to communication accommodation theory, muted group theory is another potential communication theory that would be beneficial to study in the context of microaggressions. Muted group theory is a framework that operates on the central focus that society is set up hierarchically, meaning that some groups of people are dominant while others are marginalized (Wood, 2005). The theory was created in response to the treatment of the lesser group, in that muted group theory works to place value on the lives and experiences of those who are subordinate (Wood, 2005). Specifically, the theory looks at the relationship between genders, men being the

dominant group in society while women are ignored, or muted (Wood, 2005). Although muted group theory was constructed to highlight the unjust treatment of women in society, the theory can be applied to any marginalized group to help better understand the issues they face.

Microaggressions, specifically microinvalidations, can effectively silence minorities who fall victim to these attacks. Microinvalidations as mentioned previously in the literature review, “nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color” (Sue et al., 2007). Muted group theory could be applied to certain situations such as when an African American student receives poor service at the student health center and is told to “stop being so petty” by white classmates when sharing his or her experience. The theory could work to address why the student of color felt silenced by white counterparts for expressing negative feelings relating to a situation where he or she believed to be the victim of a microinvalidation. It is crucial to try to explicate the mechanisms by which microaggressions form a communication perspective because these problematic situations arise from a communicative act; therefore communication theories could give a more detailed picture regarding the impact that microaggressions have for minority groups. Additionally, becoming familiar with the methods used to study microaggressions can uncover valuable strategies as well as room for improvements for colleges.

To further explore how minorities, specifically African Americans, have a tendency to be silenced on PWCUs, we must combine aspects of both muted group theory and IMT. As the research highlights, stereotyping or face threatening acts are a core facet of IMT. To stereotype someone means to base your thinking of another person

on an oversimplified and usually hurtful idea used to describe an entire group of people (Hilton & von Hippel, 1996). Although any group of individuals can be subjected to stereotypes, muted group theory suggests that those who are less powerful in society are more at risk (Wood, 2005). Therefore, since African Americans at PWCUs are the minority, they are more likely to be victims of stereotyping or face threatening acts. This could likely leave Black students feeling muted and could trigger the same mental and physical drawbacks such as paranoia and stress (Pascoe & Richman, 2009). However, it is also possible that some Black students don't necessarily feel silenced even if they are the victims of face threatening acts. This could be because they believe that being the victim of a face threatening act actually encourages them to speak out against discrimination by making others aware of their past experiences. Examining Black students' accounts of these experiences would generate more information on face threatening acts and silencing. Thus, the second research question asks:

Research Question 2: What types of face threatening acts do African American students report and how do they perceive these as limiting their expression of voice?

NARRATIVE THEORY AND ITS APPLICATION TO MICROAGGRESSIONS

Narrative theory was developed to help explain how/why humans use stories to interpret their life experiences (Lee et al., 2016). In regards to narrative theory, "narratives" are described as "fictional or nonfictional stories to provide coherence and meaning" to certain situations in the lives of human beings (Lee et al., 2016). Narrative theory works on the assumption that humans are "natural storytellers" and various facets

of the theory help make sense of the stories people tell to one another (Lee et al., 2016). For instance, the narrativity in medicine is used to create a sense of perception from the eyes of the patient (Charon, 2009). In an effort to bridge the gap between doctors and patients, narrative medicine is used to gain a better understanding of patients' concerns about their medical care because they often feel as though they are misunderstood (Charon, 2009).

Personal narratives have been sought as a research tool because they have demonstrated the ability to convey much about intention, culture and history as relayed through life events (Hammack, 2011). The experiences a person goes through in the practical world are given an intimate meaning through narratives, which act as a catalyst for actions that one may take when being placed in a reoccurring situation (Hammack, 2011). Personal narratives attach meaning to these life events while, at the same time, work to perpetuate the status quo (Hammack, 2011). The learned social balances are highlighted through narratives. Unlike other methods where the investigator may assume a more stoic role, in the narrative approach it is crucial that the investigator is active in the collection and analysis of the data (Hammack, 2011). In order to extract meaning from participants the investigator must be willing to explore the personal depths of the narratives and not shy away from what may be powerful information (Hammack, 2011). This research tool of extracting personal narratives has the ability to tap into an individual's self-awareness and helps create information to challenge the current situation of inequality (Hammack, 2011).

Instances of microaggressions often unfold in stories and as humans we are better equipped to figure out how individuals who experience microaggressions feel if they

explain these experiences in their own words. The analysis of these words is essential because it allows for deeper connections, contexts, and experiences to be made among others who have also been involved with the same phenomena such as microaggressions. It is only when we fully understand the occurrence of an event (the “how and “why”) that we will be able to prepare for it in the future (Pennebaker, 2000). Microaggressions are largely experiential and can be emotional. Stories can help elucidate the experiential states of victims in ways they may not be able to articulate or demonstrate in experiments and surveys. By studying this phenomenon through the use of narratives, not only are personal accounts gained but also examining these stories helps those who have not experienced microaggressions achieve new insights on what their fellow classmates have to endure. Narratives can help create this newfound competence within others that allows them to acknowledge acts of microaggressions and interpret its impact on minorities. Colleges and universities can use this information gained through narrative theory to not only address how and why instances of microaggressions occur on campus but also to educate students on the consequences of these actions, creating a more respectful and empathic campus climate.

CHAPTER 2

METHODS

Survey designs have been a common method used to study microaggressions (Williams et al., 2016; Torres et al., 2010; Nadal et al., 2014; Basford et al., 2013; Torres-Harding et al., 2012; Sellers & Shelton, 2003; Boysen, 2012; Sue et al., 2009; Tovar-Murray et al., 2012). Although surveys can be a beneficial method for collecting large quantities of data, they do not have the ability to expose crucial explanations of the themes that they gather. For example, the results from Torres-Harding et al. revealed that the racial microaggressions scale (RMAS) was a valid and reliable tool to evaluate the incidents of racial microaggressions involving people of color (2012). A theme of the scale, such as criminality, emerged to be consistent with previous findings that found African American males to be stereotyped as criminal and aggressive (Torres-Harding et al., 2012). This finding is important because it solidifies the presence of discrimination toward the Black community; however, there is no deeper explanation of why African American men feel as though they are viewed to be criminal. Surveys allow us to generalize findings to larger populations, but often do not provide rich insights into *why* phenomena occur.

Experiments have been an additional way to study the ramifications of microaggressions (Salvatore & Shelton, 2007; Jones et al., 2014; Bair & Steele, 2010). Salvatore & Shelton (2007) chose to conduct an experiment to observe the psychological affects of microaggressions on minorities. Although this method has been useful in connecting acts of discrimination to possible health effects in people of color, experiments can often be exaggerated scenarios that are controlled by the researcher.

Instead of gathering information from participants on actual events from their lives, experiments create the situations in hopes of observing specific responses. For instance, Salvatore and Shelton conducted an experiment in which participants were asked to review a fictional list of hiring recommendations that were laced with blatant or ambiguous racism (microaggressions), or not motivated by prejudice (2007). Following this the researchers examined cognitive impairment with a color-naming task (Salvatore & Shelton, 2007). Even though the experiment yielded worthwhile results, finding that African Americans were vulnerable to cognitive impairment as a result of being exposed to microaggressions, the results were gathered from a fictional event (Salvatore & Shelton, 2007). Additionally, experiments do not help us understand the perspectives of those who experience microaggressions.

In terms of studying college populations, little is known about the actual experiences minority students have with microaggressions. Thus, a qualitative approach is best. Specifically focus group designs, which have been employed to study the implications of microaggressions (Nadal et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2011; Sue et al., 2009; Sue et al., 2008; Nadal et al., 2012; Sue et al., 2007) Sue et al., for instance, focused on gathering in-depth perceptions and reactions from African Americans (2008). Focus groups were chosen instead of one-on-one interviews because the researchers believed that the focus group setting would allow participants to share and endorse each other's experiences as well as generate various perspectives from a single account of a microaggression from one participant (Sue et al., 2008).

METHOD

Prior to conducting the current research, multiple methods involving the examination of microaggressions were reviewed. For the purpose of this study focus groups were chosen to gain additional insight into African American students' experiences with microaggressions while studying at predominately white institutions. Microaggressions is a concept that lacks an abundance of research and focus groups have been shown to be a compelling way to extract in-depth knowledge from participants (Krueger, 1994; Seal et al., 1998; Sue et al., 2008). Although focus groups are not the perfect method as they do have the ability to alter participants' accounts of events and even silence thoughts, the benefits of employing a social environment ultimately outweigh the drawbacks. Since microaggressions are a communicative experience shared by definable social groups, focus group methodology provides the advantage over interviews in allowing for greater opportunity for participants to "stir up" memories of personal accounts. It also allows the researcher to gain not just different accounts of microaggressions, but to assess the extent to which participants have shared versus unique experiences. Analysis of the data was performed by comparing, contrasting and cataloguing the various themes regarding instances of microaggressions on college campuses that emerged through each focus group.

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were solicited through convenience sampling, specifically through text messages and word of mouth. To guarantee that the selected sample would match the phenomenon that was the target of examination, purposive criteria were used. The criteria

included: all participants had to self-identify as Black or African American, be currently enrolled in a college that was predominantly white and be 18 years or older. Four focus groups were conducted (n=4, n=4, n=4, & n=6) that consisted of a total 18 participants: 18 self-identified as Black or African American; 9 were men and 9 were women; their ages ranged from 21 to 25 years. Two participants were graduate students studying at a private, southern university and the remaining 16 were undergraduate students studying at two public universities and one private university located in the Midwest. The decision to end data collection at four focus groups was because the saturation point was reached. Saturation was concluded when there was no new information being generated from the focus groups but rather the same themes were emerging multiple times (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

PROCEDURE

Each participant was first contacted via text message and asked if they would be willing to participate in the study. This was informal and was used to gather a general idea of who would be available. Once IRB approval of the study was obtained and each participant agreed to the study via text, an email was sent containing a link to the Qualtrics survey and a link to a Doodle sign up sheet. The survey (see appendix) included four demographic questions and one short-answer writing prompt. The survey was given to the participants on a Thursday and the focus groups were conducted on a Monday and Tuesday. The prompt was an informal way to generate discussion for the focus groups. Once the participants completed the survey the data was sent to my Qualtrics account where they could no longer access the information. After each participant indicated all

dates that they were available for the focus groups, I selected two days containing two groups of participants. The first focus groups each began at 6 p.m. and the second at 7:30 p.m. Ten minutes before each focus group I logged onto WebEx, began a meeting and added each participant via email. I was the sole researcher/interviewer in each focus group. Each focus group was recorded (audio and video) at the consent of each participant. Participants were not given any information about “microaggressions;” rather, they were asked to share their personal experiences with subtle discrimination on campus in the survey that they completed prior to taking part in the focus group. However, I used the term “microaggressions” interchangeably with “subtle discrimination” throughout the focus groups. Once the focus groups concluded the files were manually saved to my ThinkPad’s hard drive, which is protected via personal password. Only I had access to each recording. No class credit or financial compensation was offered in exchange for participating in this study. Each focus group lasted between 38 and 40 minutes. The qualitative analysis of each focus group was done the following day in which the examination of reoccurring themes was recorded.

CODING

Data collection was comprised of a short demographic survey aimed at collecting basic information regarding racial self-identification, gender, year in school, racial makeup of the colleges that participants were enrolled in, and age prior to conducting the focus groups. The survey included one open-ended writing prompt designed to generate thoughts about a time where the participants felt as though they had been the victims of subtle discrimination on their college campuses. Specifically, the question aimed to

produce examples of microaggressions in which the participants' interpretation of the interaction from (both their perspectives and the microaggressors'), the effect of the microaggression on students and how they responded to the event.

During the first focus group I attempted to record direct quotes in real time. This was difficult to accomplish since I was also responsible for asking questions and moderating the discussion. Therefore, following the first focus group I did not take notes on nonverbal behaviors such as emotions or quotes from the participants in an effort to be completely present and responsive in the moment. Since focus groups ended around 8 p.m., I transcribed the last focus group immediately upon its conclusion, while waiting to transcribe the first focus group of the night for the following morning. Every focus group was coded by theme, in that I would play the recording until what I believed was a significant theme emerged. I would then listen to the recording once through until the theme had ended. Next, I would replay the theme until I heard a memorable quote, at which time I would stop the recording and transcribe the quote, identify the participant who said it and document the question or reaction they were responding to. This process was repeated in the coding of each theme for all four focus groups. Frequency, or how many times each theme was said during the focus groups, was not taken into consideration while coding because quantifying thoughts may diminish the value of what was said. For instance, a quote may have been reiterated several times throughout a focus group but that does not mean that what was said is necessarily rich with importance. Additionally, a thought might have only been expressed once but it could be an essential insight. This is consistent with research on the guidelines of establishing reliable narrative coding (Syed & Nelson, 2015).

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

OVER-ACCOMMODATION

Research question 1 (RQ1) asked, *what do students' narratives reveal about over-accommodation in intercultural interactions?* This question uses COT as a framework in an attempt to explore if encounters between individuals with different cultural background (a pillar of IMT) are more problematic than enriching.

Theme 1: Benefit of the Doubt (Students). Over the course of data collection four themes arose from the focus group discussions that help to answer this question. The first is that African American students tend to give their white counterparts the benefit of the doubt when they perform over-accommodation. This theme derived from participants expressing empathy toward white students. Seven participants agreed that although over-accommodation was a common experience at PWCUs, they did not believe white students were trying to be discriminating. When asked about the intention behind many over-accommodating encounters one participant said, "I think that they're like trying to make you feel comfortable, they aren't trying to be rude." Another participant agreed that although several white students started conversations with him based on the assumption that he enjoys sports he noted that, "a lot of my friends play sports, so it's OK if white students think I do too." Not all participants said they give white students the benefit of the doubt in these situations, one participant said, "I feel like my entire college experience has been like intertwined with subtle discrimination. So it's hard for me to you know when to brush those things off because like we're all adults now. As a college student you should know when you are being racist." Fourteen of the 18 participants did

feel as though over-accommodation was simply white students' way of "searching for a common ground" and was not cause for concern. CAT supports this finding as it falls under a specific type of accommodation called "convergence" (Gasiorek, 2015). When individuals attempt to reduce social differences within an intercultural interaction by way of over-accommodating they are participating in convergence (Gasiorek, 2015). Convergence does not necessarily come from a discriminatory place, rather this type of accommodation taps into humans need for approval and commonality among others (Gasiorek, 2015). Therefore, by giving white students the benefit of the doubt, the majority of participants (n=14) are recognizing these acts of over-accommodation as convergence instead of discrimination.

Theme 2: Benefit of the Doubt (Professors). The second theme stems from opinions of a majority of participants who felt differently when the over-accommodation and discrimination was coming from their professors. Thoughts that expressed that professors should be held accountable for their words were the foundation of this theme. Fifteen participants expressed a lack of sympathy for white professors in comparison to white students who performed over-accommodation. One participant revealed how this was his "biggest pet peeve, ever. I just assume you're racist at that point." Another participant agreed by explaining, "I get way more upset with teachers who uh interact with Black students inappropriately because it's like, you're an educated adult, you know what I mean? You should know better." Four participants also noted that they have experienced discriminatory assumptions in the classroom from professors who expressed surprise at the students' academic abilities. The students stated that professors have made comments such as, "you speak/write so well, I was really impressed with your paper, you

come to class!” Each of the four participants communicated a sense of aggravation that their professors were not able to censor themselves from making such comments.

Theme 3: Stress from Subtlety. The third theme that appeared from the focus groups was that all 18 participants agreed that subtle forms of discrimination were more stressful to interpret than blatant discrimination because the intent behind the messages were unclear. Three participants agreed to a student’s point when he explained, “I’d much rather uh a person be blatant racist toward me because at least then I can like put you into a clear box and avoid you in the future. Whereas microaggressions are more annoying because like it’s almost impossible to tell if you were being uhm deliberate with your discrimination or if you’re just misinformed.” Eight participants agreed that while microaggressions are more stressful, they still preferred microaggressions in the form of over-accommodation interactions because then they were able to “walk away and not feel bad about like not taking on that responsibility to educate the individual. Unlike if you’re blatantly racist and I walk away and don’t try to change you then it’s like *I* failed.” The eight participants felt as though over-accommodation practices were the least stressful form of microaggressions that they had encountered on campus because “you don’t have to wonder if you are the one that’s going crazy, it’s clearly like the white students who are trying to like adjust themselves to fit whatever stereotype they think you are.”

Theme 4: Institutional Over-accommodation. The final theme addressing RQ1 related to the participants’ views concerning HBCUs. Every student agreed that they would likely face less over-accommodation while studying at an HBCU. One student revealed that she would have changed her decision about studying at a PWCU saying, “If I could do it again I’d go to an HBCU. Their whole mindset is totally different. I feel like

students there have like no problem uh confronting people about stuff like discrimination. I guess I'm jealous of that uhm unapologetic nature." Another student agreed, "It would be refreshing to have like four or five years to not constantly be reminded that you're a minority. I mean like we know that the world isn't all like Black obviously, but still it'd be uh a nice break from reality." While one participant was turned away from the possibility of attending an HBCU, "My guidance counselor actually talked me out of it. She was like 'That's not how the world is.' Looking back I wish I didn't listen."

The majority (n=12) of participants revealed that if they could enroll in school again they still would have chosen a PWCU. One student explained her answer of not going to an HBCU by saying, "I feel like if I was to go to an HBCU I wouldn't have been like exposed to so many issues like microaggressions and I wouldn't have an uh understanding of how or why they happen." Another participant agreed by stating, "Going to a PWCU has helped me grow as a person. I might not have been this like involved in uh social issues because I wouldn't have experienced as much." One student viewed over-accommodation experiences as her preparation for life outside of college by saying, "I feel like PWCUs are preparing me for the corporate world. Not only will I be somewhat accustomed to the uhm unfortunate uh discriminatory situations that are bound to occur in a majority white working environment but like I really need the name of a PWCU to gain respect, to be taken seriously." Although one participant expressed his disappointment with his institution at the way they handled issues of discrimination on campus he admitted that, "it forced me to become active, this university is far from perfect, but it is perfect for what I'm trying to become in my life."

Table 1 <i>Themes from RQ1: What do students' narratives reveal about over-accommodation in intercultural interactions?</i>	
Theme	Example
Benefit of the doubt (students)	Participants chose to believe white students weren't intentionally discriminatory
Benefit of the doubt (professors)	Seen as purposefully discriminatory to Black students
Stress from subtlety	Difficult to react when unsure if they were actually being discriminated against
Institutional over-accommodation	Perceived to be less over-accommodation at HBCUs but not realistic setting for the real world

Table 1 illustrates each theme that was derived from the focus groups that help better explore RQ1. There is one brief example corresponding to each theme that acts as a summary of the findings. Therefore, in response to RQ1 that asks, "*What do students' narratives reveal about over-accommodation in intercultural interactions?*" there were four themes (benefit of the doubt (students), benefit of the doubt (professors), stress from subtlety, and institutional over-accommodation) that help guide our knowledge to better answer the question.

FACE THREATENING ACTS/SILENCING

Three themes emerged from the focus groups that work to answer RQ2, which asks, *what types of face threatening acts do African American students report and how do they perceive these as limiting their expression of voice?* This question uses both muted group theory and IMT in an attempt to explore the specific kinds of discrimination African American students face at PWCUs and if it impacts their ability to communicate.

Theme 1: Stereotypical Assumptions. The first theme was that of stereotypical assumptions being one of the most common face threatening acts participants recalled

experiencing on campus. Nine students agreed that both white students and professors often made assumptions about them that they felt were a direct result of their race. One participant recalled his professor making several racial assumptions about him during a single class, “my professor confused me for uh a cafeteria worker and a football player after she uh made fun of me for being late to class but like she knew I was working. He also discussed my test with the entire class in my absence and made comments about what uhm poor quality it was when I didn’t even have the chance to defend myself.” The student felt as though the professor was using his status as the more powerful person in the interaction to silence him. He explained, “Obviously I am not about to call out a professor in front of the entire class like he did to me because in that situation he was in control. It was his class and I felt like it was not the time or place to express how I felt.” In response to being the victim of stereotypical assumptions from their professors, five participants recoiled from participating in class as often and avoided meeting one on one with professors during their office hours. Four participants felt more motivated to produce their best work to combat the assumptions while the remaining nine didn’t feel as though the face threatening acts greatly impacted their participation or work in class.

Theme 2: Burden of Confrontation. The second theme that originated through the data collection was that participants saw addressing and confronting microaggressions as too much of a burden. Of the 18 participants, 13 agreed that they would rather “let it go” than deal with facing the aftermath of microaggressions. One participant explained, “At school I just don’t have the time or energy to confront the situation. I feel like I would have to go back like 400 years of history to make sure uh white people fully understand.” Four participants noted that a lack of experience dealing with microaggressions also

could make it less likely for African American students to address the situation. One explained, “As a first-year college student you’re not sure how to react to microaggressions. I know Black students who have uhm internalized microaggressions and as a result, start to assimilate into white culture instead of being true to themselves.” Another student agreed stating, “I don’t know if everyone is confident or comfortable enough to uhm articulate themselves and explain how they feel when it comes to uh addressing microaggressions.” Although participants were aware that they were being proactive in silencing their voices they felt as though there were better places than campus to educate microaggressors, such as a social setting.

Theme 3: Fear as Aggressor. The third and final theme originated from 11 participants who disclosed that they are less likely to address microaggressions because they fear that they will be perceived as the aggressor in the situation. Four female students agreed with a participant who explained that, “we are always fighting the ‘Angry Black Woman’ stereotype and so that makes it that much harder to stand up for ourselves uhm if we do feel like we’re the victims of a microaggression.” Another student noted, “I think white people are not used to uh Black women having a strong opinion and like when we let them know that they are wrong they don’t know how to handle it and so they automatically become uhm defensive and then we look like the bad guy. It’s very frustrating and after that’s happened to you several times you just start to like avoid that outcome altogether.” A male participant recalled a situation where he also became the aggressor, “A white student asked to touch my hair because she wasn’t uh accustomed to seeing the different texture of Black hair. I told her no and she immediately got loud and defensive like shouting “Oh wow, *I’m* sorry! Why is it such a big deal?” like I just don’t

get why you have to make *me* feel bad for not wanting to be treated like an animal in the petting zoo?” The participants agreed that as long as they did not feel greatly offended by the microaggression, they were likely not to acknowledge the incident further.

Table 2 <i>Themes from RQ2: What types of face threatening acts do African American students report and how do they perceive these as limiting their expression of voice?</i>	
Theme	Example
Stereotypical assumptions	Common beliefs about African Americans that aren't always accurate (i.e. athletes)
Burden of confrontation	Teaching the microaggressor right and wrong becomes overwhelming
Fear as aggressor	Becoming the bad guy for being assertive, would rather avoid situation altogether

Table 2 shows each theme that was generated from the focus groups that work to address RQ2. Similar to Table 1, there is one brief example corresponding to each theme that acts as a summary of the findings. Therefore, in response to RQ2 that asks, “*What types of face threatening acts do African American students report and how do they perceive these as limiting their expression of voice?*” there were three themes (stereotypical assumptions, burden of confrontation and fear as aggressor) that act as key insight to help us better answer the question.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the relationship African American college students have with microaggressions while studying at a predominately white institution. Focus groups were used to gain rich data as well as help answer the two research questions posed in this study that were created with the theoretical framework of muted group theory, CAT and IMT: *what do students' narratives reveal about over-accommodation in intercultural interactions and what types of face threatening acts do African American students report and how do they perceive these as limiting their expression of voice?* A total of seven themes were generated from the focus group discussions that help to explain the research questions, they included: *benefit of the doubt, power judgments (in the case of white professors), stress from subtly, institutional overaccommodation, stereotypical assumptions, burden of confrontation, and fear as aggressor.*

IMPLICATIONS

African American students in this study held their professors to a higher standard than their fellow students. They look to professors to set the tone for what is appropriate in intercultural interactions and act as an ally to students who fall victim to microaggressions in their classroom. These findings were consistent with prior research that found that students believed professors' responses to microaggressions were more effective than ignoring the issue (Boysen, 2012). However, if the professor also doubles as the microaggressor then how are African American students expected to feel

comfortable enough to express themselves in what should be a safe space? If African American students feel as though they lack the needed support from their professors this could manifest in ways that effect their academics. Out of fear of being the victim of a microaggression students could begin to participate less in class or stop attending class altogether. This has the potential to negatively impact their grades as well as their psychological well-being (added stress and anxiety) as was examined in previous studies (Pascoe & Richman, 2009; Salvatore & Shelton, 2007). It might also contribute to a cycle where a white professor might perceive behavior that confirms an existing stereotype, which then feeds into more microaggressions.

African American students have accepted the fact that microaggressions will be a common fixture in their lives, so much so that many of them would forego a seemingly more comfortable environment from an HBCU to endure discrimination, in preparation for life after college. This finding was partially supported through past research. Previous literature found that African American students studying at PWCUs were subject to additional stressors that could impact psychological and social health, however there was not any mention of students expressing that they would still attend PWCUs to better their futures (Greer & Chwalisz, 2007). There are very strong opinions regarding HBCUs from African American students who attend PWCUs. While some students expressed their jealousy of the “unapologetically Black” mindset of those studying at HBCUs, others felt as though they would not have been pushed outside their comfort zones in regard to social and academic issues. Perhaps society has placed too much emphasis on success in the workplace that African Americans feel as though the only way they can be considered qualified is to attend an institution where they will be faced with daily discrimination.

Additionally, because many African Americans are aware that they will be the minority in their working environment, they see their years dealing with microaggressions as a jump-start to the rest of their lives. Instead of considering paths that could prove to be beneficial for their health, outside pressures are determining the collegiate careers of certain African American students.

Exposure to microaggressions could impact how African American students express and communicate their concerns in troubling situations. Since many of the African American participants found addressing microaggressions too much of a burden, their lack of response only encourages microaggressors to continue participating in subtle forms of discrimination. Prior research has also found that African Americans tend to avoid speaking out against microaggressions because of the additional burden it places on the victim (Bair & Steele, 2010). Some students expressed how it was unfair that they had to be the ones to communicate how microaggressors act inappropriately. However, since the intent behind most microaggressions is unclear, explaining to the microaggressor the impact their words can have on disempowered groups of people can help expose their subconscious biases.

In recent news, there has been a push to combat microaggressions from occurring on college campuses by implementing educational seminars during student orientation (Saul, 2016). Additionally, through Minikel-Lacocque's research regarding CRT, she also legitimizes the importance of instilling a call to action that combats racism on college campuses (2013). CRT functions from the notion that students of color should not be victimized by their experiences of discrimination, instead they should be given a voice to highlight their stories in an effort to address crucial issues that occur on campus

(Minikel-Lacocque, 2013). CRT realizes that racism is an unfortunate aspect of our society but it does not believe that those who are the subject of racism should be complicit and expect anything to change (Minikel-Lacocque, 2013). Instead, the theory calls for an unapologetic discussion of race because it is only when society recognizes its shortcoming that there will be any kind of progress (Minikel-Lacocque, 2013). This was inconsistent with the data collected from this study. All 18 participants agreed that intervening at the collegiate level was too late. To instill lasting ideologies in individuals it is beneficial to start young-- elementary school--so that the appropriate forms of communication in intercultural interactions is all they know. Participants agreed that trying to change someone's mindset when they have already reached young adulthood is challenging, so much so that one student stated, "there is nothing that universities can do." However, participants agreed that any programming geared toward younger audiences should include teachers because their influence will always be key in generating change.

LIMITATIONS

This study was not without limitations. A convenience sample was useful in recruiting participants who would be comfortable enough with the focus group moderator and each other to share about their personal experiences; however, it resulted in a lack of diversity among students. Since this study was qualitative and designed to capture in-depth data, the results are not meant for generalization. Additionally, the sample I selected to participate in the focus groups is not representative of African Americans as a whole. Only four universities were represented and three were in the Midwest. Results

could have been bolstered with additional accounts from participants representing a variety of locations in the United States. Regional differences—for example, experiences in the south versus the west—may have yielded different perspectives. For instance, due to the intense relationship the south has with racism, Black students who study at PWCU in the south may experience, or be accustomed to, more overt forms of racial discrimination on campus compared to those Black students who attend PWCU in any other region of the United States. The thoughts from African American students at several large public institutions would have been interesting to compare to those studying at small, private liberal arts colleges as well. For example, it is possible that students enrolled in large public institutions have been accustomed to interacting with people from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, Black students may not have experienced as many instances of microaggressions on campus as compared to those attending small, private universities where there is less diversity.

As is normal for narrative research, I served as the sole coder for the data. Therefore, it is possible that the results may unknowingly reflect my own bias, as there was not a neutral party present to assist in collecting or analyzing the data. Future research should employ a separate focus group instructor as well as data coder to limit potential bias during both the data collect and analysis. The themes identified in this thesis could serve as an a priori coding scheme that could then be tested for inter-coder reliability.

As the sole focus group moderator, it is possible that researcher attribute effects may have influenced the types of responses that participants were willing to share (Samples et al., 2014). I am an African American who attends a PWCU so my own perspective as a student of color could have influenced the responses from each participant. For instance, because there are physical and situational commonalities

between the participants and myself, there may have been an assumed understanding that I identify with their experiences of microaggressions on campus. This could have hindered the participants' willingness to divulge detailed information about their experiences with microaggressions because they may have believed that I already knew what they were talking about, resulting in abbreviated responses. On the other hand, it is possible that participants shared more than they would have if the focus group moderator were someone of a different ethnic background (Samples et al., 2014). The participants could have felt more comfortable with me as their interviewer because of our shared background and therefore felt supported enough to share insights that they might not have been otherwise in fear of misunderstandings or judgment (Wood, 2005).

All of the participants were friends of mine; therefore this could have additionally influenced the nature of what they shared. For instance, one participant included me in her example of one instance where she gave white students the benefit of the doubt. When they tend to confuse her with other students of color she explained that she and I were only the two "light skins" in the department so she could understand why we would be constantly mistaken for one another. Had another focus group moderator been conducting data collection then this insight would not have been expressed. However, because this participant and I are friends and we share a common knowledge on issues that Black students face, she did not feel the need to further elaborate on the term "light skin" for a better universal understanding of the situation. Additionally, as the interviewer I did not ask a follow up question to examine her point for a more in-depth answer because there was a shared knowledge between us. Again, this could be problematic

because such commonality between the researcher and the participants could result in surface level information (Samples et al., 2014).

The decision to use focus groups was primarily based on the notion that the method allows for more conversation and in-depth discussions on specific issues. Referring back to CRT, a central component of the theory is that to fight back against racism it is important to encourage students of color to share their situations with rich details about how their encounters influence their college experience (Minikel-Lacocque, 2013). However, it was not taken into account that microaggressions could have possibly been too sensitive a subject to allow for every participant to feel comfortable. For instance, during one focus group it took a participant nearly 15 minutes to get fully involved in the conversation by adding her own thoughts and feelings into the discussion, even though I began the focus group by explaining that participants could privately share information with me via direct messaging in WebEx if they felt uncomfortable sharing that information with the group. Therefore, it might not only be sufficient to conduct focus groups where there is homogeneity among the participants and the researcher because instances of discrimination may still be too painful to discuss even if others share common experiences. While it is crucial to explicitly let participants know about the subject matter prior to the discussion, as well as give them an outlet to express their thoughts privately both during and after the focus group has concluded, future research could implement follow-up interviews to ascertain focus group participants' perceptions of the group meeting (e.g., did they agree or disagree with others? Did they share all that they wanted to share? What else might they add?).

FUTURE RESEARCH

In the future, replicating this study with a variety of minority and international students could be beneficial in creating additional narratives from those studying at predominately white institutions. In order to gain a comprehensive account from all minority college students there must be more of an effort to gather information on a variety of ethnic groups. Previous research has analyzed students of different ethnic backgrounds, however, by using focus groups there is more room for freedom to specifically compare the experiences differing minorities have with microaggressions (Houshmand et al., 2014). Although all minorities do not share the same experiences with microaggressions on campus, having a healthy account is crucial because universities can use this information to educate both students and staff as well as create calls to action in response to discrimination.

In this study, no effort was made to distinguish between males and females as it relates to microaggressions. Intersectionality theory would argue that gender is often ignored when examining how microaggressions impact minorities (specifically Black women; Lewis & Neville, 2015). Intersectionality theory is used when examining the best approaches to study the effects that microaggressions have on a specific gender (Lewis & Neville, 2015). However, the college environment, in particular, is one where gender tensions have been highlighted, especially in regard to gender identity issues (Strayhorn, 2013). It may be appropriate to incorporate this theory in the future; research could study microaggressions with a specific focus on how males and females of different gender orientations experience racial stereotypes and communication. Therefore, by knowing

this specific information, data collection (for example experimental situations) could be tailored to suit each gender in order to yield the most accurate responses.

To gain a better knowledge of teachers' experiences with microaggressions it could be helpful to replicate Boysen (2012) but specifically focusing on the perspectives of white and black professors who teach at both PWCUs and HBCUs. A survey analysis could fill in gaps using generalizable data about how professors of different racial and ethnic backgrounds differ on the issue of microaggressions and how their beliefs/experiences vary based on the racial makeup of their classrooms. Another study in which focus groups would be a useful method is one examining how microaggressions might lead to destructive behavior in minority students (Blume et al., 2012). Hearing first hand if the discrimination that is present at PWCUs has any influence on the harmful decisions of minority students would expand the valuable literature on microaggressions. Finally, exploring the link between microaggressions and stress more at a physiological level (Harrell, 2003). What emotional reactions and stress (by way of cortisol) do African American students display when watching a microaggression? The example could be introduced via video and participants' emotional reaction and stress hormone response would be recorded and compared to white students viewing the same microaggression. It is increasingly crucial that minority voices and experiences be heard and learned from in the effort to fight discrimination on college campuses.

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APPENDIX

SURVEY MEASURE

1. Please indicate your age (17 or younger, 18-24, 25+)
2. How would you describe your racial ethnicity? (White/Caucasian, Black/African American, Native American or American Indian, Asian American/Pacific Islander, Hispanic or Latino, Other)
3. What is your year in school? (Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Senior, Graduate Student, Doctorate Student)
4. How would you describe the ethnic makeup of your school? (Majority White, Majority Black/African American, Majority Hispanic/Latino or Other)
5. Think about a memorable moment or event that took place on campus in which you felt as though you had been subtly discriminated against. Please tell me the story of that moment or event. Please do not use any specific names in your recollection.

Please attempt to include the following information when relaying your story:

- The context of the moment or event (setting, time period, who else (if anyone) was involved)
- A basic description of what happened, including what you or others said/did, and what you were thinking/feeling
- Why this moment or event stands out to you as important or representative

Any information you believe is relevant is important, thank you for taking the time to complete this brief writing prompt.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Courtney D. Green

Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, NC

Master of Arts in Communication, May 2017

Thesis: “How Microaggressions Affect Minority Students in the Classroom”

GPA: 3.8

Butler University, Indianapolis, IN

Bachelor of Arts & Sciences in Strategic Communication, minor in English, May 2015

GPA: 3.6

UNIVERSITY LEADERSHIP

Member, R.E.A.C.H. Board of Butler University’s Student Government Association (2013 – 2015)

- Instrumental in coordination of events for university students including guest seminars (addressing different topics), culture education presentations, and community awareness events.
- Contributed to awareness event with responsibility for creating event apparel, booking event space, contracting entertainment and securing iPad mini for event raffle.
- Initiated concept and collaborated with university on event increasing domestic violence awareness; event attended and contributed to by students, victim and victim family.

Multicultural Student Ambassador (2012 – 2014)

- Developed and participated in educational activities to welcome and acclimate incoming freshmen; mentored and motivated underclassmen throughout school year.

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