

Research Proposal: Microaggressions Against Students of Color at St. Norbert College

Logan Stefl

Professor Morgan

Communication Theory

Abstract

Microaggressions are a ubiquitous experience for students of color at predominantly-white academic institutions. In this paper, I will propose a study of microaggressions against students of color at St. Norbert College. I propose using a series of focus groups to interview students of color from St. Norbert College to understand their experiences with microaggressions and potentially shed some light on what could be done to improve the campus environment. Conducting this study would not only draw attention to unique instances of racism at this college, but would also contribute to the wider literature on this topic as a whole.

Introduction

In a country that is politically divided, many assume that college campuses—which tend to swing toward the liberal end of the political spectrum—would be places where people of marginalized backgrounds can breathe easier and worry less about potential scrutiny directed at their race. While it may be true that many college campuses will promote an environment where racism is not tolerated, college campuses are still full of instances of racism (Yosso et al., 2009), and it is precisely because these institutions frequently swing left that these instances tend to go unnoticed. In fact, many of the perpetrators of these instances of racism have no idea that what they are doing is racist in any way. Because of the insidious, low-lying nature of racism in our current time, many racist actions by the perpetrators will go unnoticed by them, while the victims of these actions still feel the full effects of them. This is especially true for predominantly-white institutions (PWIs), in which the campus is primarily made up of white students and faculty.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that a research study at St. Norbert College examining microaggressions against students of color through the lens of Critical Race Theory

(CRT) would prove beneficial both to the wider body of work examining microaggressions at PWIs but also in drawing attention to the unseen issues at SNC in particular. I was drawn to this topic because of some of the experiences that friends of mine on this campus who identify as persons of color have recounted to me regarding microaggressions. In the rest of this research proposal, I will give an overview of CRT, microaggressions, and previous research on this topic, my research questions and hypothesis for the outcome of this study, methodology, including participants, procedures, and data analysis plan, and results and discussion.

Literature Review

I am far from the first person to propose a study on this topic. In fact, a number of other studies exist that also observe microaggressions at PWIs, and these studies proved instrumental in guiding my work on this proposal. In the following literature review, I will explain CRT and its history as well as microaggressions, an overview of prior studies on this topic, and the guiding research questions and hypothesis for the outcome of this proposed study.

Critical Race Theory

CRT stems from Critical Legal Studies, which was used in the 1970's to observe objectivity and neutrality in legal proceedings, and how the law has historically oppressed minority groups—the work of academics such as Derrick Bell and Kimberlé Crenshaw finally lead to the creation of CRT as a way to apply a critical approach to viewing a number of different areas of research through the lens of systemic racism (Reiter & Reiter, 2020, p. 30). The basic CRT model, as identified by Solorzano et al. (2000), consists of five tenets

- (a) the centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of subordination,
- (b) the challenge to dominant ideology,

- (c) the commitment to social justice,
- (d) the centrality of experiential knowledge, and
- (e) the transdisciplinary perspective (2000, p. 63).

Tenet (a) observes how race and intersectionality are at the center of many forms of discrimination and subordination, tenet (b) is about how CRT seeks to challenge accepted norms and societal structures, tenet (c) is about how CRT not only seeks to point out injustice, but also makes a call to action to put an end to discrimination and subordination, tenet (d) points out how crucial people's lived experiences are to understanding how racism manifests and how it affects the people, and tenet (e) points to the versatility of CRT in how it can be used in many different disciplines and areas of focus. These five tenets work together to create a theory that is committed not only to pointing contradictions and injustices in the systems and institutions that dominate society, but also to calling for action that will work to eliminate these injustices until our systems and institutions are truly working for the good of all people. One of the most crucial aspects in understanding the subordination that CRT points to are microaggressions.

Microaggressions

Microaggressions can be described as subtle put-downs (intentional or unintentional) directed at minority groups that come across as innocuous, but little by little, add up to do a lot of harm to the persons they are directed at (Yosso et al., 2009). Such insidious comments can include asking a black friend what music "y'all" (black people) listen to (Von Robertson & Chaney, 2016, p. 268), being called "friendly" compared to other black people (p. 268), and being stereotyped based on one's Hispanic heritage (Minikel-Lacocque, 2013). In each of these instances, the (often white) person making such a comment will likely not perceive the harm that is being done in making such a comment; asking about one's music taste may seem like a

genuine question, calling someone friendly may seem like a genuine compliment, and stereotyping may not be perceived as such. In each instance, however, not only are these comments harmful to the people they are directed at, but comments of this nature are likely to be heard multiple times by different people around campus. While an individual microaggression can potentially be shrugged off, it becomes much more difficult when these microaggressions pile up, and eventually wear down on the person these comments are directed at. This “racial battle fatigue” (Robinson-Perez, 2021, p. 2) can manifest in a number of negative outcomes, including poor mental health (Robinson-Perez, 2021), worse academic performance (Von Robertson & Chaney), and an increased likelihood of dropping out (Minikel-Lacocque, 2013). In short, microaggressions appear harmless on the surface, and the people causing microaggressions likely do not realize the harm that they are causing, but the harm that is felt is very real and adds up over time.

Prior Research

A research study of this sort would be far from the first of its kind—in fact, studies of microaggressions against students of color at PWIs have been conducted for over 20 years now. The following studies all examined microaggressions against students of color (some focusing on Black students in particular, others on Hispanic students, and others on both) using qualitative focus groups, analyzing data through transcript analysis, and using CRT as a guiding theory.

Solórzano et al. (2000) examined microaggressions against black college students at three universities. This study, while not the first to use the five tenet identification for CRT, was thereafter frequently cited by later studies of microaggressions against students of color. The research questions for this study were:

- (1) How do African American college students experience racial microaggressions?

- (2) What impact do these microaggressions have on African American students?
- (3) How do African American students respond to racial microaggressions?
- (4) How do racial microaggressions affect the collegiate racial climate?

The focus groups covered seven areas of inquiry:

- (1) The types of racial discrimination experienced by students;
- (2) How students responded to racial discrimination;
- (3) How racial discrimination affected the students, including their ability to perform academically;
- (4) The advantages of having a critical mass of African American students on campus;
- (5) Whether or not the racial climate for African American students had improved or worsened on the students' campuses in the past few years;
- (6) Whether or not the participants would recommend their college to other African Americans; and
- (7) Advice on how better to conduct the study.

The authors of this study found that many black college students feel looked over in the classroom and feel a greater need to establish themselves in order to be considered as intelligent as the other students. These experiences often created feelings of self-doubt, frustration, and isolation within these students. In response, many students created counter-spaces both on and off campus to have a space where they are centered. This was one of the first studies conducted on this topic, and hereafter proved to be a foundational piece of research on this topic.

Yosso et al. (2009) examined racial microaggressions against Latina/o students at three selective universities. In particular, the researchers examined three types of microaggressions: interpersonal microaggressions, racial jokes, and institutional microaggressions. What the

researchers found was that microaggressions against Latina/o students target language, culture, immigration status, phenotype, accent, and surname, which results in a feeling of rejected presence at the universities. In response, these students engage in community building and critical navigation between multiple worlds. These results show that there are common themes related to the microaggressions these students experienced, how they felt as a result, and what they did in response, and imply that these things can be found when Latina/o students attend predominantly white institutions.

Minikel-Lacocque (2013) observed the transition experience for six Latino/a students attending a predominantly white university and the “subtle” racism they experienced through microaggressions. In conducting this study, the author was not trying to specifically look at microaggressions experienced by students of color, but rather was trying to observe the transition experience for Latino/a students; what became readily apparent, however, was that each of the students faced microaggressions in their experience, and the study shifted focus from there. The author found that her participants experienced feelings of isolation and stares from their peers, stereotyping, insensitivity and ignorance, and online hatred. They also were ignored at bus stops and experienced hostility from bus drivers. One was also given a racialized nickname. These findings matter because the study did not initially set out to look at microaggressions in particular, but found them to be a common experience between 6 different students at the same college. The author of the study even acknowledges that this could be seen as a limitation, but also sees it as a potential strength, since the experiences of racism came up so organically. The implication is that, even without setting out to observe racism within a particular study, it still shows up as a common experience between Latino/a students at a predominantly white institution.

Von Robertson et al. (2016) examined how Latina/o students at a predominantly white institution navigated racism and racial microaggressions and developed counter-spaces. The study sought to find an answer to how Latina/o navigate racism and microaggressions in a white-dominated space. The study found that many Latina/o students experience microaggressions in the form of verbal assaults that minimize their culture and heritage that had the potential to affect them psychologically, academically, and socially. The study also found that students were able to cope with these experiences through counter-spaces, which allowed them to vent their frustrations and share their experiences with people of a similar heritage. Another finding of the study was that non-Mexican Latina/o students, such as Peruvian Americans, are often categorized as Mexican by ignorant peers, further minimizing their heritage. The implication of this study is not only that microaggressions are harmful to Latina/o students, but that non-Mexican Latina/o students may further experience racism through further minimization of their heritage.

Von Robertson et al. (2017) examined the influence of microaggressions on black men at a predominantly white institution. Black men were the focus of this study because they have the highest attrition rate of any college demographic. This study hypothesized that racial microaggressions against black male students, especially at predominantly white institutions, are causing negative academic outcomes for these students. The authors of this study found that the majority of the participants experienced racial microaggressions. One common theme was being told that they were “friendly,” implying that black men are intimidating. The implication of this study is that many black men at predominantly white institutions are seen as intimidating, and when their peers get to know them, there is perceived surprise at their “friendliness.” This may be a common experience between black men at predominantly white institutions.

Hall (2017) examined factors that may have contributed to lower graduation and persistence rates from black and Hispanic students compared to their white peers. The author found that the emergent theme of the study was microaggressions, and identified them as a common barrier for success at a predominantly white institution. In some cases, microaggressions also served as motivation to succeed, because of the perception that the participants needed to outperform their peers in order to go against negative perceptions and stereotypes. The findings imply that microaggressions can be a serious barrier to success to black and Hispanic students, and even in cases where it provides motivation, it is to escape negative perceptions.

Reiter & Reiter (2020) examined how brown and black students at a predominantly white academic institution are emotionally, academically, and socially affected by microaggressions. The study seeks to determine if and how race is emphasized in the campus setting, and how racism affects college life for these students. The authors found that many students of color faced academic microaggressions, including assumed academic inferiority and “instrumental visibility” in the classroom. Non-academic microaggressions included assumptions of criminality and hyper-surveillance. Students also faced assumptions of pathologized cultural values and communication styles. The findings show that students of color at a particular predominantly white academic institution face common struggles, both academic and non-academic in nature. This study carries the implication that these microaggressions can potentially be found at predominantly white academic institutions.

Finally, Robinson-Perez (2021) examined microaggressions against Black male students and the subsequent mental health outcomes that occurred as a result. The author found that victims of microaggressions felt attacked, belittled, insulted, subtle or overt aggression, and

internal racism. As a result of these microaggressions, participants felt a lack of belonging and safety, particularly during the period after the 2016 presidential election. Participants also described the unique experiences of being Black men on campus, and that they were often stereotyped as being scary or aggressive. Finally, participants drew attention to the heavy wear and tear that accrues when a person faces microaggressions regularly, and stated that maintaining good mental health was a constant struggle.

Hypothesis & Research Questions

The research questions for this study are:

- How do students of color experience microaggressions?
- How do students of color respond to microaggressions?
- How are students of color impacted by microaggressions?
- What can be done to improve the campus environment for students of color?

Based on the results of studies that have come before, my hypothesis for this proposed study is that students of color would report that they face microaggressions in the form of stereotyping, assumptions of academic inferiority, and assumptions of aggressive behavior. It is also likely that a common response to microaggressions is to shrug them off and refrain from pointing them out. The result of these microaggressions would likely negatively affect mental health and negatively affect academic performance. Finally, ways to improve the campus environment would be to develop spaces where the experiences of students of color can be centered and to increase awareness of the struggles that students of color face on PWIs.

Methods

Participants

Following the examples set by previous studies that have been conducted on microaggressions at PWIs, my plan for data collection is to conduct focus groups with self-identified students of color. The data collected will be qualitative in nature. Two focus groups will be conducted—once during fall semester and once during spring semester—with 10 students per focus group. In order to participate, students would need to be at least 18 years old, attend St. Norbert College and live on campus, and self-identify as a person of color.

Procedures

The focus groups would ideally be conducted by two students. This would help to make the work more manageable and would aid in making the data analysis more accurate, as a consensus would need to be reached between the two researchers. Additionally, it would likely be beneficial if one of the student researchers was a student of color themselves; as a white person, a focus group of students of color may perceive the information they give as face threatening, and it would likely diffuse some of that anxiety from the participants if one of the researchers was themselves a student of color. Students would be asked the following questions:

- How have you experienced microaggressions at SNC?
- How do you respond to microaggressions?
 - Have you ever pointed out a microaggression to the perpetrator? Why or why not?

If yes, what was the result?

- How have microaggressions impacted you?
- What can be done to improve the campus environment?

These questions are reflective of this study's research questions, and would demonstrate what microaggressions look like and how they come about on a campus setting, examine how a student of color navigates this situation in a predominantly-white space, examine how these

microaggressions hold long-term impacts on the students they effect, and provide suggestions for what can potentially be done to improve the campus climate and reduce the amount of microaggressions that occur. As these questions are open-ended in nature, the researchers would have to be diligent about keeping the focus group on task for the sake of time—in this event, one of the researchers would try to respectfully steer the conversation back to the topic at hand in the interest of respecting everyone's time. It would likely be helpful to set a pre-established time limit so that everyone knows how long the focus group will go. I think a 90-minute focus group split between a 5-minute introductory period, 20-minutes per research question, and a 5-minute closing period would generate meaningful responses to each question while not taking up too much of peoples' busy schedules.

Data Analysis

In order to analyze the data, the focus group sessions would be recorded and subsequently transcribed. From there, four categories would be created: Microaggressions, Response, Impact, and Improvement. These sections would allow for placement of certain terms that correspond to a given category. For example, if a participant is describing their response to microaggressions and uses a particular term, that term would be placed in the Response category. The purpose of this is to find commonly occurring terms or phrases that appear in the conversation and indicate a common theme for a particular category. In order to do this, the researchers would separately go through the transcripts placing terms in categories before coming together to find a consensus in their findings. Finally, Critical Race Theory would be used as a lens through which to interpret the data findings and come to a greater understanding of what the data indicates; keeping the tenets of CRT in mind, the researchers would examine how the perpetuation of microaggressions acts as a form of subordination, how the suggestions for

improving the campus environment challenge these injustices, and how their implementation would create positive change.

Results

The results of this study would likely indicate that there are instances of microaggressions occurring on SNC's campus. Previous studies on microaggressions at PWIs indicate that microaggressions occur very commonly against students of color, and it is highly likely that SNC would follow suit. In the event that the results indicate that microaggressions do not commonly occur at SNC, this would in and of itself be notable, because it then begs the question of how SNC is able to maintain an environment with few instances of microaggressions. The results would also likely indicate that students' response to microaggressions would be to laugh it off or to brush past it. Results of previous studies suggest that it is common to try and brush past the instance without drawing attention to it, and that it is less common for students of color to openly and directly point microaggressions out. The results would also likely indicate that students suffer both mentally and academically as a result of microaggressions. While a single microaggression may seem innocuous to the person who committed it, they add up over time to weigh down on a person mentally and result in negative mental health outcomes. Additionally, this would also likely lead to worse academic performances, especially if microaggressions are found to commonly occur in the classroom. Finally, the question of how the campus climate can improve is the one question that is a bit of an unknown. Many studies in the past have examined how microaggressions occur, how students respond, and how they affect the students they occur against, but studies have asked their focus groups if there are any things that can potentially be done to limit instances of microaggressions. Hopefully, this study would be one of the first in addressing this question.

Discussion

Carrying out this research study is important for a number of reasons. As has been pointed out previously, many studies have been conducted observing microaggressions at PWIs, and the research indicates that SNC would not be immune to such instances occurring. As such, conducting this study at SNC would likely shine a light on a problem that appears to be rampant throughout PWIs and would call attention to the specific instances that occur at SNC. As a result, the school would likely take action in reducing instances of microaggressions and making the campus climate more welcoming to all students. In addition, this study would contribute to a wide body of research that has studied this exact same topic and hopefully enrich what has already come before. Despite there being a number of studies on this very topic, the studies have shown throughout time that the issue has not gone away, and as long as microaggressions persist as an issue at PWIs, it is important to continually draw attention to the issue until it becomes less rampant. I was personally drawn to this topic because I have friends who are students of color that have told me of times in which they experienced microaggressions at this school (for example, being asked to speak on behalf of black people as a collective as the only black student in class.) Finally, I was also drawn to this topic because of its roots in CRT. In recent months, there has been an anti-intellectual backlash against the use of CRT, with manufactured outrage against its supposed nefarious purposes. In moments such as these, I believe it is important to push back against this backlash by putting more work into the world that utilizes CRT.

References

- Hall, R. R. (2017). Factors contributing to the persistence of African American and Hispanic undergraduate males enrolled at a regional predominantly white institution. *Administrative Issues Journal*, (7)1, 51-65. <https://doi.org/10.5929/2017.7.1.4>
- Minikel-Lacocque, J. (2013). Racism, college, and the power of words: Racial microaggressions reconsidered. *American Educational Research Journal*, 50(3), 432-465. <https://doi.org/10.2307/23526109>
- Reiter, A. B., & Reiter, E. M. (2020). Microaggressions, intersectional assumptions, and the unnoticed burdens of racialized college life for brown and black students at a PWI. *Sociation Today*, (19)1, 29-44.
- Robinson-Perez, A. (2021). 'The heaviest thing for me is being seen as aggressive': the adverse impact of racial microaggressions on Black male undergraduates' mental health. *Race, Ethnicity & Education*, 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2021.1969902>
- Solórzano, D., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: The experiences of african american college students. *Journal of Negro Education*, 69(1/2), 60-73.
- Von Robertson, R., & Chaney, C. (2017). "I know it [racism] still exists here:" African american males at a predominantly white institution. *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*, (39), 260-282.
- Von Robertson, R., Bravo A., & Chaney C. (2016). Racism and the experiences of latina/o college students at a PWI (predominantly white institution). *Critical Sociology*, 42(4-5), 715-735. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920514532664>
- Yosso, T. J., Smith, W. A., Ceja, M., & Solórzano, D. G. (2009). Critical race theory, racial

microaggressions, and campus racial climate for latina/o undergraduates. *Harvard Educational Review*, 79(4), 659-690.