

Racial Microaggressions, Racial Battle Fatigue, and Racism-Related Stress in Higher Education

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Abstract

The college experiences of students of color today are described as distinct from their White peers due to racial microaggressions. Recently, higher education research has begun to describe racial microaggressions, but scholars often do not take the next step to investigate the impact of racial microaggressions on health and academics. This literature review highlights the differences among racial microaggressions, racial battle fatigue, racism-related stress and racial trauma through theoretical and empirical studies. The paper argues that institutions, practitioners, researchers, and higher education leaders can address racial microaggressions and racial battle fatigue to make their campuses more equitable.

Introduction

Analyses of higher education have historically been concerned with access, retention, and graduation rates. Early studies and frameworks did not consider the experiences of students of color¹ and did not include the possibility of an unhealthy campus racial climate (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993). Many of the findings from these early

¹ Students of color, historically underrepresented students, marginalized groups, and people of color are used to identify students who are not of European American/White descent (e.g., African American, Asian American, Indigenous, Latina/o, and Pacific Islander).

frameworks were less relevant for students of color and do not reflect what scholars know today about campus racial climates, cultures, and racial microaggressions (Franklin, Smith, & Hung, 2014; Harper, 2012; Hurtado, 1992; Johnson, Wasserman, Yildirim, & Yonai, 2014; Museus & Jayakumar, 2012, Pérez Huber & Solórzano, 2015; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Institutionalized racism and the negative impacts on historically underrepresented groups are rarely mentioned in higher education literature (Harper, 2012). While access to higher education opportunities has increased for students of color since the 1960s and 1970s, (Allen & Jewell, 1995), admission to a university does not necessarily correspond with equitable social conditions (Allen, 1992; Feagin, 1992, Harper, 2012; Hurtado, 1992; Museus & Jayakumar, 2012). Recent events at University of Missouri with the resignation of the president and chancellor over longstanding racial incidents demonstrate that social conditions are still detrimental for students of color (Thomason, 2015). Strayhorn (2008) states that even though “college participation rates have increased for all groups over the past 30 years... significant gaps across racial/ethnic groups persist” (p. 301). William A. Smith (2009b) characterizes this discrepancy when he states, “White campus racial culture...promotes Plessy-like environments on post-Brown campuses” (p. 616). Simply put, greater access and opportunity for students of color did not eradicate racism or racist ideologies on college campuses. Instead, society witnessed a shift to a

subtler, “color-blind” racism that is equally injurious to the everyday lives of people of color (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Color-blind racism is the notion that racism today operates with the assumption that society is post-racial and that people do not see race (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Color-blind racism does not take the form of overt Jim Crow laws, but rather subtle approaches that use meritocratic rationales for racist practices (Bobo, Klugel, & Smith, 1997; Bobo & Smith, 1998; Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Color-blind racism not only operates in larger society, but also within higher education settings (Harper, 2012). Color-blind racism within higher education settings can take the form of racial microaggressions or subtle indignities based on the race of a person (Smith, 2009a).

This paper reviews the literature on racial microaggressions, racial battle fatigue racism-related stress, and racial trauma. Additionally, it argues that higher education and student affairs research needs to better account for racism in the scholarship and address the health outcomes as a result of racial microaggressions. Finally, the paper proposes how institutions, practitioners, and higher education leaders can address racial microaggressions and racial battle fatigue to make their campuses more equitable.

Racial Microaggressions

Research on racial microaggressions is not new, as it has been discussed since the 1970s. Chester Pierce (1970) stated that the “most offensive actions are not gross and crippling,” but rather “they are subtle and stunning” (p. 265). Pierce later named these racialized offenses as racial microaggressions (Pierce, 1974, 1995). Sue et al. (2007) defined racial microaggressions as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or

negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group” (p. 273). Solórzano, Allen, and Carroll (2002) added that racial microaggressions are “layered” in they attack “one’s race, gender, class, sexuality, language, immigration status, phenotype, accent or surname” (p. 17). Examples of racial microaggressions include being treated with less respect, receiving poor service, being assumed to not be smart, people acting as if they are afraid of you, and people thinking you are dishonest because of your racial and/or ethnic background (Perez Huber & Solórzano, 2015). As suggested, microaggressions can also interact across gender, racial, language and other identities (Solórzano et al., 2002). For example, a professor may assume a Latino student speaks Spanish or that a Chinese student can speak for all Asians. Similarly, African American males are frequently assumed to be athletes because of stereotypes (Smith et al., 2007). Microaggressions also work across racial and ethnic groups in the form of multiracial microaggressions. Examples of multiracial microaggressions include comments about the beauty of mixed-race phenotypes, accusations of acting White, being made to choose a single racial identity, and messages of inauthenticity (Johnston & Nadal, 2010). These instances of racial microaggressions put a burden on students of color to justify their identity and presence on college campuses.

Racial microaggressions, whether intended or not, present a specific message to historically underrepresented and marginalized groups that they are not welcome on college campuses. Racial microaggressions occur in all types of higher education institutions whether they are predominately White or institutions that mainly serve African American or Latino students (e.g., HBCU and HSIs) (Palmer & Dina, 2015). Therefore, racial

microaggressions still occur at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) and Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI) because these institutions admit White students. Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) found that many African American students stated they felt “invisible” in the classroom and professors appeared to be less interested in their concerns. Not only have African Americans reported invisibility, so have American Indians (Clark, Spanierman, Reed, Soble, & Cabana, 2011), Asian American students (Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007), and Latinos (Nadal, 2011; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, Solórzano, 2009). Additionally, racial microaggressions have been shown to make students feel “personally diminished” (Solórzano et al., 2000). As a result of their experiences, students of color feel unwanted, unwelcomed, and lack a sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Yosso, Smith, Ceja, and Solórzano (2009) found that there were three types of racial microaggressions directed against Latinos: interpersonal microaggressions, racial jokes, and institutional microaggressions. Perez Huber and Solórzano (2015) concluded that there are verbal and non-verbal attacks on people of color and that the attacks are layered. Sue et al. (2007) have contributed greatly to the work on racial microaggressions by proposing they be classified into three forms: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Sue et al. (2007) have investigated differences in racial microaggression in various racial/ethnic groups. Microassaults are explicit racial verbal slurs or more overt actions, while microinsults, and microinvalidations are more subvert, subtle actions such as insensitivity or taking for granted the experiential reality of a person (Sue et al., 2007). Finally, there is a cumulative effect of racial microaggressions that stress the psychological, physiological, and academic

success of students of color (Smith, 2004). While the work of Sue et al. (2007) has focused more on counseling situations and settings, the work of Perez Huber and Solórzano (2015), and Smith (2004, 2009a, 2009b) has focused on systemic racial microaggressions in higher education.

Racial Battle Fatigue and Health

Building off the work of Chester Pierce and other health psychology literature (Carter, 2007; Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999; Utsey, Chae, Brown, & Kelly, 2002; Pierce, 1970, 1974, 1975a, 1975b, 1995), William A. Smith introduced the conceptual framework of racial battle fatigue in the area of higher education using literature from educational foundations, higher education, sociology, psychology, and health psychology (Smith, 2004). The racial battle fatigue framework operates from the standpoint that universities are operated from a historically dominant White perspective (Smith, 2004, 2009a, 2009b; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007). In such an environment, Whiteness and White privilege are embedded in the climate and culture resulting endless racial microaggressions that accumulate (Franklin, Smith, & Hung, 2014). People of color are physically and emotionally spent in response to preparing against everyday racial microaggressions (Smith, 2009a). Rather than focusing on academics, students of color may have to divert their energy to cope with the stress responses caused by racial microaggressions (Harrell, 2000; Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2007).

Racial battle fatigue can be defined as the the psychological, physiological, and behavioral stress responses due to the cumulative impact of racial microaggressions (Smith 2004, 2009a, 2009b; Smith et al., 2007; Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011). Psychological stress responses may include frustration, anger,

resentment, or fear (Smith, 2004). Physiological stress responses may include headaches, a pounding heart, high blood pressure, or sleep disturbances (Smith, 2004). Finally, behavioral responses to racial battle fatigue may be stereotype threat, impatience, or poor school performance due to academic disidentification (Smith, 2004). Racial battle fatigue is unlike typical occupational or academic stress in that it is “a response to the distressing mental/emotional conditions that result from facing racism daily” (Smith, 2004, p. 180). Individuals are exposed to racial microaggressions throughout their lifetime, beginning from childhood. The cumulative effect of racial microaggressions is physically, psychologically, and emotionally detrimental as is evidenced in health psychology literature (Carter, 2007; Clark et al., 1999; Harrell, 2000).

In a 7-year-long longitudinal study of racial discrimination and physical health, Krieger and Sidney (1996) found evidence to support a relationship between racism-related stress and blood pressure changes. They found that working class African American adults who accepted unfair treatment had higher blood pressure than those who challenged unfair discriminatory practices. Furthermore, they found that African Americans had higher blood pressure on average, but it was attenuated by accounting for behavioral responses to discrimination such as countering the racist acts. In a study of 40 African American college students, perceived racism in the academic setting predicted an increased level of blood pressure (Hill, Kobayashi, & Hughes, 2007). Studies have also found an association between perceived discrimination and depressive symptoms among Chinese-Canadian students in Toronto (Dion, Dion, & Pak, 1992) and African American college students and adults (Sellers, Copeland-Linder, Martin, &

Lewis, 2006). For African American students, racialized stress has been associated with low academic persistence (Neblett, Philip, Cogburn, & Sellers, 2006) and low graduation rates (Brown, Morning, & Watkins, 2005). Wei, Ku, and Liao (2011) found that the university environment was a significant mediator for the association between minority stress and persistence attitudes among Asian American, African American, and Latino students. The campus environment can significantly affect the levels of stress for many students of color, but stress can impact other facets of the life of a person or group. Ojeda, Navarro, Meza, and Arbona (2012) found that ethnicity-related stressors significantly predicted life satisfaction in college students. For instance, in interviews with 26 doctoral students of color, Truong and Museus (2012) illuminated that the participants experienced racial trauma or “severe cases of racism-related stress (p. 228)

The responses to racial battle fatigue make predominantly White settings, where racial microaggressions occur, particularly hostile and uncomfortable places for students and people of color (Smith, 2004, 2009a, 2009b). Though students of color have experienced racial microaggressions most of their lives, the added stress of a higher education institution with a negative racial/ethnic environment may be overwhelming for some individuals. There is a cumulative effect of the numerous racial microaggressions experienced by students of color and they have expressed this in research and in interviews (Smith et al., 2007). Qualitative research on racial battle fatigue has informed much of the recent quantitative work. For instance, one study investigated racial battle fatigue among Latinos (Franklin et al., 2014). Franklin, Smith, and Hung (2014) found that Latino students were the most affected by

psychological and physiological stress due to racial microaggressions. Some research has demonstrated that coping mechanisms employed by African American and Mexican American students can mediate the impact of racial microaggressions on racial battle fatigue related stressors (Franklin, 2015). Taken together, the research in health psychology and higher education demonstrates that racism can negatively impact students of color beyond the everyday academic stressors of college (Carter, 2007; Clark et al., 1999; Franklin et al., 2014; Harrell, 2000; Hill et al., 2007; Neblett et al., 2006; Smith, 2004, 2009a, 2009b; Smith et al., 2007; Utsey et al., 2002; Wei et al., 2011). Sometimes, higher education scholarship operates in a vacuum without considering that students live complex lives that are not only concerned with academics.

Racism-Related Stress and Racial Trauma

Research terms that are associated with racism and stress are used interchangeably. Terms such as racism-related stress and racial trauma are regularly used in research studies and are not clearly defined and/or differentiated. Although these terms may suggest similar notions, distinct differences exist between racism-related stress, racial trauma, and racial battle fatigue.

According to Harrell (2000), racism-related stress is defined as "the race-related transactions between individuals or groups and their environment that emerge from the dynamics of racism, and that tax or exceed existing individual and collective resources or threaten well-being" (p. 44). Harrell (2000) suggested that racism-related stress is characterized by situations that are described as overwhelming and where feelings of helplessness and hopelessness are direct consequences of these events. Although

racism-related stress appears to be the same as racial battle fatigue, conceptually it is different. Racism-related stress refers to the actions as a result in the outcome of racial battle fatigue. As Harrell (2000) stated, "race related stress are the race-related transactions" or racial micro- and macroaggressions that manifest into racial battle fatigue. Therefore, racism-related stress is conceptualized as the individual racist actions, and racial battle fatigue is the health outcome for people of color. Empirical research has found a wealth of evidence to suggest that racism-related stress negatively affects the psychological well-being of an individual. Racism-related stress research has historically been based on the African American experiences. More recently, examinations of racism-related stress and ethnic discrimination have been extended to other populations such as Asian Americans (Alvarez, Juang, & Liang, 2006; Liang, Alvarez, Juang, & Liang, 2007) and Latinas/os (Utsey et al., 2002).

While racism-related stress is the racialized transaction or the actions associated with racist events, the notion of racial trauma is less clear (Harrell, 2000; Truong & Museus, 2012). Truong and Museus (2012) found previous health psychology literature does not draw clear distinctions between racism-related stress and racial trauma. Sometimes racial trauma is described as a cause of severe cases of racism-related stress. In their study with doctoral students, Truong and Museus (2012) provide definitions for racism-related stress and racial trauma. They define racism-related stress as "the emotional, physical, and psychological discomfort and pain resulting from experience with racism" while racial trauma is "severe cases of racism-related stress" (Truong & Museus, 2012, p. 228). The definitions employed by Truong and Museus do not appear to indicate that racial trauma is caused by

racism-related stress, but is rather a greater degree of racism-related stress. As a result, racial trauma as defined would still be the action related to racism and not necessarily outcomes. Racial battle fatigue is an encompassing framework that includes racism-related stressors and racial trauma in a larger theoretical conception that accounts outcomes or stressors. Therefore, racism-related stress and racial trauma are conceptualized as racist actions, and racial battle fatigue is the outcome as a result of those actions.

Why Study Racial Battle Fatigue?

The racial battle fatigue framework provides a more comprehensive perspective of the impact of racial microaggressions by accounting of the psychological, physiological, and behavioral stress responses of individuals. The framework helps researchers and practitioners better understand students' holistic experience, including how racial microaggressions impact health and well-being. Contrary to popular notions of a post-racial era, scholars have demonstrated that experiences of students of color on college campuses profoundly contrast with those of White individuals (Feagin, 1992; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Hurtado, 1992; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Smith, 2009). Research demonstrates that students, faculty, staff, and administrators commonly characterize historically underrepresented students of color as: academically inferior, lazy, illegal, athletes, exotic, criminals/predators, affirmative action beneficiaries, and unwilling or unable to fit into the dominant White college campus culture (Feagin, 1992; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado, 1992; Smith et al., 2007).

In response to negative stereotypes, students of color repeatedly express that their experiences, cultural traditions, and opinions are questioned and disputed in

academic and social settings on campus (Picca & Feagin, 2007; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, Fitzgerald, & Bylsma, 2003). These exclusionary practices engender feelings of not being welcomed into the academic and social community (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Students of color express a general lack of sense of belonging to the university (Hurtado, 1992; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2012). Recent research points to detrimental psychological, physiological, and behavioral responses to the negative racial climates experienced by historically underrepresented student populations (Hill et al., 2007; Smith, 2004, 2009a, 2009b). Additionally, research has demonstrated racialized stress can also negatively impact academic outcomes such as GPA and academic self-concept (Johnson et al., 2014; Wei et al., 2011). As reviewed, there are a multitude of various outcomes as a result of racism and racial battle fatigue framework provides researchers and practitioners a framework to better understand of the experiences and responses of students of color on college campuses. Academic performance is an important outcome to consider, but educators also need to make sure that the institutional environment is not detrimental to the health and well-being of students.

Addressing Racial Microaggressions and Racial Battle Fatigue

Despite reported hostile campus racial climates, students of color persist and graduate from colleges and universities, but their pathway is consistently interrupted (Harper, 2012). Students of color are often blamed for poor academic outcomes while universities receive little to no scrutiny. Instead, university administrators need to be held accountable for not addressing hostile and unhealthy environments that are rife with racial microaggressions. Since colleges and universities are admitting students and

asking them to spend valuable resources at the institutions, administrators need to provide healthy living and learning environments for all students.

Unfortunately, there is not enough critical assessment of institutional values and the culture of universities that largely ignores racism.

The racial battle fatigue framework may help administrators implement programs and policies that help address racial microaggressions and the race-related health outcomes of students of color. Prior institutional policy interventions on campuses have generally ignored the effects of racism on students of color. Universities have been interested in getting students of color on campus, but have not focused as much on making sure students of color stay and feel welcome. Institutional policies and programs that address the health of students due to racism would not only attract students, but may improve the academic outcomes of students of color and perhaps their overall experience (Johnson et al., 2014). In the short term, such policies and programs may improve the everyday experiences of all students with long term outcomes addressing the perceived hostile culture of higher education institutions toward historically underrepresented students. A single program or institutional policy by itself will not address the climate and culture of higher education institutions, but a number of targeted policies that improve the postsecondary experience for students of color is needed. The racialized experiences of students of color on campuses are multifaceted. Health is only a single component of possible outcomes in college, but it is important because there can be lifetime impacts.

The systemic issue of racism on campus is so pervasive that, unless change occurs, will continue to be a problem for campus community members well into the

future. Higher education practitioners can utilize research on racial microaggressions, racial battle fatigue, and campus racial climate to create race-conscious programs for White students, faculty, and administrators that help address and dispel prevailing negative stereotypes of students of color that lead to racial microaggressions and racial battle fatigue. University policy makers can also create opportunities for Whiteness to be disrupted through intergroup dialogue, cross-racial programming, and multicultural housing. White students need critically analyze Whiteness and White privilege. The self-inspection of Whiteness should occur not only in student affairs programming, but it should be part of the curriculum in university courses.

Universities need to conduct the long-term project of dismantling systemic Whiteness and White privilege on their campuses by confronting everyday racial microaggressions. Universities should have counselors that are trained to assist and help students, faculty, and staff who have been impacted by racism on campus. Race-conscious counselors and programs should address racial battle fatigue and racial microaggressions. Counselors should provide students with information about coping strategies. Counselors should be trained to identify situations in which racial stress may be amplified and how to proactively address such situations. In addition, faculty and staff should be trained so they can recognize when students may be impacted by racism on campus. This would remove the responsibility from the student to the institution.

Nevertheless, institutions are taking steps to educate students about racial microaggressions. For instance, the University of Utah has counselors who focus on racial microaggressions and racial battle fatigue, and Emory University's Office of

Health Promotion has published information on racial microaggressions (Zesiger, 2013). In addition, colleges need to promote counseling and need to provide information that dispels the stigma associated with counseling so that students will be comfortable with seeking such services. These suggestions require a shift in the university culture that will not be easy, but is needed if universities care about the unique challenges and risks experienced by the increasingly diverse students matriculating and graduating from these institutions.

Finally, the structure, organization, and leadership positions in higher education are still predominantly White (Museus & Jayakumar, 2012). Structural diversity can play an important role in how students perceive the campus climate and their experiences with racism. To address hostile campus racial climates and resulting racial battle fatigue, it would be helpful for universities to focus on hiring and enrolling students, faculty, staff, and administrators from historically underrepresented groups. Universities can do a great deal to address racial microaggressions and racial battle fatigue experienced by students of color. Universities can implement race-conscious policies and programs, educate White students and faculty about racial microaggressions and racism, and finally hire and enroll more individuals from historically underrepresented groups.

Conclusion

The stressors that comprise racial battle fatigue have very real health consequences for students of color on college campuses. Post-secondary scholars do not focus on racial battle fatigue as a framework to incorporate diverse research literature on human behavior, social conditions, and health. Students of color experience the everyday stressors associated

with being a university student, but their everyday lived experience is compounded by endless racism and discrimination that occurs daily on college campuses (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). The growing body of literature on racial microaggressions and racial battle fatigue on students of color provides a significant perspective for practitioners, researchers, administrators, and students.

The racial battle fatigue framework is an important and promising model to empirically study race-related stress for people of color in higher education and in society at large. The opportunity to attend postsecondary institutions is not enough to guarantee the success of students of color. Higher education administrators and practitioners need to create welcoming campus environments free of racial microaggressions. It can be helpful for individuals who experience racial microaggressions and racial battle fatigue to understand, assess, and name their experiences with racism. While it is important to understand consequences of racism such as racial battle fatigue, it is also crucial to adopt adaptive coping strategies to combat the pervasiveness of racism. Understanding the possible stress responses for students who live and work in racist environments can help higher education leaders better understand and address the structural racism that permeates higher education institutions.

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