# The Effect of Microaggressions, Predominantly White Institutions, and Support Service on the Academic Success of Minority Students

Anna Parsons

ABSTRACT

There are a variety of factors that have an effect on the academic success of college students. For students of a racial and ethnic minority, their racial identity can be factor hindering to their overall success. This article looks at how academic achievements of racially and ethnically marginalized students are affected by microaggressive behaviors, a predominately white institutional (PWI) setting, and support services through various scholarly literatures. Results showed that both PWIs and microaggressions have a negative impact on academic success. However, this is due to mediating factors and not a direct relationship from one variable to another; PWIs tend to harbor students with microaggressive behaviors, which in turn increases anxiety and duress in students of color resulting in lower academic performance and higher attrition rates. Supportive services could combat this by boosting coping skills in minority students, which increases resilience and academic success.

BACKGROUND

It is difficult for American adults to be successful in the modern workforce without a post-secondary education; approximately 73% of young adults between 25-34 years of age who had a post-secondary degree also had stable, full-time employment compared to only 60% of those who completed high school (Kena, Aud, Johnson, Wang, Zhang, Rathbun, Wilkinson-Flicker, and Kristapovich 2014:10). With that in mind, it is not surprising that greater amounts of students from various socioeconomic statuses are enrolling in college at higher rates than previously seen. Considering that approximately 25% of the current United States population is composed of minority groups, academic success of minority students is crucial. Although rates for college enrollment of minority students have risen over the years, retention seems to be a common issue for most colleges and universities; the national dropout rate for black students in higher education institutions was consistently 20-25% greater than their white counterparts (Davis, Dias-Bowie, Greenberg, Klukken, Pollio, Thomas, and Thompson 2004). The gap between white and minority students is also apparent in baccalaureate attainment, with white students being almost two times more likely to attain their bachelor's degree than black students, and almost three times more likely than Hispanic students (Forrest-Bank and Jenson 2015).

This division in higher educational attainment has previously been explained by increased likelihood that black and Hispanic students are of low socioeconomic status (SES), raised in an impoverished public school system, therefore blaming inferior educational preparation. Although minority and low SES students are more likely to enroll in remedial courses, and students that take remedial courses are less likely to graduate post-secondary education, a wealth of research strongly suggests that prior academic preparation is not the sole

predictor for college success, nor a significant factor in the dropout rates of minority students (Forrest-Bank and Jenson 2015; Davis et al. 2004). Rather, there are other factors that contribute to the success of minority students in higher education.

*Microaggressive Behavior*

A microaggression is a term coined by African American psychiatrist Chester Pierce to describe the relationship between black and white interactions (Harwood, Huntt, Mendenhall, and Lewis 2012). It is used to describe relations between oppressed and privileged groups. Specifically, racial microaggressions embody "every day subtle or ambiguous racially related insults, slights, mistreatments, or invalidations" (Torres-Harding and Turner 2014: 464). This includes behaviors such as being followed around a store because the owner thinks that you might steal, commenting on how good your English is, or someone commenting on how they "don't see" skin color.

Common themes with microaggressive behavior towards minority students include proving self-worth, invisibility, hypervisibility, sole representation, as well as assumptions of inferior intelligence levels, being foreign born, and criminality (Davis et al. 2004; Sue, Capodilupo, and Holder 2008; Torres-Harding and Turner 2014). Each microaggressive category tends to affect different ethnicities/races in different ways; according to Torres-Harding and Turner (2014), Latinos in the U.S. tend to feel more impacted by microaggressive behaviors, whereas Asians tend to feel less of an impact from microaggressions.

Students of color reported feeling an internal conflict after hearing or being treated in a microaggressive manner; this leads to either confronting the aggressor or ignoring the issue.

Regardless of the action taken or lack thereof, many marginalized students report unsatisfactory responses from white students and professors, as well as racial tension in the classroom (Sue et al. 2009). Even so, Davis and colleagues (2014) found that students of color often avoid addressing professors about microaggressive behaviors due to a fear of retaliation in the form of grade tampering. Ultimately, feeling unsupported by the educational institution increased anxiety and decreased class participation from students of color, thus negatively affecting the students' academic performance.

*Predominately White Institutions*

Racism has always been a part of the United States' history; despite the outlaw of slavery with the Emancipation Proclamation and the end of segregation with the civil rights movement of the 1960s, racist ideology had been a part of the American culture for nearly 200 years. According to Critical Race Theory, our society (including educational institutions) often has white supremacy ideologies unconsciously ingrained in its foundation. This institutionalized racism is hidden in the culture, language, and traditions of the universities, allowing problematic policies and practices to go unnoticed (Gusa 2010). Instantaneously erasing all institutionally-ingrained Eurocentric ideologies is nearly impossible. Eurocentric ideals praise European cultural standards, making racially and ethnically diverse students feel inferior and reject parts of their own culture (Davis et al. 2004). Thus, these influences are perpetuated, continuing to affect ethnically diverse populations.

Predominantly white institutions (PWI) have unknowingly adopted this culture as their own. However, in the decades after the civil rights movements, universities worked diligently to

diversify their campuses through programs and initiative such as affirmative action(Tod, Spanierman, and Aber 2010). Despite these efforts, students of color tend to view campus climate differently than their white peers, frequently feeling unwelcomed and unsupported (Harwood et al. 2012; Worthington 2008). Research suggests that racial discrimination is a key factor in the high attrition rates for marginalized students (Davis et al. 2004) and perceptions of a racially unsupportive environment can result in adverse outcomes such as poor performance, poor mental health, and increased stress levels (Torres-Harding and Turner 2014).

One of the biggest hindrances to changing the racial climate on college campuses is an understanding of race and ethnic challenges—such as daily racism—between both ethnic minority groups and white privileged groups. A study done by Roger Worthington and colleagues (2008) shows that white groups have a similar attitude with students of color toward campus climate relations if the white groups are more aware of their racial privileges. Therefore, it is easier to produce a positive, supportive environment for students of color at a PWI if the privileged population is aware of race in relation to privilege and oppression. Changing racial awareness could have a positive effect on retention rates of minority students.

*Support*

Support for students when challenges arise, independent of race/ethnicity, is important for academic achievement. Since students of color face challenges beyond their control that negatively affect their collegiate success, support is critically necessary to oppose the negative outcomes and promote a positive academic outcome.  Vincent Tinto's theory of college student attrition stresses that when institutions of higher education offer supportive environments that

allow students to integrate successfully, students are more likely stay in school, perform better academically, and be more emotionally satisfied (Tinto 1993).

There are many factors that dictate the need for different types of support services on college campuses for students of color. Specifically, many students of color tend to be of low-socioeconomic status. Thus they are more likely to work part-or full-time in order to support themselves and take on the financial implications of college (Baker and Robnett 2012). Family devotion also plays a role in student support, as well as student responsibility; family support and obligation can be of great importance to students of color such as Latinos, however outside commitments can detract from student's success by taking the focus away from school responsibilities (Baker and Robnett 2012; Schneider and Ward 2003).

Most research available consistently suggests that social support in aids in successful integration of racially and ethnically diverse students in higher education, thus resulting in greater academic success. In their study, Baker and Robnett (2012) found that Black students were more likely than Latino students to gather with peers to study and participate in student organizations on campus. The retention rate the following year for Black students was greater than the retention rate of their Latino counterparts. Similarly, a study done by Schneider and Ward (2003) found that Latinos who gathered peer support from the general college population were significantly better adjusted than Latinos who sought support from other Latino peers.

Lastly, support that comes in various forms is more likely to effectively aid student adjustment and retention when combined rather than offered separately (Schneider and Ward 2003). Support from faculty and staff at an institutional level increases trust in the institution.

Support likewise increases the confidence of students of color, which allows them to face challenges such as microaggressions and PWIs with increased self-assurance (Davis et al. 2004; Sue et al. 2009).

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, both Predominately White Institutions and microaggressions have a negative effect on minority student's academic performance, though this relationship is not direct; specifically, PWIs and microaggressions have an effect mentally, physically, and emotionally for students of color, which then can inhibit their academic outcomes. Ways to buffer these effects primarily include increasing supportive environments for marginalized students on campus. Support can come in a variety of forms, such as increasing campus diversity, encouraging student organization participation, and promoting awareness of both students and staff regarding racial privilege and oppression.

Although the literature overwhelmingly highlights that problems in a racial environment have an effect on student outcomes, there were limitations to their studies; much of the literature was based on convenience sampling, which can be problematic in relation to biased answers or over-representation of a limited viewpoint. Other limitations include many small sample qualitative studies that can also have an over-representation of one viewpoint. Further limitations include a lack of encompassing measures and data; each study had different ways of measuring academic success and many studies focused on particular minorities instead of multiple. The results taken from literature with different measurements of a standard are harder to generalize to a larger population.

Considering this, future research should be done to more definitely establish the specific connections between PWIs or microaggressions and academic performance, which can be achieved by controlling for different moderating factors which may include student body size or school location. Moreover, future research could focus on different responses to microaggressions and PWIs in relation to gender identity. Lastly, regardless of where future research is directed, similar research could be more comprehensive if there were universal measures and definitions for terms such as minority and academic success. Gaining a more comprehensive understanding of factors that impede educational advancements for students of color would allow universities to better support their students, giving everyone an equal opportunity to achieve success.

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