

# The Salience of Color-blindness Among Students of Color: Racial Microaggressions and their Impact on Campus Racial Climate

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## Introduction

- Research indicates that students of color often endure race- and ethnicity-related psychological burdens while attending predominantly white universities. Much of this psychological burden relates to uncomfortable situations that place students' of color racial status on display.
- Students of color in predominantly white universities endure challenging experiences due to their racial categorization that invalidate their presence within institutions of higher education. These experiences are termed *microaggressions*: "brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group. These exchanges are so pervasive and automatic in daily interactions that they are often dismissed and glossed over as being innocuous" (Sue, Bucci, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007, p. 72).
- Purpose:** This study qualitatively explores how college students of color experience microaggressions at a predominantly white university.

## Literature Review

- Since white students tend to be racially unaware, they also tend to deny the existence of overt and covert racism, which creates frustration for students of color (Morrison, 2010).
- Even at a historically black university, Asian American students are subjected to microaggressive situations, particularly based on the model minority stereotype (Palmer & Maramba, 2015).
- Latinx students enrolled in Hispanic-serving universities are subjected to racial microaggressions regardless of the racial composition of the university (Garcia, 2016; Sanchez, 2019).
- Black college students that attend predominantly white universities are often critical of these institutions because they fail in adequately responding to black students' concerns about the racial climate of the campus (Lewis & Shah, 2019; Mwangi, Thelamour, Ezeofor, & Carpenter, 2018; Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017).
- Critical Race Theory asserts that contemporary racism is challenging to combat because of color-blindness or the "belief that one should treat all persons equally, without regard to their race" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 170). Elsewhere, Bonilla-Silva (2018) defines color-blind racism as a set of frames or beliefs that ignore the existence of institutional racism and that subtly maintain the racial status quo in a colorblind society.

## Research Question/Hypotheses

- To what degree do experiences with racial microaggressions affect students' of color perceptions of the campus racial climate?
- Long-involved Asian American undergraduate students enrolled at a predominantly white university are the most likely to endorse a color-blind perspective when describing the campus racial climate.
- For long-involved Latinx undergraduate students, their likelihood of endorsing a color-blind perspective when describing the campus racial climate is somewhere between Asian American students and black students.
- Then, long-involved black undergraduate students are the least likely to endorse a color-blind perspective when describing the campus racial climate.

## Results (Microaggressions)

- Microaggressions and Asian American Students: A defining characteristic relates to forever foreigner concept; the notion that Asian Americans are foreigners in their own country of birth.
- Microaggressions and Latinx Students: A defining characteristic relates to the assumption of this group holding an "illegal" status or to the assumption that this group is academically incapable.
- Microaggressions and Black Students: A defining characteristic relates to the hyperawareness of their blackness or of the label of criminal.

## Results cont. (Color-blind Racism)

- Asian American students: A defining characteristic is the individualization of institutional racism.
- Latinx Students: Like black students, a large defining characteristic relates to the degree of criticism toward institutions.
- Black Students: A defining characteristic would be that this group remained hypercritical of various institutions in terms of its perpetuation of race and racism.

## Conclusions/Implications

- Concordant with prior research, black students, as a whole, rejected the frames of color-blind racism. They spoke about disrupting white spaces, recognizing racism as a systemic issue, refusing to pathologize black people, and contending that harassment of black people is normalized and pointing out institutional failures.
- Asian Americans most often endorsed the frames of color-blind racism by individualizing institutional racism. Some examples include the following: the exoneration of the university from social responsibility, the denial of racism by providing alternative motives, and the rationalization that racist acts stem from individual ignorance and their absence of social skills.
- Latinx students mostly rejected the frames of color-blind racism: This group criticized the university's resources for students of color, lack of resources, and institutional failures, acknowledged that differences in culture should be unifying, and recognized the systemic disadvantages that exist for students/people of color.
- Future researchers must continue to explore how students of color experience racial microaggressions on predominantly white universities, how students of color reject and/or endorse frames of color-blind racism, and how students of color perceive the campus racial climate.
- Since racial microaggressions are embedded in the lived experiences of students of color, repeated interventions that are mediated by student affairs professionals and faculty members are necessary.

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## Methods

- Purposive sampling was used, then snowball sampling when needed: undergraduate students of color (Asian American, Latinx, and black) that have been long-involved with a multicultural club for a period of at least 6 months were recruited. Additional criteria included: 18 years of age, current student, US-born or raised.
- To ensure in-depth qualitative data, a semi-structured, focus-group interview was conducted for each targeted racial group (Asian American, Latinx, and black) for a total of three one-to-two-hour focus-group interviews. Three student groups of color (four Asian American students, four Latinx students, and five black students) were interviewed over the first-half portion of the spring 2020 semester.
- To ensure that the narratives of students of color remain experiential, patterns/trends that appear within the narratives were coded utilizing inductive coding. For organizational purposes, however, some general priori codes reflected the theoretical framework, such as the four frames of color-blind racism: abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism.

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