
Original Paper

Exploring HBCU College Students' Experiences with Microaggressions and Perceptions of Law Enforcement

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Abstract

This study explored college students at a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) experiences of microaggressions, and their perceptions and attitudes toward law enforcement officers. Microaggressions is a term used to describe subtle and everyday behavioral, social or verbal slights or indignities directed at marginalized communities based on their identity. Past research suggests that microaggressions are commonplace in the life experiences of people of color, however, there is a lack of research examining microaggressions toward students of color. Racial and ethnic microaggressions have been suggested to impact the well-being and self-esteem of college students of color. In particular, the quantitative, pilot study explored which forms of microaggressions (i.e., microassaults, microinsults, or microinvalidations) that students at an HBCU are more likely to encounter when interacting with law enforcement officers. A sample of (N= 83) college undergraduate students completed a survey that included the Perception of Law Enforcement Measurement, the Microaggressions Scale, and a demographic questionnaire. A descriptive analysis was conducted to explore college student's experiences with racial microaggressions, and perceptions and attitudes of law enforcement officers.

Keywords: microaggressions, HBCU, students of color, perceptions, law enforcement

1. Introduction

Presently, in the United States police brutality has become a very alarming social problem impacting young people of color. Particularly, racial profiling and racial discrimination by law enforcement officers remain a concern for young, black, and brown bodies in the U.S. Past studies suggest police officers are more likely to show prejudices and biases against young Black adolescents compared to other racial and ethnic populations (Correll et al., 2007; Eberhardt et al., 2004). In addition, police officers are more likely to dehumanize black and brown bodies perceiving them as “uncontrollable, aggressive, and violent” individuals. In turn, this perception of black and brown bodies leads to justifying discrimination, brutality, and violence against black and brown people (Campbell, 2019). While much research has explored racial microaggressions, discrimination, and perceptions by law enforcement officers toward black and brown bodies in relation to interactions, arrest rates, racial profiling, criminal investigations, and crime statistics, there remains a gap exploring the unique experiences and perceptions of college students of color who experience microaggressions by law enforcement officers.

Racial microaggressions and discrimination continue to impact students of color within institutions of higher education in the United States. Institutions of higher education offer a unique space to examine the microaggressions experienced by students of color. Racial discrimination is distinct from racism, manifesting at the individual or structural levels thus representing practices and behaviors that deny the equitable treatment of people of color (Driscoll, Reynolds, & Todman, 2014). While racial discrimination has evolved from covert experiences to explicit assaults and hate crimes, research

suggests a modern form of racial mistreatment known as racial microaggressions exists and is often experienced by people of color (Delapp & Williams, 2014; Williams et al., 2014; Torres, Driscoll, & Burrow, 2010). Racial microaggressions can include intentional or unintentional, subtle nonverbal or verbal, behavioral or environmental indignities that communicate denigrating messages to people of color (Constantine & Sue, 2007; Sue et al., 2009). Racial microaggressions are classified into three categories: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations (Sue et al., 2007). It is important to note such interactions can produce mental distress and foster inequities for people of color. Studies have suggested inequitable outcomes particularly for students of color within higher education (Caplan & Ford, 2014). Caplan and Ford's (2014) study concluded college students were likely to express experiences of racial microaggressions and discrimination at 4-year institutions. Anderson (2016) concluded 81% of Black students reported experiencing discrimination and reported being perceived by others as suspicious. Nadal et al. (2014) study explored the racial microaggressions experienced by college students and faculty in higher education, further suggesting that racial microaggressions may contribute to the development of negative self-concept and self-esteem among college students. Past studies also report that racial microaggressions are likely to negatively impact college students' mental health, well-being, and academic success (Solórzano et al., 2000; and Sue et al., 2009).

2. Microaggressions Framework

Many students of color in the United States experience racial discrimination and racial microaggressions in their everyday lives. Concernedly, research suggests that people of color may experience racial microaggressions more frequently than overt racial discrimination (Sue et al., 2009). Historically, "old-fashioned" racism has changed from blatant, overt actions and behaviors to more covert and subtle forms of "modern" racism, often contributing to White individuals often unaware of their subtle, covert, and discriminative attitudes and behaviors that can negatively impact their interactions with people of color (McConahay, 1986; Neville et al., 2000; Sue et al., 2008). According to Pierce (1970) these subtle forms of "modern" racism are known as racial microaggressions. Microaggressions can be defined as nonverbal, verbal, and environmental insults and disparages, that can be intentional or unintentional, and that communicate a hostile derogatory, or negative message to a person because of their marginalized identity (Feagin, 1992; Sue, 2010). Often, microaggressions are unconscious thoughts, insults, and actions that are reflexive because of societal conditioning (Sue, 2010; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009). Microaggressions can be perpetuated by institutional policies, laws, and regulations. Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, and Esquilin (2007), authors of "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Everyday Life," provides three descriptive categories of the experiences related to racial microaggressions: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Microassaults can be an "old-fashioned" type of racism. According to Nadal et al. (2014) microassaults are often aligned with experiences of overt racism. Microassaults can consist of explicit racial derogation characterized by a verbal or nonverbal attack intended to harm the victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions (Sue et al., 2007). An example of a microassault includes a police officer calling a person of color a racial slur or using an anti-gay slur to refer to an individual that identifies as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Sue et al. (2007) suggest microinsults are defined as "communications that convey rudeness and demean a person's racial heritage or identity. They are known as snubs, frequently unknown to the perpetrator, but clearly convey a hidden message to the recipient of color" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 274). Microinsults can include endorsement of racial stereotypes. Microinvalidations are defined as "communication that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color" (Sue, 2010, p. 37). In comparison to microinsults, microinvalidations are covert messages or social interactions that result in discrimination or mistreatment of people of color. Often these messages and social interactions tend to devalue the individual's racial and or ethnic heritage and can include the dismissal of race-based experiences and stressors (Delapp & Williams, 2014). Microinvalidations can consist of invalidating a claim of injustice a person of color may experience. In the context of police interactions with people of color, an example may include a student of color suggesting that they have been racially profiled and the police officer responding that "they don't see color," or "that racism does not exist."

Importantly, research has illustrated racial microaggressions as a stressful life event that is commonly

experienced by people of color (Torres et al., 2010). Experiences of racial microaggressions often require a primary cognitive appraisal, which consists of the individual assessing the impact of the stressful life event on their overall well-being. For students of color, there are several potentially stressful events within academic settings, such as social isolation, academic support, mentorship, feelings of connectedness on college campuses, and academic performance. Additionally, students of color are more likely to experience dehumanizing indignities and racial microaggressions on college campuses from faculty, staff, or law enforcement officers.

The purpose of this exploratory pilot study is to capture which forms of microaggressions (i.e., microassaults, microinsults, or microinvalidations) that students of color at an HBCU are more likely to encounter when interacting with law enforcement officers. The study aims to extend prior work on microaggressions by capturing college students' experiences of microaggressions, and their perceptions of law enforcement officers. The following research question guided the study:

Research Question:

Which forms of microaggressions (i.e., microassaults, microinsults, or microinvalidations) are college students at an HBCU more likely to encounter when interacting with law enforcement officers?

3. Method

The pilot study used a quantitative method to collect and analyze data to gain a deeper understanding of college students of color experiences with microaggressions and perceptions of law enforcement officers. The sample participants consisted of 83 undergraduate students attending a small, rural HBCU in the southeastern region of the United States (approximately 6,000 students, 60% Black or African American, 20% White, 7% Hispanics or Latino).

3.1 Measures

Data collection consisted of a brief demographic questionnaire, the Perception of Law Enforcement Measurement, and the Microaggressions Scale. The brief demographic questionnaire consisted of 13 questions exploring age, race, ethnicity, economic status, level of education, sex, marital status, military affiliation, sexual identity, residency, and sexual identity.

The Perception of Law Enforcement Measurement included an 11-item scale measuring the student's attitudes toward law enforcement officers with a 4-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree). Sample questions included: "*Police officers in my community do not treat individuals differently based on one's race,*" and "*I have experienced more positive encounters with Non-white police officers compared to encounters with White police officers,*" and "*Police officers are a valuable part of my community.*"

On the basis of the three forms of racial microaggressions developed by Sue et al. (2007), The Microaggressions Scale was developed to capture the three forms of microaggressions (i.e., microassaults, microinsults, or microinvalidations). The item content for the Microaggressions Scale was guided by several qualitative studies exploring Black and African Americans' experiences of racial microaggressions (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008; Sue, Capodilupo et al., 2007; Sue, Nadal et al., 2008). The Microaggressions Scale consisted of a 22-item scale measuring the occurrence of the three forms of microaggressions with a 4-point Likert scale (0 = Never, 1 = Little/Rarely, 2 = Sometimes to 3 = Often/Frequently. Sample questions included: "*How often has a police officer used a racial slur or racial insult toward you?*" and "*How often have you been physically assaulted by a police officer?*"

3.2 Procedure

Participants were recruited within the HBCU campus community through a variety of methods including student email listservs, word of mouth posted fliers, social media platforms, and classroom invitations asking for volunteers. Undergraduate students were recruited and encouraged to participate with a snowball sampling technique. Data collection occurred during two semesters (spring and summer) in a single academic year. The procedures were identical across both semesters (i.e. the participants were instructed to complete the consent form and the questionnaires in-person). The research was vetted and approved by the University Institutional Review Board.

The brief demographic questionnaire, the Perception of Law Enforcement Measurement, and the Microaggressions Scale were administered in-person. The participants were provided with the informed consent, brief demographic questionnaire, the Perception of Law Enforcement Measurement, and the Microaggressions Scale. The in-person survey lasted about 20 minutes.

To analyze the data the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used. Univariate analysis was performed to explore the descriptive statistics of the variables.

4. Results

4.1 Perceptions of Law Enforcement Scale

Of the respondents, seventy-two percent of the sample consisted of self-identifying as Black or African American students. The majority age range of participants was between 19 and 21 years of old. Sixty-one percent of the sample participants identified as females, 35% identified as males, and 1% identified as nonbinary. Regarding socioeconomic status, 51% of participants self-identified as lower class, 32% identified as working class, 15% identified as middle class, and 1% identified as the wealthy class (refer to Appendix A for an overview).

The results of the Perception of Law Enforcement Scale reported student's perceptions of law enforcement officers within their community (Refer to Appendix B). Of the respondents, 57% indicated trust in police in their community and reported feeling safe around police officers (59%). Sixty-five percent of respondents reported experiencing many positive encounters with police officers, specifically, 40% of participants reported more positive encounters with Black police officers compared to encounters with White police officers. Twenty-four percent of respondents indicated that they fear police officers in their community. Regarding perceptions involving factors related to race, 62% of respondents indicated police officers treat individuals differently based on race, and 60% of respondents felt that race does not impact their attitude toward police officers. Of the respondents, 53% stated police officers treat individuals differently based on their sexual orientation. While the participants indicated an overall positive perception of law enforcement in their community, the participants also indicated a belief that officers could treat individuals differently based on their race and sexuality.

4.2 Experiences with Microaggressions

The Microaggressions Scale was categorized into the following types of microaggression experiences: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations (Refer to Appendix C). Findings for the microassaults indicated 46% of respondents experienced being targeted or profiled by a police officer because of their race, while 39% of respondents reported being discriminated against by a police officer because of their race. Thirty-six percent of respondents reported being verbally assaulted by a police officer, while 7% reported being sexually assaulted by a police officer. Thirty percent of respondents report experiences involving a police officer used a racial slur or racial insult. The findings regarding the experiences of the microinsults concluded that 41% of participants indicated experiences where a police officer assumed they held a lower socioeconomic status, occupation, or education because of their race. Thirty-nine percent of participants felt that a police officer treated them like a second-class citizen because of their race, while 37% reported experiences of police officers suspecting them of doing wrongdoing because of their race. Of the respondents, 30%, reported being ignored by a police officer after initially calling for their help or while filing a report. Regarding the experiences of microinvalidations, 45% of respondents reported experiences where a police officer indicated they treat people the same regardless of race, while 35% reported experiences where a police officer indicated that race does not matter. Thirty percent of respondents reported experiences involving a police officer stating that racism does not exist, while 31% of respondents reported police officers stating that they do not see color.

5. Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to explore the forms of microaggressions (i.e. microassaults, microinsults, or microinvalidations) that students of color at an HBCU are more likely to encounter when interacting with law enforcement officers. This study aims to extend the existing literature on

microaggressions by capturing college students' experiences, and their perceptions of law enforcement officers. The findings are unique in that they highlight the perceptions and microaggressions that students of color experience when interacting with police officers. The research findings show that while a large percentage of students (84%) perceived police officers as a valuable part of their community, students also report police officers treating individuals in their community differently based on one's race, sexual orientation, and sex. In addition, students reported multiple experiences of microassaults, microinsults, or microinvalidations such as being ignored by police officers, police officers using racial slurs, being profiled, and discriminative behaviors. While it is evident that students of color experience microaggressions on college campuses and within their communities, it is important to discuss the sense of urgency toward mitigating these experiences and providing social and emotional support to students. It is critical for colleges to identify strategies and interventions that recognize and address these unique experiences of students of color. Solorzano and colleagues (1998) discussed the importance of creating counterspaces. Counterspaces are defined as academic or social safe spaces that allow students of color a space to share their experiences, narratives, and stories of perceived microaggressions, interactions, and challenge deficit notions of people of color (and other marginalized groups) and establish and maintain a positive collegiate racial experience for themselves (Ong et al., 2017). Additionally, there is a need for future research to examine the implications of microaggressions on students of color academic performance, attrition, self-esteem, mental health, and well-being.

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