

QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION OF MEXICAN-AMERICAN
EXPERIENCES OF RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS

A Dissertation Presented to the
Faculty of the College of Education
University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Stephanie Chapman
August, 2011

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Abstract

Racial microaggressions are the brief, commonplace racial slights and insults that are expressed by Whites against people of color (Sue, Capodilupo et al, 2007). This qualitative study examined previously unexplored area of ethnic-racial microaggressions directed against Mexican-American persons. Through the use of a semi-structured focus group interview, 15 self-identifying Mexican-American university students shared their experiences of microaggressions. Data was collected and analyzed following the guidelines of Consensual Qualitative Research (Hill, Thompson & Williams, 1997), a rigorous method for analyzing qualitative data that involves a team approach in the development and coding of domains and core ideas in order to accurately describe consistencies across cases. Results identified 7 major domains of microaggressions experienced by participants: 1) Assumption of foreigner status, 2) Assumption of criminality, 3) Assumption of inferior social class and/or second class citizenship, 4) Pathologizing cultural values, 5) Invalidation of racial reality, 6) Implied special privileges as a minority group, and 7) Invalidation of interethnic differences. Two additional domains described participant's emotional experiences of racial microaggressions and strategies employed by participants to cope with aggressive events. Results supported broad domains of racial microaggressions previously identified by other research teams in their research of Black American (Constantine, 2007; Sue, Nadal et al. 2008) and Asian-American (Sue, Bucceri, et al., 2007) experiences of racial microaggressions. Group-specific

messages of racial microaggressions identified within this study include the assumption of illegal immigrant, messages regarding inferior English language skills, and messages pathologizing Mexican-American cultural values and forms of communication, particularly related to the Spanish language and traditional Mexican cultural values of familismo. This evidence supports the hypothesis first proposed by Sue, Capodilupo et al. (2007) that different racial and ethnic groups are vulnerable to experiencing different forms of racial microaggressions.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

Although racism has been a part of the life experience of racial and ethnic minorities throughout US history, the social expressions of racism have changed over time. Fifty years after the gains made by the Civil Rights Movement (CRM), such as the establishment of suffrage to African Americans and the creation of legislation outlawing certain forms of overt racial discrimination (Zinn, 2003), contemporary US culture continues to be plagued by racism directed at racial and ethnic minorities (Sue, 2003).

The current state of racism in the US is reflected by statistics demonstrating the inequitable and unjust treatment of people of color within this country across all domains of daily life. For example, racist practices and institutions affect access to health care - it is well documented that people of color receive lower quality health care in comparison to White counterparts, even when matched on socioeconomic status (Gieger, 2006). Racist practices are also reflected in the fact that, 50 years after desegregation, US society remains highly segregated, with research indicating that 62% of all Blacks continue to live in highly segregated metropolitan areas (Pettigrew, 2004). Segregation contributes to inequitable access to educational services, as Latino and Black families are statistically more likely to live in the most disadvantaged urban communities in the US (Kivo, Peterson & Kuhl, 2009), while Whites live almost exclusively in privileged, suburban neighborhoods (Pettigrew, 2004). Additionally, racial inequities influence a family's access to financial resources to its members. Race in the US is strongly related to household income, with Black, Latino and Asian families in the US living on a household income that is significantly less than their White counterparts (Schwartz & Scott, 2009).

Although racism has been defined differently by many scholars, Marable's (1992) definition of racism as the "system of ignorance, exploitation, and power used to oppress African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, Pacific Americans, American Indians and other people on the basis of ethnicity, culture, mannerisms and color" (p.5) is particularly instructive. As Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) note, this definition of racism is helpful in that it shifts the discussion of racism away from a Black versus White dichotomy to one that is inclusive of "multiple faces, voices and experiences" (p. 61). Also key to Marable's definition of racism is the idea that, because Whites have traditionally had greater access to power and inclusion in contemporary American society, White racial characteristics and cultural practices have been privileged as superior to those of other racial or ethnic groups by dominant US society. This White privilege has enabled White people to continue to maintain feelings of superiority over individuals of other groups into the twenty-first century, and serves to legitimize the racist behavior of Whites against people of color (Solórzano et al., 2000).

Many scholars of race and racism agree (e.g., Bonilla-Silva, Lewis, & Embrick, 2004; Neville et al., 2000) that the overtly hostile racist attitudes and practices characterized by the pre-CRM racism of the south are no longer outwardly condoned within dominant US society. Instead, these authors argue that current racial practices are often hidden within a color-blind racial ideology. This refers to a pervading racial framework in which race does not and should not matter in our society today (Gushue & Constantine, 2007). Individuals who adopt color-blind racial attitudes assert that an individual's race is not an important component of their identity and should not be recognized in any significant way. Rather, they propose that all people should be treated

as individuals to be assessed and rewarded by others based on their unique personalities, characters, values and traits (Williams, 2001). Neville et al. (2000) argue that to adopt color-blind beliefs is to perpetuate color-blind racism, in that color-blind beliefs serve to minimize or ignore the effect of racism on people of color by (a) denying the existence of White privilege; (b) ignoring the extent of institutional racism within our society (as well as the need for social policy to affect change); and (c) denying the present existence of blatant or “old-fashioned” racism.

Support for the prevalence of a color-blind racial ideology within current US society was provided by President Clinton’s Race Advisory Board (1998). This seven member board, comprising a diverse group of individuals with backgrounds in theology, government policy, labor activism and the legal and the criminal justice system, was established to provide counsel to the President on ways in which his administration could improve the quality of American race relations, as well as to promote national dialogue on racial issues. Through an extensive, two-year series of town hall meetings and public forums conducted with thousands of groups and individuals across the country, the Race Advisory board produced a report outlining the conclusions that they drew from their participation in these meetings. This report also specified the Board’s recommendations for future interventions needed to eliminate racism between groups and to reduce the systemic inequities experienced by people of color.

In their report, the Race Advisory Board (1998) noted that they repeatedly found racial inequities to be so deeply ingrained in American society that they were almost invisible. This investigation also determined that most White Americans were unaware of the particular advantages they held, as well as the ways in which their colorblind attitudes

or actions caused them to unintentionally discriminate against minority persons in their communities. For example, in their investigation the Race Advisory Board cited findings from sources such as the 1997 Gallup poll indicating that the majority of White respondents interviewed asserted that there existed “fewer race problems, less discrimination, and abundance of opportunity for Blacks, and only minimal personal prejudice” (p. 51). Another 1995 Washington Post poll cited by the Advisory Board revealed that at the time only 36 percent of Whites endorsed the statement that “past and present discrimination is a major reason for the economic and social problems facing Blacks” (p. 51). These findings clearly reflected dominant color blind racial ideologies, in that they reflected a lack of understanding on the part of White people about the effects of institutional and cultural racism, as well as an inability to recognize more subtle forms of individual racism that occur in society.

One of the most common ways in which racism is perpetuated by White people within a color-blind racial ideology is through the expressions of racial microaggressions. Microaggressions are the “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group” (Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007). Different components of color-blind racial ideology contribute to the creation of a racial climate where White people in particular are socialized to ignore the occurrence and effects of racial microaggressions. First, because color-blind racial ideology supports the myth that racism is a thing of the past, race relations are perceived by White people to be much more favorable than they actually are. This biased perspective allows Whites to overlook instances of racism that they encounter and to ignore their own white privilege that they carry (Neville et al., 2000). Additionally, many

well-meaning Whites have been socialized by color-blind ideology to believe that it is important not to “see color”, causing Whites to be highly invested in the belief that they personally are progressive, liberal and fair in their thoughts about and actions towards people from other racial and ethnic groups (Bonilla-Silva, 2004). While it is inarguably a good thing that contemporary social factors motivate White people to act in less obviously racist ways than in previous generations, this social push towards color-blindness can problematically cause Whites to fail to admit to themselves the racial biases and stereotypes to which they subscribe. These two factors inherent to color-blind racial ideology – a lack of ability in being able to identify anything but overt forms of hate as racism and a driving desire to view oneself as “non-racist” – set the stage for the smaller, more innocuous forms of microaggressions to go unrecognized and unaddressed by White people in their interpersonal interactions and their social spaces.

Racism continues to be a major issue affecting social relations in the US. The current racial ideology of color-blind racism maintains and perpetuates racial inequities through dominant messages that both deny the existence of White privilege and ignore the institutional racism that currently exists in US society. Color-blind racial attitudes allow racial microaggressions, one of the most common forms of racism, to go unrecognized and unaddressed by White individuals in both public and private spaces.

Chapter 2 – Color-Blind Racism and Racial Microaggressions

The concept of racial microaggressions was first coined by Pierce in the 1970's, who defined microaggressions as the "subtle, stunning, often automatic, and nonverbal exchanges which are 'put downs' of blacks by offenders" (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Wills, 1978, p. 66). Solórzano et al. (2000) broadened the definition of microaggressions, describing them as the "subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and /or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously" (p. 60). A more recent definition of racial microaggressions sums up contemporary scholarship in the area, stating that they are the recent

brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group, and are expressed in three forms: microassaults, microinsults and microinvalidations. (Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007, p. 72)

Sue, Capitolupo et al., (2007) first proposed that racial microaggressions can be broken down into three different categories. The first type of microassaults are actions that are deliberately intended to hurt, oppress or discriminate against people of color. Microassaults might be what most closely resembles old-fashioned racism; examples include using racial slurs like the "N" word", showing symbols like a Klansman's hood or a noose to intimidate, and deliberately serving a white customer before a person of color.

What differentiates microassaults from old-fashioned racism is that microassaults are likely to be expressed in limited, private or "micro" situations, where some level of

anonymity is guaranteed for the aggressor. In keeping with color-blind codes of racial ideology currently dominant in America today, overt expressions of racism are socially prohibited, causing individuals who privately maintain some level of belief in White racial superiority to feel social pressure to keep these beliefs to themselves. While this may contribute to less instances of overtly public sentiments of hate being espoused than in previous racial eras (when White people could have expected to be socially supported by other Whites when making a racist joke or slur) racial microassaults still tend to occur at times when an individual has either a) lost emotional control and fails to sensor his or her internal racial biases or b) the individual is in a more private forum, where he or she feels relatively safe to engage in a microassault (Sue, Capodilupo et al., 2007). This element of the private versus public is a factor distinguishing a racial microassault from a more overt and more easily recognized racist statement or act – because racial microassaults are more likely to occur in private settings with few witnesses, they are more likely to go unrecognized and unaddressed.

The second type of microaggressions, microinsults, involves communication that conveys insensitivity and rudeness, and may demean a person's racial heritage or ethnic identity (Sue, Capodilupo et al., 2007). These microinsults may be conveyed either verbally or non-verbally. Examples of verbal microinsults include telling a black person that he is a "credit to his race," or expressing surprise that he is very articulate. While these comments may seem relatively innocuous and may even be meant to be complimentary, they actually convey a hurtful message that Black people as a group are inferior. An example of a non-verbal microinsult is when a store owner follows a person

of color closely around the store, as if he or she is more likely than white customers to be a thief.

Microinvalidation is the term coined for the third type of microaggressions proposed by Sue, Capodilupo et al. (2007). Microinvalidations are communications towards people of color that serve to negate or diminish the importance of race to one's identity, as well as one's lived experiences of realities of race and racism. In this regard, microinvalidations are often based in color-blind racism, and reflect the White communicator's belief that race does not or should not matter any more in today's Post-CRM world. For example, a Black person may be told that "race doesn't matter" because "We are all human beings" (Sue & Capodilupo et al., 2007, p. 274) or that "I don't see you as Black; I just see you as a regular person" (Constantine, 2007, p. 5). Other microinvalidations might be based in implicit racist beliefs that only White Americans are "real" Americans (DeVos & Banaji, 2005). When American-born Asian Americans or Latino-Americans are repeatedly told that they "speak good English" or are asked where they are from, the message received subtly invalidates their American citizenship, and perpetuates the idea that they are outsiders or perpetual foreigners (Sue, Bucceri et al., 2007). The effect of these types of statements is that people of color's racial identities and experiences of racial discrimination are minimized at best, but certainly negated. This also absolves the White speaker from having to acknowledge their own personal racial privileges (Helms, 1992).

Research into Black and Asian Experiences of Racial Microaggressions

Microaggressions have begun to receive more attention in the research literature in counseling psychology (e.g., Constantine, 2008, Sue, Bucceri et al., 2007; Sue, Nadal

et al., 2008). To-date, the published work in the area of racial microaggressions has focused primarily on the experiences of Black or African American persons. In 2000, Solórzano, Ceja and Yosso utilized grounded theory to analyze data from a series of focus-groups that they conducted with 34 (18 female and 16 male) Black students. These focus groups investigated Black students experiences of racial microaggressions while living and working on three primarily White university campuses. After the 2007 *American Psychologist* publication that outlined their theoretical framework of racial microaggressions (Sue, Capodilupo et al., 2007), Sue and his research team published their study looking at racial microaggressions against Black Americans (Sue, Nadal et al., 2008). This study made use of focus groups and Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) methodologies (Hill, Thompson & Williams, 1997) to analyze and categorize the experiences of racial microaggressions of 13 Black individuals (4 men and 9 women). In this study, participants were composed of both college students and working professionals. A second paper (Sue, Capodilupo et al., 2008), focusing specifically on participants' reactions to their experiences of microaggressions, was also published from this data set. Another study investigating Black experiences of microaggressions (Constantine, Smith, & Redding, 2008) made use of structured individual interviews and interpretive phenomenological analysis to investigate the types of racial microaggressions Black or African-American faculty members reported experiencing in academia. Finally, Constantine (2007) also published a study exploring African-American clients' perceptions of their White counselors with respect to perceived racial microaggressions and the therapy working alliance. This study again made use of focus groups and data

was thematically analyzed to identify the dominant categories of microaggressions reported by the 24 college-aged participants (17 female and 7 male).

A review of the literature produced one study (Sue, Bucceri, et al., 2007) exploring Asian Americans' experiences of racial microaggressions. Using methodology similar to the investigations of Black persons' experiences of microaggressions, this study utilized focus groups of 10 participants in total (1 male and 9 female) who reported their vocational status as either students or working professionals. This sample of participants reflected a range of Asian ethnic identities, including Chinese Americans, Filipino Americans, one Korean American, one Japanese/German American and one Asian Indian/European American. In this study, CQR analysis was used to develop a categorical list of racial microaggressions most commonly reported by the participants. Although results of this study indicated that the Asian participants reported several experiences of microaggressions that were similar to those previously reported by Black participants, an interesting findings was that the Asian participants also reported several group-specific experiences of microaggressions, indicating that distinct racial and ethnic groups will experience microaggressions differently.

Research into Latino/a Experiences of Racial Microaggressions

A review of the literature identified one study (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009) that investigated Latino/a experiences of racial microaggressions. This study utilized critical race theory and grounded theory methods to qualitatively explore through focus groups the specific types, effects and reactions to racial microaggressions experienced by 37 Latino/a students across three primarily White university campuses. Specific ethnicities of participants outside of the broad category "Latino/a" were not

reported. Results indicated that participants experienced three primary types of racial microaggressions: 1) interpersonal microaggressions; 2) racialized jokes; and 3) institutional microaggressions. Although not specifically categorized, the types of interpersonal microaggressions documented by researchers in this study included exclusion from social groups (such as being told that a study group was “full”) and experiences of social isolation, such as being left sitting alone at a table in a classroom while nearby tables were filled to capacity with White students. Other experiences of interpersonal microaggressions involved denial of small privileges afforded to White students, such as the offer of extended office hours or homework support. The microaggression of racialized jokes described a campus culture which supported the telling of jokes that involved problematic racial stereotypes and racial epithets. Inherent to this microaggression was the message that White students were “only joking”, and that Latino students lacked a sense of humor if they objected to the “comedy”. Finally, the category of institutional microaggressions involved environmental microaggressions such as unavailability of other Spanish-speaking individuals, lack of social power due to relatively small numbers of Latino/a persons on campus, experiences of “cultural starvation” due to lack of Chicano culture on campus, and underrepresentation of Latinos across faculty demographics and course content.

Yosso and colleagues’ (2009) contribution examining Latino experiences of racial microaggressions is an important contribution to the existing body of literature. However, given the different methods of analysis and the manner in which the study was broken down into themes, it was difficult to compare results of this study to prior studies evaluating Black and Asian experiences of microaggressions. Additionally, a limitation

of this study was that it did not utilize an interview protocol that allowed for the categorization of specific types of interpersonal or environmental racial microaggressions. Thus, only limited parallels and points of contrast can be drawn between the Latino participants' experiences of racial microaggressions and prior research findings on Black and Asian individual's experiences of racial microaggressions. Commonalities and differences between different groups are discussed below.

Commonalities of microaggression experience

Of the types of microaggressions examined in the aforementioned studies, microinsults seem to be the most prevalent. Several themes of racial microinsults have been identified across this literature, although depending upon an individual's racial identity and particular role, the type of microinsult varied. A commonly reported microinsult includes the ascription of intelligence, where the aggressor automatically assigns either low levels of intelligence to Black individuals (Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000; Sue & Nadal, 2008) or high levels of intelligence to Asian persons (Sue, Bucceri et al., 2007).

A second frequently reported theme reported by both Black and Asian participants centered around receiving treatment on the part of White people that reflected a belief that they were either second-class citizens or generally of inferior status. Examples of this type of microinsult include having one's family be placed at a table at the back of the restaurant, even when more preferable tables were available (Sue, Bucceri, et al., 2007) or of having customers or colleagues incorrectly assume that one

works in a lower status position than is the reality (Constantine, 2008; Sue, Nadal et al., 2008).

A final commonly reported microinsult involves messages that pathologize people of color's cultural values and communication styles (Sue & Nadal, 2008). As examples of this type of microinsult, Black individuals reported experiences of being told in corporate work environments to "...act White and be professional" (Sue, Nadal et al., 2008, p. 334) or to minimize African cultural dress in the workplace (Constantine et al., 2008). In a similar fashion, Asian participants reported feeling that their cultural values emphasizing silence placed them at a disadvantage in classrooms where participation grades were awarded for high levels of verbal participation (Sue, Bucceri, et al., 2007). Consistent with color-blind racial ideology, these types of microinsults assert White privilege in their insistence upon White norms and values in school and work settings, all the while placing people of color at an institutional disadvantage across public spaces.

This field of research has also illuminated several common microinvalidation themes, many of them congruent with color-blind racial ideologies. One common theme involves the denial of the institutional racism that exists in America today. As a brief definition, institutional racism refers to the societal patterns and system inequities - such as inequities in healthcare and educational systems - that impose oppressive or negative conditions against groups based upon racial or ethnic differences (Jones, 1997).

Research participants provided multiple reports of experiencing microinvalidations denying the existence of institutional racism. For example, one client of mental health services reported the counselor as saying "If Black people just worked harder, they could be successful like other people" (Constantine, 2007, p. 5). Additional examples include a

student's experience of observing her college professor fail to talk about racism in lectures when it was clearly related to the issues at hand (Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000), or experiences of "administrative inertia" related to recognizing and acting upon the need to improve cultural sensitivity on campus (Yosso et al, 2009). Other participants reported experiencing color-blind racial comments that denied their racial identity entirely. Examples of this included Black counseling center clients reporting that their White counselors attempted to deny the racial differences between them, saying "I don't see you as Black; I just see you as a regular person" (Constantine, 2007, p. 5). Asian participants also reported this color-blind denial of their racial reality, in one case, a Vietnamese American male was told that "Asians are the new Whites" (Sue, Bucci et al., 2007, p. 76).

Relatedly, research participants commonly endorsed experiencing the microinvalidation of over-identification, which occurs when the speaker attempts to deny or minimize personal racial biases because of assumed similarities - for example, stating "As a gay person, I know just what it's like to be discriminated against because of race" (Constantine, 2008, p. 5). Microinvalidations such as this reflect color-blind racial ideology which asserts both that in current society an individual's race is an insignificant component of his or her identity, at the same time denying the fact that racial inequities and racial discrimination exists in the US (Williams, 2001). Frankenberg (1993, p. 144) defined this aspect of color-blind racism as incorporating two parts – 1) "color evasion", White emphasis on sameness as a way of rejecting identification with held White privilege; and 2) "power-evasion", a term used to describe White sentiments reflecting

meritocratic beliefs that everyone has the same access to power and opportunities to succeed.

Another common microinvalidation spoken to in several of the studies involved a person of color pointing out what they perceive to be a racially motivated slight, and the listener rejecting the speaker's perceptions, instead presenting alternate explanations for the interpersonal interaction (Sue, Capodilupo et al., 2007). Yosso et al., (2009) described this interaction commonly occurring when Latino/a students objected to White students' telling of racial jokes and were told by the White students to "have a sense of humor". It can be argued that color-blind racial ideology significantly contributes to this type of microinvalidation. Because color-blind racial ideology socializes White people to think of racism as only the overt expressions of hate characteristic of pre-CRM times, White people are often unprepared to view racial microaggressions as forms of racism needing to be addressed. Additionally, since part of the color-blind racial framework in US culture involves teaching Whites to identify themselves as non-racist (and to be highly invested in maintaining that view of themselves), Whites often find it very difficult to be "called out" as having acted in a racist way, often vehemently denying that their actions expressed a racial bias (Bonilla-Silva, 2004).

Differences in microaggression experience

Although there was a great deal of commonality of reported microinsults and microinvalidations across studies, there were also instances where Black, Asian and Latino participant experiences' appeared to diverge considerably. One type of microinsult reported only by Black participants involved the message that Black people are criminals (Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000; Sue & Nadal, 2008). In contrast, Asian participants

alone reported feeling perceived as foreigners no matter their actual nationality or immigration status. Female Asian participants also spoke to a theme researchers termed “exoticization of Asian American women”, which played upon stereotypes of Asian women as domestic and subservient (Sue, Bucceri, et al., 2007, p. 76). This finding of group experience differences is significant, and has implications for the way in which racism and racial microaggressions need to be considered flexibly, taking into account each individual’s racial identity and relevant demographic characteristics. A specific microaggression noted for Latino/a participants was the experience of hearing racialized jokes that involved negative stereotypes and epithets historically used towards Latinos (Yosso et al., 2009).

In summary, the preliminary qualitative research investigating people of color’s experiences of racial microaggressions has notably borne out the theoretical framework of microaggressions proposed by Sue, Capodilupo et al. (2007). It appears that several types of microinsults and microinvalidations are commonly experienced by Black, Asian and Latino/a group members. At the same time, research indicates that is likely that the specific types of microaggressions a person of color may experience may vary considerably depending upon their membership within a particular racial or ethnic group, as well as depending upon other demographic factors, such as gender. Although additional research is needed in this area, it is clear that racial microaggressions are an important area of investigation in capturing people of color’s experiences with and reactions to this type of racism.

Psychological Effects of Racial Microaggressions

There is a great deal of literature indicating that exposure to perceived racism and racial discrimination has serious implications for one's psychological and physical health. Research indicates that exposure to racism is linked to issues ranging from hypertension (Kryger & Sydney, 1996), to depression and anxiety (Bowen-Reid & Harrell, 2002). Living with racism can also have detrimental effects on an individual's sense of self and connection to others – research links exposure to racism with a more negative racial identity adoption (Hipolito-Delgado, 2008) and separation from one's cultural heritage (Ruggiero, Taylor & Lambert, 1996).

While the majority of the literature has examined effects of racism on Black or African American populations (Araújo & Borrell, 2006), research also shows that for Latinos specifically, perceived discrimination is related to a host of negative health effects. For example, in a diverse community sample of 128 participants representing multiple national backgrounds and acculturation levels, Moradi and Risco (2006) demonstrated that exposure to racism is linked to both increased depressive symptoms and lower reported self-esteem. Similarly, using regression analysis, Hwang and Goto (2008) demonstrated that level of perceived racism significantly predicts levels of reported psychological distress, anxiety and suicidal ideation among a diverse group of Latino college students. In addition to the psychological consequences of racism, research in this area also indicates that the psychological distress takes a physiological toll on Latinos. For example, in examining a sample of 224 Latino employees (62 men and 162 women; national heritage not stated) and matching them to similar status White comparisons, Gutierrez, Saenz and Green (1994) demonstrated that for Latino's perceived discrimination in the workplace is positively related to higher levels of stress

and health problems. This finding is similar to James, Lovato and Khoo's (1994) work, which showed with a sample of 60 Mexican American men and women of varying acculturation levels that amount of perceived discrimination predicted level of objective measures of health, such as blood pressure as well as more subjective measures, such as self-reported level of illness (James, Lovato, & Khoo, 1994).

Although research has focused mostly on the psychological consequences of exposure to more overt forms of racism, preliminary research indicates racial microaggressions can have devastating psychological effects for People of Color. For instance, recent findings from studies examining Black, Asian and Latino/a experiences of racial microaggressions indicate that chronic exposure to racial microaggressions might be even more damaging than exposure to more direct expressions of hate (Solórzano et al., 2000; Sue, Capodilupo et al., 2008, Yosso et al., 2009). While the messages may appear innocuous, in reality racial microaggressions can have a cumulative and serious impact on people of color (Franklin, 2004, Sue, Nadal et al., 2008). Similar to the literature that has looked at the effect of exposure to overt racism, research indicates that people of color who are exposed to repeated racial microaggressions experience feelings of self-doubt, frustration and isolation (Solórzano, 2000). Other reported emotional reactions to microaggressions include feelings of "belittlement, anger, rage, frustration, alienation and of constantly being invalidated" (Sue, Bucceri et al., 2007). Yosso and colleagues (2009) reported Latinos/as experience racial microaggressions as a rejection of their efforts to become integrated on their university campus, making students feel like they should expect to be treated like intruders in their spaces of work and study. During the process of conducting a focus group, Sue, Nadel et al. (2008) noted

that the painful emotional reactions of participants to the microaggressions that they had experienced was evident in the pain it took to recount stories. These researchers noted that participants become at times highly distressed in retelling their stories, often crying or tearing up, having fluctuations in voice volume and stammering over words.

The ambiguous, confusing nature of microaggressions also contributes to their ability to hurt and take a toll psychologically. Sue, Capodilupo and Holder (2008) found in their focus group with Black students and working professionals that a common process for individuals was to go through a process of “questioning” whether or not any particular incident was racially motivated. For example, one participant reportedly wrestled with an incident where a White person told her that her answer was “Very smart” (Sue, Holder et al., 2008, p. 332). She described her reaction to this comment saying, “Like it feels like a compliment but not really. It leaves you feeling like, did you just compliment me or what?” Similarly, another participant in this study struggled when a White woman changed seats on the train when she was sitting next to her. This participant explained her difficulty in decoding the event, stating “Maybe it just so happened that the person that she decided to sit next to wasn’t Black, and she wasn’t Black. I can’t say that’s why she moved, but maybe she wanted to be close to the window. I don’t know” (Sue, Capodilupo Holder et al., 2008, p. 331). Asian research participants also shared that they were forced to spend a great deal of psychic energy on the “guessing game” (Sue, Bucceri et al., 2007, p. 78) of whether they just experienced a racist attack or whether they were simply being overly sensitive or paranoid. These participants shared that the result of the confusing nature of microaggressions was that it

caused them to doubt and mistrust their own perceptions of the intent of others around them.

Participants also reported that they often were at a loss of how to respond to microaggressions in the moment, and had to deal with feelings of anger and frustration with little avenue for recourse after the fact (Sue, Nadal et al., 2008). Other participants reported feeling social pressure to “rescue offenders” (Sue, Capodilupo & Holder, 2008, p. 332) meaning to put the White person’s feelings in the situation ahead of one’s own. For example, a Black male participant reported changing his physical behavior when in the presence of a White woman who seemed troubled by being close to him

Inside an elevator, a closed space, being very conscious of a White woman, whether or not she’s afraid, just sort of noticing me, trying to relax myself around her so that she’s not afraid. (Sue, Capodilupo & Holder, 2008, p. 333)

It is likely that this process of feeling required to take care of White offenders contributed to the psychological cost of feelings of powerlessness and invisibility that many participants reported.

The recipient’s relationship to the perpetrator of a microaggression also factors into the psychological impact of microaggressions. People of color have stated that while they typically experience overt racial aggressions from strangers, microaggressions were often perpetrated by intimates - friends, colleagues and acquaintances (Sue, Bucceri et al., 2007; Sue, Nadal et al., 2008). In this regard, microaggressions are often a more hurtful form of racism, because they are committed by persons who are trusted and respected, and they tend to catch the receiver when his or her guard is down.

Additionally, as discussed previously, current color-blind racial ideologies within the US which socialize Whites to only recognize overt acts of racism, and to invest highly in perspectives of oneself as non-racist beings (Bonilla-Silva et al., 2004). Because microaggressions often are not readily recognized by members of dominant White society, recipients of microaggressions can often be doubly impacted by friends and acquaintances' tendency to "explain away" the microaggressions when they are pointed out. This was a notable theme identified in the microaggression literature. Participants repeatedly stated that their relationships with White friends and colleagues were often strained when they were put in the position of having their personal experiences of racism invalidated by important others around them (Sue, Bucceri et al., 2007, Yosso et al., 2009).

Research shows that people of color experience high levels of internal conflict in deciding whether or not to respond to experiences of microaggressions (e.g., Sue, Bucceri et al., 2007, Sue, Capodilupo et al., 2007; Sue, Capodilupo & Holder, 2008) as they recognize White people as unprepared and unwilling to view microaggressions as forms of racism. A consistent theme across the focus group research on microaggressions (e.g., Sue, Bucceri et al., 2007, Sue, Capodilupo & Holder, 2008) indicated participants' knowledge that microaggressions were often committed outside of the awareness of the perpetrator and went unrecognized by the other White people witnessing the interaction. In this regard, focus group participants in the microaggression literature voiced a struggle in finding a way to address microaggressions effectively with White perpetrators and community members, as in their past experiences, Whites would be likely to perceive such interactions very differently than they did. Many participants reported feeling stuck

in a difficult “catch-22” in terms of dealing with microaggressions (Sue, Bucceri, et al., 2007). If recipients of microaggressions do not speak to the assault, the microaggression is likely to go unnoticed and unchecked. At the same time, if recipients choose to point out the experience to friends or colleagues they risk damaging important relationships, being perceived as oversensitive or hostile, and experiencing further conflict. One participant described the difficulty in opening dialogue about microaggression:

“If you were to address every microaggression, it’s like all, “Oh, there you go again, you people”...so it’s like, you sort of are conditioned to not say anything, thereby becoming oblivious to it. Not oblivious, but you know – if you’re hypersensitive about it, then they’re like, “See, we told you.” (Sue, Capodilupo & Holder, 2008, p. 334).

In deciding how to respond to microaggressions, participants reported a feeling of powerlessness that went along with being trapped between the choice of addressing microaggressions or letting them go, both of which had negative consequences for them (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008). This sense of powerlessness was reflected even in the statements of participants who reported feeling in control of the decision to respond to microaggressions. As one such participant poignantly stated,

“It’s just humiliation. Episode after episode of humiliation or attempts at humiliation. I get to decide, but episode after episode. The way my children get treated, you know, seeing it through the eyes of a parent, and having to listen after my children, as they experience the same thing I experience.” (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008, p. 334).

Because microaggressions are often committed outside of conscious awareness of the perpetrator and go unrecognized as racism, they are often allowed to flourish in public spaces, serving to create work and school environments that are oftentimes felt by people of color to be overtly hostile in nature. Participants in the microaggression literature stated repeatedly that their cumulative experience of microaggressions in certain environments restricted them from participating fully in these spaces. For example, Black students on predominantly White campuses reported feeling unable to take advantage of student services and choosing to drop out of university settings in response to repeated microaggressions because it became too tiring to continue to battle hostile environments (Solórzano et al., 2000). Similarly, Black students receiving counseling services were more likely to terminate counseling services prematurely if exposed to microaggressions from their White counselors (Constantine, 2007). Other participants stated that they did not feel safe in being themselves at work – for example, Black faculty on a predominantly White campus reported feeling pressure to minimize cultural dress or manners of speech at work, or stated that they needed to adopt a level of hyper-professionalism in order to be accepted by colleagues (Constantine et al., 2008). At times participants in this study shared that their work environments felt so unsafe that their only course of action was to leave these positions, which can have the effect of disrupted career paths and financial stress (Constantine et al., 2008).

Resistance Against Microaggressions

It is important to acknowledge that people of color are not passive recipients of racial microaggression attacks. While the research to date has not specifically looked at paths of resistance against microaggressions on the part of people of color, different

coping strategies have been identified within the focus group studies. Some of these strategies include the (a) creation of counter spaces, (b) seeking out emotional support, (c) increased engagement in coping mechanisms, including healthy paranoia, and (d) empowering and validating oneself.

Many participants reported creating academic and social counter spaces outside of the White-dominant environment – places where deficit notions about people of color are challenged and a race-inclusive culture is promoted (Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998). Examples of counter spaces that Black and Latino/a participants identified included (a) choosing to live in cultural floors in residence halls or eat in community dinner gatherings, (b) joining Black and Latino cultural organizations such as fraternities, sororities or cultural centers, and (c) becoming more involved in social service work within the one's community (Solórzano et al., 2000; Yosso et al., 2009). Participants reported that the benefits of engagement in these counter spaces were that they provided a place where deficit notions about their racial identities could be challenged, a positive collegiate environment could be maintained, and support systems could be created. Two negative results of engagement in counter spaces identified were the fact that for some students, the energy and time demands of engagement in multiple minority-group-specific organizations negatively affected their study habits (Solórzano et al., 2000), and lack of understanding about the importance of these activities from White friends and acquaintances (Yosso et al., 2009).

Similarly, in a study examining Black faculty members' experiences of microaggressions, the most common coping strategies identified were (a) seeking support from colleagues, friends and family members; (b) choosing one's battles carefully in

terms of selectively deciding when and where it will be most effective to address racial microaggressions directly; (c) engagement in prayer or other spiritual forms of coping; (d) withdrawal from unsafe spaces and resignation that subtle racism will always exist in academia (Constantine et al., 2008).

In a third recent study examining Black experiences of racial microaggressions (Sue, Capodilupo & Holder, 2008), participants reported adopting an increased level of healthy paranoia around their interactions with Whites, in order to better prepare themselves against their almost daily experiences of microaggressions. Participants in this study also reported turning to other Black friends, colleagues or relatives for “sanity checks” (p. 332), using these relationships to check in on their perceptions of racism that they encountered. Finally, participants within this study reported cognitive “empowering” or “shielding” strategies (p. 332), where they consciously worked to control their emotional hurt in response to the incident by actively identifying the racial microaggression for what it was and refusing to take on responsibility for the interaction on themselves.

Strengths and Limitations of Current Microaggression Literature

Although nascent in its development, the existing literature examining People of Color’s experiences of racial microaggressions has opened up an important avenue or research into current manifestations of racism in the US. A major strength of this line of research has been its use of qualitative methodologies. As noted by Hill, Thompson and Williams (1997), qualitative research allows for a more open-ended and rich collection of data than does quantitative research, and is particularly useful in the early stages of a research program when little is known about the phenomenon – as is the case with racial

microaggressions. Qualitative research paradigms are also a good fit for research questions that are intended to be ethnographic and emancipatory in nature, as the open-ended nature of qualitative methods allow participants greater latitude to truly share their own perspectives and experiences (Mertens, 1998). The qualitative focus groups and individual interviews used in the studies described above allowed for the richness of the data collected, which has facilitated both the identification of several common microaggressions, as well as given voice to the way in which microaggressions can be expressed differently, depending upon the group of target. These methods of investigation have also provided strong findings indicating the devastating impact of racial microaggressions on people of color, sounding the need for additional research in this area.

The most significant limitation of the existing body of research looking at racial microaggressions is undoubtedly the relatively few studies examining the construct. The fact that only five studies examining racial microaggressions against Black individuals (Constantine, 2007; Constantine et al., 2008; Solórzano et al., 2000; Sue, Bernal et al., 2007; Sue, Capodilupo & Holder, 2008), one study examining racial microaggressions against Asians (Sue, Bucceri et al., 2007) and one study examining racial microaggressions against Latinos (Yosso et al., 2009) were published at time of writing indicate the preliminary nature of this work. Obviously, additional research is needed to both bear out current findings amongst different samples, as well as to investigate more fully the experiences of individuals from different racial and ethnic groups.

Research into Racial Microaggressions Against Latinos

As noted above, only one study to date has examined microaggressions within a Latino community. The paucity of research in this area is particularly striking considering the fact that Latinos account for 16% of the total US population and make up the largest minority group in the US (US Census Bureau, 2010). When citing demographic numbers, it is important to note that available statistics on Latino immigrants to the US do not include people without legal status. In March 2008 there were estimated to be 11.9 million people living and working in the US as unauthorized migrants, three-quarters of whom were believed to be Latino (Passel & Cohn, 2009), indicating that current population statistics dramatically underestimate the total size of the Latino / Hispanic population currently living in the United States.

Although no reasons for the limited examination of racial microaggressions against Latinos have been mentioned in the literature, this author proposes that research into the experience of racial microaggressions against Latinos may have been slowed or complicated by confusion around the constructs of race and ethnicity. The terms of Latino or Hispanic serve to describe one's ethnicity, which includes one's sense of identification with a shared culture, language, historical identity and a common national or religious identity (Utsey et al., 2002). In contrast, race is widely viewed as a socially constructed term that is used to stratify people into groups on the basis of various sets of heritable characteristics, with an emphasis upon salient traits such as skin color, facial features and hair texture (Helms, Jernigan, & Mascher, 2005). While it is important to clearly recognize the distinction between ethnicity and race, this author proposes that the concepts of racial discrimination and racial microaggressions can help to capture Latino

persons' shared experiences of discrimination, oppression and marginalization within dominant US society.

In the US, discrimination against Latino persons is often based upon a complex combination of both racial membership (identified through features such as skin color or facial features) and ethnic or cultural variables (characteristics such as accent, language spoken, occupational status and food cooked in the home) (Araújo Dawson, & Borrell, 2006). This is not unlike how discrimination works against members of other racial groups – as the research in the microaggression literature alone shows, racism experienced by Asian and Black persons is based upon both racial and cultural or ethnic variables (Constantine, 2007, Sue, Bucci et al., 2007). Although it is more widely recognized that Latinos are discriminated against for distinct cultural practices and language traditions, there exists significant research indicating that Latinos also experience discrimination based upon physical or “racial” phenotype characteristics - often at alarmingly high rates. For example, the National Survey of Latinos (2004) found that a third of Latinos in southern states such as California and Texas reported experiencing discrimination based upon their physical characteristics alone.

In arguing the position that the construct of racial microaggressions can be used to help describe the discrimination that Latino people experience, it is also important to note that several leading researchers (e.g. Araújo Dawson 2009; Utsey et al., 2002) in the field of race and racial discrimination have already set a precedent in using the ethnic identifiers of Latino or Hispanic as racialized constructs when investigating the experiences of discrimination directed at Latinos. These researchers approach this in two main ways - either through cross-comparing Hispanic experiences or outcomes with

those from other racial groups in the sense of “Hispanic” being another racial group alongside those of “Black” or “Asian” (e.g., Utsey et al., 2002) or through the use of measures of racism or racial stress to describe discriminatory experiences of Latino persons (Araújo Dawson, 2009; Araújo Dawson, & Borrell, 2006).

Current programs of research have demonstrated that racial microaggressions are a common experience in the lives of People of Color, and one of the most common ways in which racism is manifested within current color-blind racial frameworks dominant in the US. Although Latinos make up the largest minority group in the US (US Census Bureau, 2010), only one study (Yosso et al., 2009) has investigated Latino experiences of racial microaggressions, and this study was limited by its failure to utilize a protocol that could elucidate specific types of microaggressions experienced by Latinos. As data indicates that the experience of racial microaggressions often profoundly affects the work and personal lives of people of color, additional research into Latino perception of and reactions to racial microaggressions is severely called for.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to investigate Latino/a experiences of racial microaggressions via a qualitative focus group data collection method. In this regard, the study built upon previous qualitative investigations of racial microaggressions (e.g., Constantine, 2008; Sue, Bucceri et al., 2007; Sue, Nadal, et al., 2008; Yosso et al., 2009) to extend the focus of inquiry to categorize for the first time the different types of microaggressions commonly experienced by Latinos. As racial microaggressions are of the most common ways in which racism is perpetuated within the dominant color-blind racial ideology of contemporary US society, increased knowledge around Latino

experiences of racial microaggressions will significantly contribute to the larger body of scholarship on racism.

In this regard, the study aims to provide valuable information that has important implications for prevention of racism against not only Latinos but all People of Color. Because a color-blind racial ideology obscures racial microaggressions as racist acts, most White people who commit microaggressions do not realize the harm that they are inflicting, and often remain unmotivated to change their behaviors or to work to change the behaviors of others. The process of thematically categorizing common racial microaggressions experienced by Latino/a individuals will provide information that can directly increase awareness about the impact of microaggressions against Latino persons. This information should help to motivate many well-meaning Whites to become more sensitive to their own behaviors, and to better prepare them to recognize and intervene positively when microaggressions occur within their environments. This information can also help to improve diversity training and education programs, preparing future counselors and educators to be better able to work with different persons of color.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

Participants

This study recruited participants from a large southern university who self-identified as Mexican-Americans. No other limitations were set upon participant characteristics in this study. The decision to sample from a Mexican-American population was made for two reasons. Because Hispanic populations such as Mexicans, Dominicans and Puerto Ricans all have varied histories and immigration patterns, it may be that different Hispanic populations could encounter very different experiences of discrimination (Araújo Dawson, & Borrell, 2006). For example, with recent Mexican-US border tensions, a Mexican-American might expect to face increased stereotypes and discrimination around immigration issues; in contrast, a Puerto Rican of African descent might experience less suspicion around the legality of one's citizenship status but might expect to encounter increased racism around skin color and physical appearance. In this regard, the decision to sample only Mexican-Americans was made to increase the likelihood that participants would report a commonality of experience in regards to the types of microaggressions that they have been exposed to. This commonality of experience is necessary within a qualitative framework in order to be able to draw conclusions that are at least moderately generalizable. The reason that it was decided to recruit Mexican-Americans specifically (as opposed to Latinos with heritage roots from another single geographical region) was made in consideration of the fact that Mexican-Americans make up a large majority (64%) of all Latino persons living in the US (US Census Bureau, 2008). The significant numbers of Mexican-American persons living in

the US makes their experience of racial microaggressions particularly important to start to document.

A total of 15 self-identified Mexican-American students participated in this study: 4 males and 11 females; aged between 19 and 32 years, with the average age of the sample at 22 years. Two participants identified as first-generation Mexican-Americans who were born in Mexico; 12 identified as second-generation Mexican-American, indicating that at least one of their parents had immigrated to the United States from Mexico; and one participant identified as third-generation Mexican-American. Participants reported variability amongst family socioeconomic class – five described their family's socioeconomic class (SES) as working class, four as lower-middle class, five as middle-class, and one participant reported an upper-middle family SES. On a question asking about racial identity, participants were provided with an open-ended space to answer. In response to this question, two of the fifteen participants self-identified as “White” and the other thirteen described themselves as either “Latino/a or Hispanic”. Due to the way in which the question was presented, it is not possible to know if participants were confusing questions of racial and ethnic identity when they responded, or if their responses reflect an accurate portrayal of the way in which they view their racial identity. All fifteen participants identified as undergraduate students; they reported significant variability across major areas of study, with 6 participants reporting majors in the social sciences, two in education, two in the natural sciences, two in engineering and mathematics, and three individual students reporting majors in computer design, journalism, and general studies, respectively. Three focus groups were formed from the fifteen participants, with participants individually signing up to attend a focus group

based upon a selection of dates offered via the university's online research participation system. Thus group sizes varied, with three participants composing one focus group and six participants forming each of the other two groups.

Researchers

As the primary researcher's personal racial and ethnic identity is White Canadian, this research was in part cross-cultural in nature. With that in mind, it was important that great attention be paid towards creation of a project that was both culturally sensitive and culturally relevant, as well as one that emphasized power-sharing and community involvement in research design and roll-out. There were several ways in which this was addressed. First, a Mexican-American colleague formerly employed in the university's department of Hispanic studies participated in a community consultant role, assisting the primary researcher with research design, and development of the focus group script and research questionnaire. In order to facilitate focus group participants' comfort in speaking openly about their experiences of ethno-racism, two Mexican-American researchers within the university campus with experience in group facilitation were approached and agreed to be research team members. Both team members were female; one was a recent doctoral graduate from the Graduate College of Social Work, and the other was a recent undergraduate from the department of Educational Psychology. An additional colleague, a doctoral-level clinical psychology graduate student and self-identifying Mexican-American man agreed to serve as auditing consultant to this project.

Instruments

Two formal means of data collection were used. First, all participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire intended to solicit information about age, gender, Latino ethnicity, education and occupation. As part of this questionnaire, participants were asked to respond “yes” or “no” to the question “Do you think racism exists against Mexican-Americans in the US?”. Only participants who responded affirmatively were asked to participate in the focus group session. Second, the focus group was guided by a semi-structured interview adapted from that used by previous researchers investigating Black and Asian persons’ experiences of racial microaggressions (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007; Sue, Bucceri, et al., 2007)].

Procedures

Participants were recruited through the online university research recruitment system, which is accessible to undergraduate students taking courses within the College of Education and the Department of Psychology at a large, urban university in the Southwest. All participants were asked to sign up online to attend a focus group meeting on campus. Three meetings were held between the period of June and November 2010. During the focus-group meeting, participants were provided with information about the study (including a brief description of racial microaggressions) and asked to sign a consent form that included permission to audiotape the focus group meeting. Immediately after this, participants were asked to take part in the focus group discussion about their experiences of racial microaggressions.

The focus groups were scheduled to be approximately two hours in length and followed the general guidelines outlined by previous researchers in this area (see Sue, Bucceri, et al., 2007 for a complete description). Adaptations to the original protocol of

Sue, Bucci et al. were drawn from a review of the literature on Latino experiences of discrimination and racism (see Araújo & Borrell, 2006; Moradi, & Risco, 2006; National Survey of Latinos, 2004). Although it was originally planned that each focus group would be conducted by a two-person team composed of a facilitator who would lead the discussion and a process observer who would have the task of recording process notes, scheduling difficulties limited the availability of facilitators and this was not possible. Therefore, each focus group was facilitated by one facilitator. In order to promote a feeling of safety amongst participants when speaking about negative sentiments or experiences of racism occurring from interactions with others who are outside of this group, it was also planned that only Mexican-American facilitators would participate in the focus group process. However, limitations in terms of facilitator availability allowed for the research team facilitators to facilitate only two of the three focus groups, and the primary author facilitated the third group. Because of concerns that the primary author's position as a group outsider could alter the nature of information provided within the focus group, care was taken by the primary author to discuss this issue with participants at the start of the third session. A review of the third focus-group transcripts indicated that results from this particular group did not differ qualitatively from that of the other two groups.

After facilitators conducted the focus group with the participants, they engaged in a debriefing session with the primary author, where they discussed their own reactions to the group, their observations about the group, the major themes that arose within the group, and any problems that they identified. In keeping with CQR (Hill, 1997) procedures, the tapes of the focus group and facilitator debriefing were transcribed

verbatim, ensuring that all identities of participants were removed, and these transcripts were checked for accuracy by each group's facilitator.

Overview of Data Analysis

A common critique of qualitative research has been that it lacks methodological structure. In the past, studies have varied extensively on methods of analysis, and charges of researcher bias and lack of replicability across researchers has raised questions about the validity of qualitative outcomes (Kim, Liang, & Asay, 2003). In order to address this valid limitation the guidelines laid out in CQR designs was adhered to (Hill et al., 1997, Hill et al., 2005). CQR has been recognized as a highly systematic and rigorous research methodology which has been successfully used in the study of racial phenomenon (Spanierman et al., 2007). Based upon a constructionist epistemology, CQR recognizes that people individually construct their realities, and that multiple versions of the "truth" can all exist concurrently, with equal levels of validity. With CQR, researchers look for themes or commonalities of truths or experience, which make up another form of constructed reality (Hill et al., 1997).

Related to a constructionist orientation is a strong value on consensus within CQR (Hill et al., 1997). Drawing upon feminist and multicultural psychology, CQR views differences in opinion and values not as problematic, but as something to be honored and protected, as the multiple viewpoints add value to a process of knowledge development (Williams & Barber, 2004). Many of the processes of CQR are designed to help researchers work together in reaching consensus around the meaning that can be derived from the research data (Hill et al., 1997).

Finally, CQR allows for the reality that all researchers carry with them personal biases and assumptions about the world that may affect the way in which they interpret the research data. Within CQR, researchers try to make these biases explicit by discussing them with both the research team, as well as by discussing in the results sections of their findings the implications that personal biases might have had on the research (Hill et al., 2005). Further, researchers attempt to monitor and eliminate their biases by explicating them early in the research process, and often by engaging in reflective tasks like ongoing journaling throughout the research process (Hill et al., 2005). As Spanierman et al., (2007) note, this emphasis on the monitoring and elimination of personal biases is particularly important when racially and culturally diverse team members are working together.

In keeping with CQR (Hill et al., 1997) guidelines, at the start of this project, prior to initiating data collection, the research team discussed their potential biases regarding racial microaggressions. All researchers agreed that racial microaggressions exist and that they are likely manifested via group-specific messages. All researchers also agreed that racial microaggressions are a significant way in which racism is perpetuated in the post-civil rights era, and are a source of significant psychological distress for People of Color. All researchers agreed that they hoped that this project could facilitate an understanding of Mexican-American individual's experiences of racial microaggressions with the goal of preventing these types of microaggressions in the future.

A modified version of CQR (Hill et al., 1997; Hill et al., 2005) guidelines was followed in the analysis of the focus group data. To initiate the analysis, the principal researcher checked transcripts against the audio files to ensure accuracy, and prepared a

start-list of domains identified in previous theoretical and empirical papers discussing racial microaggressions (Constantine, 2007; Constantine et al., 2008; Solórzano et al., 2000, Sue, Bucceri et al., 2007; Sue, Capodilupo et al., 2008; Sue, Capodilupo et al., 2007; Yosso et al., 2009). The initial domain analysis was completed by applying the start list to the data, and modifying the domains as necessary (i.e., breaking domains down to multiple domains or creating new domains in order to best reflect the data). In accordance with guidelines provided by Hill et al., (2005), in order to avoid redundancy one team member (in this case the principal researcher) conducted the domain analysis and team members served as internal auditors, reviewing and editing the domain analysis of the primary researcher. After completing the domain analysis, core ideas were extracted from domains in a similar manner, with primary research team members auditing the initial analysis of the principal researcher. Communication between team members occurred primarily through the e-mail sharing of electronic drafts of the analysis, although phone conversations were also conducted to clarify any points of communication that were not easily resolved through writing. In total, 31 points of disagreement between team members during the domain analysis and 25 points of disagreement during the core idea analysis were documented. The principal researcher was responsible for conducting the cross analysis of the domains and core ideas identified by the research team, and primary team members served as informal auditors to this process. Although it had initially been planned for the external auditor to be active in auditing all stages of the cross-analysis, his participation in the external audit was limited to a brief review and feedback of an initial draft of the analysis due to his time availability. Additional external auditing support to the cross analysis was provided by

this project's dissertation chair. She served as an informal external auditor in her reviews of electronic analysis drafts, and assisted in clarifying the cross analysis by helping to ensure the accuracy of core ideas into appropriate domains, as well as in regrouping domains to provide the most parsimonious presentation of data possible.

Chapter 4 - Results

The three focus groups produced 7 domains covering a range of commonly described microaggressions among the participants. The focus groups also produced 2 domains describing emotional reactions and coping strategies experienced by the participants in response to exposure to microaggressive events. As recommended by Hill and colleagues (2005), categorical labels are used throughout the following results section to describe the frequency of which domain and core ideas were noted throughout the focus groups. According to this nomenclature, *general* includes all or all but one of the participants, indicating that a domain or core idea was endorsed to be true for almost all the sample. The categorical descriptor *typical* indicates more than half of the participants endorsed the domain or core idea, up to the frequency cutoff for general; finally, the term *variant* indicates that between two and half of the sample endorsed a domain or core idea.

Domain 1 – Assumption of Foreigner Status.

A typical domain that was repeated across focus groups was the assumption that participants were foreigners or immigrants to the United States. 10 out of 15 participants reported at least one experience of this type of microaggression; several of the participants reported multiple examples. Some of these comments were overtly hostile and obviously intended to insult, such as one woman's experience of being followed down the street by a group of men and told "To go back to Mexico". However, in general participants perceived comments in this theme as either well-intentioned attempts to get to know them ("Where are you from?"; "Where is your family from?"), or as statements intended to be neutral in nature (such as bringing up immigration issues as a topic of

casual “watercooler” conversation). Even though participants reported believing that no direct offense was intended by such messages, they reported feeling offended all the same, as these statements belied the underlying perception of the speaker that the Mexican-American person was presumably a new immigrant to this country. Participants reported this experience of being assumed a foreigner made them feel isolated, singled out, and at times justifiably angry. For example, one young woman attending a predominantly white school gave an example of participating in a high-school class activity of completing a mock US Citizenship exam.

“...and he [the history teacher] gave us back our grades and I was the only one in the class who got a 100. And he congratulated me in front of the class. He said, ‘[Participant’s name] got a 100 on her exam.’ And this boy sitting behind me he said, ‘Well, that’s not fair because she already took it.’ Like this is her second time taking it. And so I was like well that’s really an ignorant thing to say.” Key to this narrative is that the participant did not report anyone else in the class responding to the invalidating statement the boy made. As is often the case with microaggressions, those in positions of privilege, often Whites, frequently do not recognize the insulting nature of the communication, and thus do not perceive a need to intervene and correct the problematic communication (Sue, Capodilupo et al., 2007).

Another female participant reported commonly being questioned about her ethnic heritage with the feeling that others ask questions partly out of genuine interest, but also to confirm their perception of her as a foreigner. In keeping with the confusing and ambiguous nature of microaggressions, this participant reported perceiving other’s

positive interest in her heritage, but also experiencing the isolating feeling that goes along with being seen as an outsider.

“I’ve gotten Italian. I’ve gotten Middle Eastern and, of course, Mexican. And so I was like I think it’s kind of cool but then I have to explain to them, ‘No, my mom is Mexican-American because she was born here.’ And I was like if you guys want me to go down my lineage like I will if you have like 20 minutes, but they usually don’t want to hear it.”

Another microaggression that reflects this assumption of the Mexican-American person as a foreigner revolved around the automatic assumption of Spanish fluency, while also assuming lack of fluency in English. This was a typical microaggression, reported by 8 of the 15 participants in this study. As one female participant, a citizen of the United States noted,

“I’ve had a lot of people come to me and be like ‘Do you know how to speak English?’ and I’m like ‘Yes, I do.’ It’s just like so stupid. I don’t know they just see that you’re brown you look Mexican so it’s like you know she doesn’t have papers and he doesn’t know how to speak English.”

The frustration of the speaker above is clearly evident. The message she received subtly but powerfully invalidates her status as a citizen and demeans her history of contribution to the society of the United States. In this regard, this type of microaggression would best be classified as a microinvalidation under Sue, Capodilupo et al.’s (2007) taxonomy, in that the message implies the speaker’s perception that the Mexican-American person is not a “real” American, and therefore would not be expected to communicate in English.

Related to the assumption that Mexican-American individuals are foreigners to the United States is the typical message that Mexican-American individuals are living in the United States illegally. Many participants (n=8) reported this type of slight, often experienced as an environmental microaggression when viewing biased and negative media reports.

“One of the things that I had noticed that drives me bananas, it drives me crazy is when I watch the news it irritates me when they only discuss immigration status of Hispanics. And I feel like it’s very closely related to what you’re [the facilitator introducing the topic of microaggressions] talking about and it feeds into a lot of what’s going on right now [negativity towards Mexican-Americans] ... You don’t ever hear of the positive Hispanic person that’s an immigrant. You only hear of the person that’s breaking the law.”

Other participants described intense feelings of being aggressed against when exposed to anti-immigrant governmental legislature, such as the recent Arizona Senate Bill 1070 (SB1070; 2010) which among other things, requires alien immigrants to carry their documentation with them at all times. In discussing this legislation, participants reported the belief that supporters of Arizona Senate Bill 1070 perceive all Mexican-Americans as potential illegal immigrants. Painfully, they also reported deep feelings of being unwanted and undervalued by the dominant majority within this country. Finally, participants noted being fearful that their physical safety could even be at risk. As one participant simply noted, “[It] makes me scared as a Hispanic to even go there, you know?” Another participant expressed particular feelings of hurt and frustration about

SB1070 because it was a message of discrimination endorsed at such a wide level by political leaders and powerful members of society.

“ I don't know what she [Arizona Governor Jan Brewer] learned in school. She's repeating the history of trying to cast out a group of people. I'm like it didn't work when they did it with black folks, why she trying to do it to Hispanic people? What do you think makes a difference? So I'm like these are professional people, not just one of them, there's a whole bunch of them. These are the ones who went to school, college, are our leaders and this is how they think.”

A variant core idea, endorsed by two participants whose parents came to the United States without documentation, shared feeling that legislation such as SB1070 represented the devaluation of their family's generational history of hard work and contribution to the United States. As one young woman stated,

“That's the only thing that I take personal when it's my dad or my mom...And whenever I hear anything about illegal immigrants, how they needed to send the workers back home and all this nonsense, just angers me like all I can think of is all of the hard labor my dad has put into this country and all this - all we hear is people saying ‘We want them to go back home.’ Home? Uh. no. This wasn't your land. You stole it.”

The comments above speak to several important points – they reflect the awareness of the economic contribution that undocumented workers have made to the US economy, as well as an understanding of marginalized US history that acknowledges disputes in US/Mexico land agreements. The participant's pride in her family and informed sense of

history are clear resiliencies that she draws upon in coping with the experiences of repeated microaggressions around this theme.

Another participant, whose parents were also without US documentation, echoed feelings of frustration that her family's contribution to the development of the United States was invalidated, as well as a feeling that gains made during the civil rights movement in the United States were eroding with the SB1070:

"I can not stand the whole Arizona 10... It doesn't make sense. My dad has been here for years working. That's when it comes to law that's when it starts getting personal. That's when I'm like I have to do something about this because this is - America is retracting back to the 1950s, 1960s. It's ridiculous."

Domain 2 – Assumption of Criminality.

Another typical domain that was endorsed by eight of the fifteen focus group participants was that of "assumed criminality". Participants reported multiple experiences of verbal and nonverbal slights that made them feel that others assumed they might engage in criminal activity like shoplifting, drug dealing or abuse of social services. A variant core idea, endorsed by three participants, involved the feeling that retail associates demonstrated hyper-vigilance against shoplifting when they were in stores, often in the form of following them closely while they shopped. One participant noted that this microaggression was a common experience for her, and stated it affected her so strongly that she felt pushed to shop at other stores that were owned by Mexican-American individuals.

“They look at me like I’m going to steal something, and it makes me feel uncomfortable, and so I just walk out and go somewhere else. But it always has to happen, especially if the associates are White American.”

Another participant reported a similar experience, and stated she chose to shop in groups in order to protect herself against the messages of distrust she experienced in stores.

“...most of my friends are Mexican-American, and whenever we go to the mall there are always three or four of us. And they always are looking at us and whispering, so we just go ‘OK, I guess we’re not wanted here’. And just leave.”

Similar to participants’ reports of being viewed as a potential shoplifter, but even more serious in tone and intensity, was the core idea of being viewed as a potential criminal by police officers. Multiple participants (variant; n=5) shared experiences of themselves or family members being followed or detained by the police for unjustified reasons. For example, one individual stated

“They stopped my cousin because he has a Cadillac and I guess for mostly if you see a Hispanic or a Black guy with a Cadillac they either think he's a drug dealer or he's just rich. And they must have thought he was a drug dealer because they started searching his car.”

Another male student reported “I remember getting stopped just for looking suspicious. I was like how do I look suspicious? I'm driving?” The nonverbal and emotional communication accompanying this participant’s statement expressed significant frustration with the unspoken message that he appeared suspicious to the officer because of his race or ethnicity.

Although microaggressions related to “perceived criminality” are in part related to the previously described “illegal immigrant” domain, the messages that they send are very different. The illegal immigrant microaggression is a microinvalidation that serves to devalue Mexican-American individuals’ important contribution to US society, as well as to minimize Mexican-American individual’s agency to claim their rightful position as members of the United States, with access to all rights and privileges involved. In contrast, microaggressions of assumed criminality constitute microinsults, in that they imply a message that Mexican-Americans are dangerous and sinister individuals that others should be wary of.

Domain 3 – Assumption of Inferior Social Class / Second Class Citizen.

Another typical domain related to the experience of microaggressions was the implied belief that Mexican Americans are either inferior or second-class citizens. The majority of participants (n=13) expressed at least one experience of this type of microaggression, and several reported multiple examples. Many of these microaggressions related to common stereotypes of Mexicans employed as landscapers, laborers or domestic workers. For example, one female student reported visiting a White friend’s family on semester break.

“...we were all sitting down at the table eating. And the lady started asking me gardening tips. And actually I do garden and I have lawn work but at the moment I was like, ‘I actually don’t know. Any time I touch a plant I kill it, so you shouldn’t talk to me.’ She was like, ‘It was worth asking.’ And I was just sitting there and I was like man that was such a funny question just to assume that I knew about landscaping.”

Another student reported being introduced to a new acquaintance and sharing that she worked in the hotel industry. “And they’re like, ‘Oh really, so you work in housekeeping?’ And I was like, ‘No.’ I was just like that was so mean, that was so rude”.

Although the recipient of this message obviously felt significantly insulted, she reported responding with a simple “no” and indicated that her experience of this aggression went unrecognized by others around her. This provides a good illustration of how microaggressions can often leave the recipient feeling insulted and confused, but not in a position to directly defend themselves, as the message comes veiled as a neutral comment. At the same time, because of color-blind socialization and a position of privilege, the White aggressor often remains entirely unaware of the inappropriateness of his or her comment, as well as of the negative effects of the message on the recipient.

Other participants reported experiencing slights indicating that the speaker, usually a White American, viewed Mexican-Americans as lacking manners or cultural sophistication. For example, one male participant reported meeting the White family members of a girlfriend and experiencing the following negative interaction:

“And I remember while I was there, they were like, ‘Oh [participant’s name], so you speak Spanish. Are you Mexican?’ And I was like, ‘Yeah, I am.’ And they were like, Oh, well, you’re really polite, I wouldn’t have noticed,’ and I’m like what does polite have to do with anything? They were like, ‘You’re just really well-mannered. I wouldn’t have been able to tell.’ I’m like, I think that’s a compliment.”

This kind of “back-handed compliment” is a good example of the confusing nature of racial microaggressions. The aggressors (the girlfriend’s relatives) were

ostensibly trying to compliment the participant, but during their interaction communicated the overt message that they viewed “other Mexicans” in a highly negative light. Although the participant instantly recognized this message, he also reported confusion and a sense of feeling “off-balance” as it was delivered in the form of what was intended to be a compliment. Furthermore, the position of the speakers as relatives of a trusted individual, within the forum of a friendly social gathering added to the challenges this participant reported in navigating this situation.

Many participants (n=4) reported the variant core idea regarding messages that their English-language proficiency was not sufficient, and thus they did not deserve the same level of respect and service as other English speakers. For example, one male participant described this negative experience waiting for assistance from a professor:

“I was just waiting for him to answer a question. We were waiting in line. And he made me wait, because he said that he couldn't understand a word that I was saying. It was like, “Oh, okay,” so I mean, I had to, the line was long, and I didn't want to just make... not a scene. But then I told myself to, you know, just control myself and just get the help that I needed at the moment. So yeah, even at school sometimes.”

Another participant, who clearly spoke fluent English, reported the humiliation of having others criticize him for his alleged “accent” in the workplace;

“I answered the call and this patient said, ‘I’m a patient with this doctor and I need to make an appointment’ and I was trying to help him. And he was like ‘I don’t understand what you’re saying, can you please transfer me to someone who doesn’t have an accent?’

This interaction reflects the privilege and entitlement that the speaker feels in the idea that “unaccented” speech is something to be expected and appropriate to ask for, and conveys a clear message that persons who speak English as a second language are seen as less competent or helpful than native English speakers.

Another way in which microaggressions of inferior social class were transmitted were via messages implying that all Mexican-Americans are living within, or just recently escaped, extreme poverty. This was a variant core idea, reported by four participants, and it was noted to occur when speakers were attempting to demonstrate an understanding of the socioeconomic challenges that Mexican-Americans can experience and simultaneously “set themselves apart” from other Whites by demonstrating support for the person as a minority-status individual. For example, one participant spoke of a close Mexican-American friend currently away attending an Ivy-league university. He stated his friend frequently reported that other students (with obvious financial means) often offered to buy him things or pay for meals and costs of admissions during social outings. Although the participant reported recognizing the surface generosity of these specific instances involving his friend, he also expressed discomfort that the more affluent students would automatically assume a Mexican-American student must be impoverished.

Other participants reported store clerks and salespeople treating them as if they must be impoverished. At these times participants stated the message received was less benevolent and more of a direct insult, making them feel that they were not worth serving in a store. For example, one woman reported a negative incident shopping for wedding dresses with her sister, who was soon to be married. “And the lady [sales associate] was

picking from the racks for sale. And she [the sister] didn't want those dresses and asked for the higher price ones, and the lady got bothered. I guess she assumed that they would be too expensive and a waste of her time."

Domain 4: Pathologizing Cultural Values/Communication.

A general domain, endorsed by nearly all (n=14) participants was the message that cultural values or practices related to being Mexican-American were devalued by Whites. One variant (n=3) core idea within this domain involved statements denigrating traditional Latino/a values of "familismo" or familialism (Santiago-Rivera, 2003). For example, in the comments below, a participant reports the experience of being told that she needed to increase her separation from family involvement and relationships.

"My friends do not understand why I'm still living with my parents. And I have a friend who goes to Baylor and she's so miserable there but I had dinner with her parents and they couldn't understand and they were like, 'So why didn't you go somewhere else for college because once you're 18, you should really experience the world on your own.' And I go, 'Well, in my culture it's a little different.'

Another participant spoke about having his practice of providing financial support to his family living in Mexico denigrated by White friends offering him unsolicited advice:

"They're like, 'Well, we think that you should separate, cut the umbilical cord, you know? You should really be more independent. They shouldn't be mooching off of you,' is what they say. 'They shouldn't be mooching off of you.' And it's like, in my mind, I don't view it as that. Even if we're this far apart, it's like, we've

been, and we still are a community. And I believe in helping out just as much as when I've needed it, they've bailed me out. And they just don't understand that.”

Another core idea endorsed at a variant frequency (n=3) in which Mexican or Mexican-American cultural values were denigrated was through the subtle message that individuals would be more successful in work settings if they acted more “White”. One woman reported a recent experience during a job interview:

“I was in the military for a long time, so most of my resume has shown military. And one of the things that happened when I went in the interview for my last job, her whole focus was in the military, and I think in her mind this kind of counterbalanced the Hispanic part of me. She was like, ‘You’re more Americanized than other Hispanic people that I’ve interviewed.’”

In a similar fashion, another participant spoke of being pulled aside by a [White] professor and given advice regarding her behavior and dress. “[She said] ‘you’re going to be working in the [office] right now. You need to learn to behave and dress better’ and stuff like that.” This scenario was relayed with only minimal context to provide a subtext, and the professor may have honestly had good intentions in providing the fashion advice. However, the student reported receiving this message negatively, primarily because she felt judged based upon her ethnic identity.

Several focus group participants (n=8) also endorsed the typical core idea of having been told in subtle ways that their use of Spanish was inappropriate and that the United States was an “English-only” country. This message is related to the first theme discussed (that of assumed foreigner), as this message also implies a perspective that “real” citizens of the United States speak English. However, the context of this message

emphasizes less the speaker's assumption that the Mexican-American person is not a citizen. Rather, the message generally is delivered in a form of a microinsult which implies that those who would chose to speak Spanish as opposed to English are coarse, ignorant, or "lesser-than". One participant described such experiences where her use of Spanish received negative feedback from English speakers around her.

"Whenever I'm talking to my friends in Spanish, it's frowned upon, like why are you speaking like that? They automatically assume that you're saying something bad about them."

This comment provides an interesting insight into the way in which White English speakers feel uncomfortable when their position of privilege or power is threatened, even temporarily. It also illustrates clear feelings of "us-versus-them" racial group membership that causes Whites to assume individuals speaking in Spanish would likely be saying something negative about them.

Participants also frequently noted feelings of frustration at the implied superiority of English-speakers insisting on use of English in stores and restaurants.

"Well they always say to you 'You're in America. Speak English.' I had this guy one time, he was African-American. He came to the store. There's a lot of ladies at McDonalds that they don't really know how to speak English kind of so they have this really like accent so this guy was like 'You know you can tell that lady that she needs to learn how to speak English, that she's in America now.' I was like 'Well how many languages do you speak?' He was like 'One.' I was like 'Well try to learn another language and then talk.'"

Of note, this interaction between an African-American man and a Mexican-American woman illustrates the multifaceted nature of power and privilege in US society.

Although African-American individuals are often the targets of discrimination and racism, this scenario illustrates how all individuals can engage in microaggressions when they are in positions of power or privilege relative to another. In this situation, language and gender privilege intersected in order to create a situation where this man appeared to have difficulty recognizing the hurtful message of his comments.

Domain 5: Invalidation of Racial Reality.

Four participants reported the variant domain of having their status as ethnic and racial minority group member invalidated. Often this happened when they were exposed to Whites who denigrated other racial groups in front of them, perhaps intending to imply that the speaker did not view Mexican-Americans in the same negative light as other minority groups. One participant described one such experience, as well as the clear feelings of discomfort and vulnerability that she felt in response:

“Yeah, like where my mom works, she works with a White geologist and they're all White and they hate Blacks- like Mexican is an exception but they will not hire a Black person and they say it. You know they'll make Black jokes in front of us and stuff. And it feels uncomfortable because I'm a minority and my mom is a minority too so we're just like I wonder what you say about us behind our backs, you know?”

In fitting with the “back-handed compliment” manner of microaggression transmission, two other participants reported being questioned in their status as minority

group members by speakers who may have been trying to be complimentary in stating that they felt they were “just like Whites”. One participant described this experience:

“Well mostly at work people assume that I'm Caucasian so I have to like for example every time I start speaking Spanish to a customer because I work in customer service, everyone is like ‘Whoa, you speak Spanish.’ And I'm like ‘Yes, I do.’ And like I always make it a point to point out, because like I get the thing ‘Oh, so your dad must be white,’ or something like that. I'm like ‘No, I'm completely Mexican. Completely and all the way.’”

Domain 6: Implied Special Privilege as a Minority Group Member.

A variant group of participants (n=3) also endorsed the domain related to insinuations that they received special privileges due to their status as Mexican-Americans. Central to this type of microaggression are comments implying that privileges and status that Mexican-American individuals hold are not earned but received through affirmative action programs or policies that unfairly disadvantage White Americans. For example, one participant reported the experience of being notified by her teacher that she won a scholarship for her writing and being questioned of her merit.

“And there was this one girl that like she actually said it, she was like, ‘Well, that's not really fair, because you're like Mexican-American, and they like gave it to you because you're like a minority.’ And I was like, “What are you talking about? ...I got that, too, because I'm a great writer. And those essays made those judges cry.’ And it's just right away, because of the Hispanic culture.”

Other participants reported feeling highly uneasy that “general” comments made by Whites against affirmative action were implicitly aimed at them directly. For example,

one participant shared the experience of feeling that others might secretly view her as undeserving of her future employment after hearing a fellow student read a portion of his writing in a literature class,

“In one of my classes we write essays and we critique each other's essays. So this other [White] guy he wrote down as part of his essay that that the police officer sitting down on the job in her car, that she must have ‘got her job through Affirmative Action’. So I'm like are they going to think that about me too? Because I'm Hispanic that I'm going to get my job not through my merits, only people are going to assume I get it through Affirmative Action? [As if] I got it out of somebody feeling sorry for me.”

Key to this participant's experience of this microinsult is the feeling of uncertainty that she is left with, leaving her feeling isolated and separated from other class members. Although she did not directly report it, the context of her communication indicated that no other students reacted to the other male student's writing. This again speaks to the invisible nature of microaggressions, illustrating how they often go undetected by Whites and others within the dominant majority.

Other participants reported being made to feel that opportunities they gained through their bilingual skills were somehow undeserved. One participant described such an experience when working at a retail job on commission,

“...a lot of the times I would get the Spanish-speaking customers, you know. And then there's an older White gentleman right there...and he worked the evenings two/three nights a week. And I remember one time he just got really, really upset that I was getting all the Spanish speaking customers, and he was like, ‘Oh, so just now,

just because they speak Spanish,’ you know, He was like, ‘[Participant’s name] is going to get them now.’ And he was like, ‘Well, that's just going to be dandy, because, I mean, we live in a highly Spanish-speaking city’.”

Domain 7 – Invalidation of Interethnic Differences.

Five out of the fifteen participants reported the variant narrative best described as invalidation of interethnic differences. This type of message involves implications that all Hispanic or Latino persons share the same culture, and denies an awareness of interethnic differences between Latino groups. Implicit in the message is a lack of interest in or respect towards the importance of recognizing and individual’s distinct cultural heritage or group. This message also reflects a sense of entitlement that one should not have to bother investing energy in learning about the differences. An example of this type of invalidation is well illustrated by one participant’s comment, stated with a clear sarcasm born of frustration, “We’re all Mexicans”. Another participant shared an experience of making repeated yet unsuccessful attempts to correct her employer’s misconception regarding her ethnic heritage,

“She was like, ‘Oh, so you’re Spanish, correct?’ And I’m like, ‘No, I’m Mexican.’ And she’s like, ‘Yeah, but you’re Spanish.’ I’m like, ‘No, Spanish is a person that is from Spain. A Mexican is from Mexico. I speak Spanish but it’s not the same thing.’ ... I was never able to just educate her on that topic because she always kept saying, ‘Oh yeah, the Spanish girl, can you please call her.’”

This narrative reflects the difficult position that minority-status individuals are in when deciding how to best address a racial microaggression. The speaker’s inability to educate her employer about culturally respectful forms of

communication reflects the “catch-22” inherent in responding to microaggressions. If this speaker does nothing, she risks feeling angry and isolated; if she interacts more assertively to address this microaggression, she risks being perceived as “angry”, “touchy”, or “uncooperative” by those of the dominant group.

Domain 8 – Emotional Reactions to Racial Microaggressions.

As would be expected, participants reported experiencing a myriad of emotions related to microaggressive events, ranging from feeling saddened, belittled, isolated, marginalized, shamed, and angered. Emotional experiences related to microaggressions were a typically endorsed domain. During this focus group 10 participants made at least one comment speaking to the negative emotional impact of microaggressive experiences; several participants noted multiple experiences. These emotions appeared to be personal and difficult to speak about, and were not openly shared until near the end of the focus group after prompting questions helped to elicit them. One participant explained her mixed emotions stemming from receiving a microaggression:

“I just feel bothered. I’m the type of person that my temper will go up and I’ll make a scene about it, and I really don’t want that to happen, so I just try to ignore it and go about my day. Sometimes it makes me feel sad, and sometimes mad.”

Other participants expressed feelings of confusion and healthy paranoia compounding experiences of negative affect. As one woman reported,

“It’s kind of like me, like a feeling, but you think about, like, do they really mean it that way or not? But yeah, I kind of get angry or irritated, and then I just think about like do they mean it in a hurtful way, or are they just messing around?”

Relatedly, another participant, describing an experience of a microaggression experienced from a woman in her workplace stated,

“ ‘OK, I’m not going to let her get to me’, but it did, and I just started crying, and I was like, I don’t even know why I’m crying this lady is just making me feel horrible.”

The comments above speak to the powerful negative effects that racial microaggressions have on individuals. In the statement “I don’t even know why I’m crying”, the speaker illustrates how difficult microaggressions can be to manage emotionally because of the fact that they are ambiguous and at times difficult to clearly identify. It is this confusing and subtle aspect of microaggressions that often causes recipients to spend considerable psychological energy and time deconstructing incidents in attempts to understand the situation fully, often compounding the microaggression’s aversive psychological effects.

Because of the confusing nature of microaggressions, they often are allowed to go unaddressed in social situation, which compounds the recipient’s feeling of being aggressed upon. A participant provided a good example of such an incident that occurred in a semi-public situation with several onlookers:

“One time we were doing this charity thing and there was this one [White] guy comes up to me and my aunt because we were ...serving soup for the underprivileged, and this guy says something about ‘Hispanic women are very subservient’. And he's like ‘That's what I really like about them.’ And I was just like ‘Wow, you are a jerk, you know’. But nobody said anything because my aunt

didn't want to deal with them. So she didn't say anything. I didn't say anything either. ..I was kind of confused and didn't understand it.”

The above scenario provides a classic example of a microaggression, in that the aggressor makes a stereotypical and derogatory statement about Mexican-American women, but follows it up with a superficial compliment in order to present his original comment as a joke. Although the message of insult was clear to the participant, she continued to express confusion, likely related in part to the fact that others around her did not appear to recognize the microaggression as she did.

As mentioned earlier, several participants also described the variant core idea of experiencing an intensification in their emotional reaction when family members, especially parents, were aggressed upon. As one participant described, “It just gets to you a lot especially when you are with your parents. It hurts me a lot.” This reaction clearly describes the participant’s emotional pain, as well as feelings of protectiveness over the older generation. This protectiveness may reflect cultural traditions of familismo. Alternatively, given the modal generational status of participants in this study as second-generation to the United States, these comments may reflect family patterns that have developed due to parents’ acculturation and language barriers as first-generation immigrants.

A final variant core idea within this domain was that participant’s interpersonal experiences of microaggressions often made them feel unwanted as outsiders to social groups or unwanted in social spaces. For example, one participant reported frequent experiences of microaggressions with a White woman in her workplace:

“But yeah, she was always so pompous, and I always felt like it was never something that she said outward. But it was that feeling that you got, just because to the rest of the employees, she was just really nice to everybody else. And everybody was like, “Oh, yeah, she's such a sweetheart.” And I was like, “Really? Because she hates me! Like she *loathes* me.” [Italics added].

Domain 9: Active Coping Strategies in Response to Microaggressions.

A significant and typical domain (n=13) related to participants' reports of employing various strategies to cope with the difficult emotions and breaches in social relationships that accompanied experiences of racial microaggressions. The four main core ideas endorsed by participants within this study included 1) immersion in Mexican-American cultural spaces as an attempt to avoid microaggressions; 2) attempting to educate the aggressors about the harmful nature of their comments; 3) debriefing about experiences of microaggressions with other Mexican-Americans; and 4) commitment to education and social justice as ways to empower Mexican-Americans and reduce forces of discrimination.

Three participants reported avoiding predominantly White neighborhoods or stores and immersing themselves in Mexican-American cultural spaces in order to avoid frequent experiences of microaggressions. For example, one participant described limiting the places that she would visit after reaching a tipping point of microaggressive experiences in White environments.

“So you kind of find yourself adjusting your life toward, maybe places you won't go, because of, maybe be discriminated against, or you're just tired of hearing those comments, maybe, so you just stay away from that environment.”

Four participants stated they found it helpful to assume that the person committing the microaggression does not know any better and attempting to educate others about Mexican-American culture and cultural sensitivity. As one male participant described,

“I started thinking, ‘Poor person. You're so limited in what you know.’ It's just like I kind of in a way feel sorry for them [White aggressors]. Because it's so limiting, you know? And it's just like, ‘Wow! You know so little’.”

Relatedly, another woman stated, “I love to go into like history, into facts and to let them [White people] know that they're the ones that are closing their minds.”

Although previous research (e.g., Sue, Capodilupo et al, 2007) indicated People of Color often do not discuss their experiences of microaggressions, a typical core idea endorsed by over half (n=9) of the participants within these focus groups involved explicitly discussing experiences of microaggressions with other Mexican-Americans. Participants reported doing this to either debrief from these negative experiences, to support others who have had similar experiences, or to socialize their children in a protective manner.

One of the common ways that participants reported communicating about microaggressions was through the use of humor, which seemed to help provide distance from the pain of microaggressive experiences. One participant described her use of humor in this way:

“I think we kind of try...[to] make fun of things. Wherever we see somebody cutting the lawn, or doing certain Mexican things they do, like, why do you have

to be Mexican, huh? Why can't you be White? Just kind of make fun of it, start laughing, steer away from it, because we just don't want to... get down about it.”

Another male participant reported use of humor as a way of “pushing back” against racial microaggressions.

“You joke back. You go against - you tell them their jokes, you know? I mean I think that's the only way you can do is just joke back with them but I've seen other people just laugh and they don't say anything.”

In this regard, joking appeared to be a helpful form of communication which both allowed the microaggression to be addressed, but also helped to defuse the potentially charged communication about the microaggression. This is an important aspect of communication, considering that microaggressions tend to be communicated by persons close to the victim, such as acquaintances and colleagues, and future interaction is often likely. By using humor as a way of standing up for himself, the participant also did not risk being viewed as angry or hostile by those in the dominant group who may have difficulty seeing the microaggression for what it really is.

Other participants (n=7) cited the variant core idea of recognizing the ways in which the negative experiences of microaggressions acted as catalysts driving them to carry themselves well to disprove stereotypes and rise above discriminatory practices. As one participant simply stated, “It makes you want to become a better person to prove these people wrong.” Another participant reported feeling so frustrated with repeated experiences of racial microaggressions that he discussed with his father the option of leaving school and working in his father’s business, but found resolve to continue with his family’s support. “I guess I should just work with you.” And he tells me ‘No, stay in

school.' So I stay in school and but I guess pride and the joy of being yourself with your family and stuff takes all that racism away at least to me."

Related to the core idea of carrying oneself well, six participants endorsed the variant core idea regarding the potential of social activism as a strategy to address all forms of discrimination, including microaggressions. Concepts regarding social activism ranged dramatically, but often involved statements regarding engagement in democratic processes or grassroots organizations. As one participant reported regarding an experience of a microaggression, "It just gets you mad; you just want to do something like towards it." Other participants reported a sense of resiliency and belief in the increasing potential for social reform as the Latino population grows in the United States.

"I take a sense of pride that we're the biggest minority and how they say that oh 'Every Hispanic who will actually vote for someone will changed this whole nation.' And that's like knowing that everyone is trying to go to college and stuff makes me think in the future we can really get something done. I'll probably be dead but we can get something done in the future."

Another woman voiced with great hope the following vision for the United States:

"I think the influx of more Hispanic people into American society, especially now that you have more immigration than ever, I think the influx of more Hispanic people into American society is eventually going to change the attitudes of people, because you're going to have more people that have been born here and raised here that come from Hispanic backgrounds."

Chapter 5 - Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate Latino (specifically Mexican-American) experiences of racial microaggressions via a qualitative focus group format, with the goal of analyzing through consensual qualitative review methods the types of racial microaggressions commonly experienced by Mexican-American participants. Findings from this research project indicated that the types of microaggressions commonly experienced by participants fell into seven distinct domains: 1) Assumption of foreigner status, 2) Assumption of criminality, 3) Assumption of inferior social class and/or second class citizenship, 4) Pathologizing cultural values, 5) Invalidation of racial reality, 6) Implied special privileges as a minority group, and 7) Invalidation of interethnic differences. Results of this study also produced two additional domains regarding participant's emotional experiences of racial microaggressions and strategies employed by participants to cope with aggressive events.

In support of prior research, all of the broad domains of racial microaggressions identified within this study have previously been identified by other research teams in their research of Black American (Constantine, 2007; Sue, Nadal et al. 2008) and Asian-American (Sue, Bucceri, et al., 2007) experiences of racial microaggressions. For example, similar to Asian-American experiences of microaggressions, participants in this study reported multiple experiences of being viewed as an assumed foreigner or "alien in their own land"; having interethnic differences amongst all Latinos be invalidated by dominant US society, and experiencing messages from Whites invalidating their experience of being a racial/ethnic minority group member. Similar to experiences of Black or African-American participants in prior studies of racial microaggressions,

participants in this study also endorsed experiences of assumed criminality, being treated as if one is a second-class citizen or of inferior social status by Whites, and receiving messages of implied special privilege as a minority-status person (Sue, Nadal et al., 2008). Additionally, a common domain identified by participants within this study and endorsed by both Asian and Black participants in prior studies (Constantine, 2007; Sue, Bucceri et al, 2007; Sue, Nadal et al., 2008) involved messages from Whites that pathologized minority group cultural values and practices.

Although results of this study support some commonalities between experiences of microaggressions across different racial groups, it is important to note that Mexican-American participants reported various group-specific differences regarding the specific types of microaggressive messages received. A major difference between the experiences of the Mexican-Americans in this study and the experiences of Black and Asian-American participants previously documented was the assumption that Mexican-Americans are illegal immigrants. This was a prominent form of the microinvalidation of assumed foreigner, and appeared to be transmitted to participants through various forms of interpersonal communication and environmental messages, such as through the media and news. Additionally, participant's experiences of being treated as a second-class citizen frequently involved negative messages related to language, specifically messages implying that their English language skills were inferior. Finally, participants in this study also endorsed group-specific messages pathologizing Mexican-American cultural values and forms of communication, particularly related to the Spanish language and traditional Mexican cultural values of familismo. This evidence supports the hypothesis

first proposed by Sue, Capodilupo et al. (2007) that different racial and ethnic groups are vulnerable to experiencing different forms of racial microaggressions.

Results from this study support theoretical assumptions made by previous authors (e.g., Solórzano et al., 2000; Sue, Capodilupo et al., 2007, Yosso et al, 2009) that microaggressions are a common form of racism within the post-civil rights era, and that cumulatively they lead to significant psychological distress in racial and ethnic minority group members. Participants in this study reported feelings of anger, sadness, shame, confusion, and isolation that lasted long after the event had passed. Based upon the context of the narratives, it was clear that some of the events shared by participants in this study were reported to have happened months and even years ago, yet participants spoke of them with a strong emotional reaction that indicated the pain of the aggression endured.

Although we attempted to collect data related to participants' reactions to microaggressions and the way in which they coped with them, participants within the focus groups spent more time recounting the specifics of aggressive events, as well as their interpretations of meaning behind those events. Often participants did not report what they did in response in those situations, possibly implying that they might not have done anything overtly in the moment. Additionally, although a portion of each focus group was spent probing for emotional reactions to microaggressive events, it seemed that participants tended to move away from this topic area. Given the context of the situation and participant's emotional responses when discussing microaggressive events, it is likely that participants were hesitant to discuss their emotional reactions in a semi-public forum with other participants that were unknown to them. Possibly the strategy of

conducting private interviews with participants could be useful in further exploring the full extent of psychological distress caused by exposure to racial microaggressions.

Limitations

As with all research, it is important to note the limitations of this particular study. First, the 15 participants in this study reflected a non-representative sample of Mexican-Americans, in that they were all undergraduate university students, generally young adults, and the majority of their parents were first-generation immigrants to the United States. Although our research team believed that the domains and core ideas produced within this study have validity for many Mexican-Americans living in the United States, it is likely that at least some of the experiences identified within this study are specific to the unique demographic characteristics of the participants. For example, a dominant coping strategy for participants in this study was to focus upon disproving racist stereotypes and assumptions through educational attainment. Quite possibly, Mexican-Americans who have not had access to educational opportunities might identify different primary coping strategies. In this regard, additional qualitative and quantitative research examining other Mexican-American experiences of racial microaggressions is needed in order to clarify the generalizability of these findings. Furthermore, research examining other Latino/a groups experiences of racial microaggressions will clarify the extent to which racial microaggressions vary based upon distinct ethnic or national identity.

Secondly, the primary author's position of privilege as a White English-speaker and outsider to Mexican-American culture may have limited her ability to correctly interpret the subtleties of participant's comments and experiences related to discrimination. Although the extent to which this is a potential limitation is unknown,

care was taken throughout the steps of the research to minimize this possibility through collaborative work with a research team comprised of Mexican-American colleagues and implementation of CQR methodology.

Third, as is the case with all focus-group research, facilitator influence during the focus group could not help but affect that direction of participant responses. Although attempts to minimize facilitator influence were made in ensuring that participants provided multiple examples of experiences that fell within each domain and core idea, each facilitator's particular use of language and direction, both via the research protocol and with follow-up prompts, may have influenced participant's recall of racialized incidents. Relatedly, a review of the written transcripts indicated that facilitators often were not able to probe the commonality of microaggressive experiences as thoroughly as would have been preferred because of the spontaneous direction that other participants often took the discussion. In this regard, it is likely that the level of endorsement of ideas that participants reported is underestimated, as the chance for all participants to endorse any particular domain or core idea was not always available.

A final limitation of the present study is that it relied upon written transcripts for the analysis of data. Thus, the context of verbal inflection, articulation, body language and emotional expression were not accounted for in dataset. It is likely that these missing subtleties of communication may have provided additional information regarding participants' individual emotional and interpersonal experiences of microaggressions.

Implications

Considering the high prevalence and negative effects of racial microaggressions, it is vital that future research continue to examine the types of aggressions experienced,

the effects of microaggressions upon individual recipients, and coping strategies utilized to manage negative effects. Although, given the limited amount of research on this topic currently, it is necessary to continue to use qualitative methodology to explore the topic of microaggressions with different racial and ethnic groups, it is also important to begin utilizing quantitative methods to further broaden our understanding of this phenomenon. The development of psychometric scales specifically assessing individual's experiences of racial microaggressions will be essential in this regard. Additionally, although we have a theoretical understanding of the factors causing Whites to commit racial microaggressions, further research examining the specific thought processes and perceptions of Whites around microaggressions is important. For example, we could begin to examine Whites awareness sensitivity towards racial microaggressions through the use of qualitative focus groups examining their personal experiences or studies examining their reactions to vignettes.

Results of this study clearly indicate the importance of increasing awareness and recognition of racial microaggressions as one of the dominant forms within which racism is perpetuated within the 21st century. In this regard, it is essential that information regarding racial microaggressions be incorporated into multicultural education and diversity training programs in order to increase the awareness of individuals, particularly Whites, as to the negative and hostile message that these common forms of interaction provide. Especially considering the fact that microaggressions often appear to be inflicted by relatively well-meaning, trusted individuals who fail to see the aversive nature of their comments, the need for education about microaggressions is vitally important. Education regarding racial microaggressions amongst dominant groups will be beneficial not only in

that awareness will likely help to reduce the number of microaggressions inflicted, but also in that individual bystanders will be better prepared to recognize and address racial microaggressions when they are committed. In this regard, research into how to help individuals recognize the way in which they perpetuate racial microaggressions in their personal communication is important. For example, research focusing on how White counselors can best be taught to identify and overcome racial microaggressions in themselves could assist in their multicultural competency development and improve cross-racial counseling dyad relationships.

The detrimental isolating and psychological effects of racial microaggressions reported by the Mexican-American participants in this study provides additional data supporting the fact that the effects of racial microaggressions are incredibly painful and often long-lasting. Therefore, initiatives aimed at helping minority status groups increase their awareness of and communication about microaggressions can help to reduce the experiences of isolation and stigma that accompany these assaults. Additional individual and group-based interventions focused upon empowering minority status individuals to foster protective coping skills and train competencies for addressing microaggressions will also be very useful. Finally, given the prevalence of microaggressions and their negative psychological effects, mental health professionals should assess for and attend to their client's experiences of microaggressions as part of their treatment conceptualization and interventions.

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