

RACIAL AND GENDER MICROAGGRESSIONS ON A PREDOMINANTLY-WHITE CAMPUS: EXPERIENCES OF BLACK, LATINA/O AND WHITE UNDERGRADUATES¹

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Abstract: Using interview data and a critical race theory approach, this paper examines racial and gender patterns in microaggressions—covert insults towards subordinated groups—that black, Latino and white women and men experienced on a predominantly-white campus. Four themes emerged: (a) views of black men as threatening, (b) views of Latinas as sexually available and exotic, (c) the classroom as a particular setting for microaggressions experienced by black women, and, (d) male-dominated academic majors as particular settings for microaggressions experienced by white women. Attention is drawn to students' solutions to microaggressions, particularly how they bonded together to form support structures to cope with these microaggressions, and what universities can do to better support students, given these experiences.

Keywords: race and ethnicity; gender; microaggressions; college students; higher education

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He [a white man] was trying to hit on me a lot (*laughs*) and I wasn't very interested, and I remember he told me... "Forget you, just go back to your own country," and I was just like, I am in my own country, stupid (*laughs*).

-Teresa Suarez²: *Latina, senior*

Despite recent gains in the number of black and Latina/o youth who attend college, black and Latina/o youth still attend and graduate from college at much lower rates than do their white peers (NCES, 2005). The campus climate is frequently identified as contributing to these educational inequalities. Past research has documented the often difficult experiences of students of color on college campuses (e.g., Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991; Feagin, Vera & Imani, 1996; Nora & Cabrera, 1996) and has looked at how to improve the campus climate for students of color (e.g., Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 1999). However, studies that compare students' experiences across race *and* gender are rare. This paper adds to prior work by taking a critical race theory approach to understanding undergraduates' experiences with racial and gender microaggressions on campus and ways that they cope with these experiences.

CRITICAL RACE THEORY AND MICROAGGRESSIONS

With its origination in the critical legal studies movement, critical race theory considers how laws and institutional structures that appear to be "race neutral" can contribute to inequalities in education (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Critical race theory considers race and racism to be central, defining characteristics of U.S. society, in general, and of higher education, in particular (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano, Cela, & Yosso, 2000). Although race is the central concept, it is viewed as operating with other inequalities, such as gender, language, generational status, class and sexuality; Crenshaw (1991) refers to this interconnected relationship as "intersectionality." Critical race theory values narratives, stories, and experiential knowledge of people of color and is committed to social justice and the end of racism and racial subordination.

Although racism and sexism occur blatantly at times, overt acts are less common and less socially accepted than are more subtle and covert racist and sexist acts (Benokraitis & Feagin, 1995; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Feagin, 1995). The term *microaggression* refers to these more subtle and covert acts, often identified as verbal or nonverbal insults. Microaggressions are brief, "subtle and stunning" encounters that are a frequent occurrence in the lives of subordinated groups and

that impact views of the self (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Pierce, 1970:266; Solórzano et al. 2000; Sue et al., 2007). Examples include "averted gazes, exasperated looks" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), code-words such as "quotas" or "affirmative action," and comments such as "You're not like the rest of them" or "I don't think of you as a Mexican" (Solórzano, 1998). The incessant occurrence of these microaggressions is similar to the concept of cumulative discrimination noted by Feagin (1992). Microaggressions are powerful because, despite being invisible to the perpetrator, they exact a toll on the recipient's psyche. Research has demonstrated the physical, psychological, and emotional costs of such an environment for blacks (Feagin et al., 1996; Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000; Landrine & Klonoff, 1996; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007).

The concept of microaggression has been used to explore the experiences and career paths of Chicana and Chicano scholars (Solórzano, 1998), African-American students (Solórzano et al., 2000) and African-American men at elite, predominantly white campuses (Smith et al., 2007). These studies document that microaggressions occur on college campuses and are directed towards Chicanas, Chicanos, black men, and black women (Smith et al., 2007; Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano et al., 2000). These microaggressions result in students feeling isolated and out of place at the university (Smith et al., 2007; Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano et al., 2000). Black men face racial microaggressions that Smith et al. (2007) argue are examples of "community policing tactics" used to suppress and control black men. However, the lack of racial and gender comparison groups in these studies limits understandings of the extent to which microaggressions are tied to specific racial and gender groups and how these microaggressions are experienced differently across racial and gender groups.

RESEARCH ON RACE AND GENDER ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES

In contrast to dominant beliefs that universities are open, tolerant, and meritocratic (Feagin et al., 1996), black and Latina/o students on college campuses too frequently experience racial jokes, loneliness, isolation and invisibility, which often are accompanied by mental anguish and academic costs (e.g., Allen et al., 1991; Feagin et al., 1996; Loo & Rolison, 1986; Nettles, 1990; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Smith et al., 2007; Willie, 2003). A study comparing students' doctoral experiences found that Latina/os and blacks are more likely than white students to say they have experienced feelings of discrimination on campus, although Latina/o students report slightly lower rates than blacks (Nettles, 1990). Several factors influence the climate for students of color including: (a) structural diversity (i.e. the proportion of specific groups on campus), (b) the historical legacy of inclusion/exclusion of racial groups, (c) the psychological climate, including perceptions of racial/ethnic tension and discrimination, and (d) social interaction among groups on campus (Hurtado et al., 1999). These factors seem especially relevant to microaggressions since microaggressions occur in interactional settings.

Although the gender gap in college attendance and achievement is almost absent among those entering college directly from high school (Corbett, Hill, & St. Rose, 2008), gender inequalities are still evident in students' experiences in higher education (Jacobs, 1995). Research on the "chilly climate" for women has stressed that gender biases reflect taken-for-granted patterns in communication and are often subtle; therefore, students and faculty may not notice such behaviors (Allan & Madden, 2006). Still, female students noted a variety of ways that their instructors and male peers marginalized, discouraged, and disregarded them: for example, male peers questioned women's competence, capability and motivation in the classroom, particularly in male-dominated fields of study (Allan & Madden, 2006). Women—and black, Latino and American Indian women, in particular—are also underrepresented in certain majors and programs, particularly those in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields (NSF, 2007).

Little research has focused explicitly on how intersecting oppressions of race and gender influence college students' experiences, but some research on women or on specific racial groups provides comparisons to a more limited extent. Research comparing the experiences of successful Latinas and Latinos, for example, finds that while neither group assimilates into the predominantly white university environment, relationships with same-race others were more important for Latinas than for Latinos (Lasley Barajas, & Pierce, 2001). In a study of undergraduate women at two universities, Holland and Eisenhart (1990) find that, despite differences in the black and white women's peer cultures, both groups left college with fewer credentials and training and lower academic and career achievement than they expected. Other research stresses the different meanings black and white women attribute to their sorority membership: black women were influenced more strongly by career goals and community service and white by social life and the desire to "get a man" (Berkowitz & Padavic, 1999). By lacking comparisons across race *and* gender, however, such research cannot answer questions about how intersecting oppressions impact students' experiences.

This paper uses critical race theory to analyze microaggressions related to race and gender. In line with understandings of oppressions as intersectional, this paper focuses on racial and gendered ways that microaggressions manifest themselves and how students respond.

METHODS, SAMPLE AND ANALYSIS

The project on which this paper is based uses a multi-methodological approach aimed at better understanding students' experiences of academic and social life on a large, predominantly-white campus. The author conducted 68 one-on-one interviews and 4 focus group interviews with a racially-diverse group of undergraduates from one university. Interviews are particularly useful for developing a broad understanding of students' experiences in various aspects of college life and for exploring the meanings students attach to these experiences

(Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The interviewer encouraged participants to tell stories about their identities by asking them about themselves, their friends, what brought them to the university, their experiences at the university, and how they envisioned their futures. When interviewing students of color, the interviewer felt that students approached her—a young, white woman—as someone who did not understand the “minority” experience, but wanted to. As will be explained in the next section of the paper, many of these students felt voiceless and invisible on campus; they seemed to embrace this opportunity to have their voices heard.

Interviews lasted two hours on average and were conducted at a location of the participant’s choice, typically their dorm room or apartment or the interviewer’s office. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Quotations presented are edited for clarity. During the interviews, egocentric network data was collected on students’ friendships and students completed questionnaires about their background and college experiences. Focus group interviews and ethnographic observations were conducted as part of an extended case method design.

This study took place at a large, public, Midwestern, predominantly-white university (hereafter referred to as Midwest University or MU). Large universities, such as this one, educate the majority of black, Latina/o, and white students who are enrolled in higher education in the U.S. (NCES, 2005). MU enrolls roughly 30,000 undergraduates and is located in a small, predominantly-white city in a Midwestern state. The student body is predominantly white: the undergraduate population is approximately 85 percent white, 4 percent black, 2 percent Latina/o, 3 percent Asian-American, and 5 percent “other,” mostly comprised of international students.

To increase variation, participants were recruited through identity-based groups for women students and students of color, residential living-learning communities, academic clubs, and sororities and fraternities. This approach was supplemented with snowball sampling and by posting flyers in locations frequented by students unaffiliated with campus clubs and organizations.

The sample includes 82 students - 68 in individual interviews and 14 additional students in 4 focus groups. Seven students participated in both an individual interview and a focus group interview. The average age of the sample is 20 and includes relatively even distributions of students by college year (first through fifth year students). Whites compose half the sample (49%); blacks (28%), Latina/os (18%) and Asians and Indians (5%) make up the other half. This paper focuses on the experiences of black, Latina/o and non-Latino white students due to the small number of Asian and Indian students (N=4) and the desire to make comparisons across gender and racial groups. Although the term has a variety of meanings in popular and academic discourse, *race* is used in this paper to refer to the racial or ethnic group that students identify themselves with. In this paper,

students of color refers to black and Latina/o students. Table 1 shows the race and gender breakdown of the sample.

Table 1. *Racial/ethnic and gender composition of sample (N=82)*

	Black	Latina/o	White	Asian
Women	74% (17)	60% (9)	80% (32)	50% (2)
Men	26% (6)	40% (6)	20% (8)	50% (2)
	100% (23)	100% (15)	100% (40)	100% (4)

Note: Numbers in parentheses are the number of individuals in that identity category who participated in an individual interview or focus group for the project.

The themes presented in this paper arose from the analytic approach of inductive reasoning. Atlas.ti, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software package, was used to facilitate coding and the creation of analytic memos. Through the coding and memoing about experiences on campus, quotations reflecting microaggressions were identified and sorted by the race and gender of the respondent. This paper focuses on those microaggressions that illustrate the intersecting nature of inequalities, specifically race and gender.

EXPERIENCES OF ISOLATION ON CAMPUS

In order to contextualize the microaggressions that students face, some background about the broader campus climate at MU is provided. Despite not having been explicitly asked about it, all groups of students expressed having felt discomfort and isolation in the college environment. Black and Latina/o students, however, felt greater isolation than did white students (see also Loo & Rolison, 1986) and were more likely to experience their isolation as related to their race.

Reflecting the lack of structural diversity—the small proportion of black and Latino students—on campus (Hurtado et al., 1999), students of color reported seeing few individuals among their peers who shared their racial identity. Many students of color came to MU from predominantly-black and Latino areas where, to use their words, “the minority was the majority.” Alberto, a Latino senior, is typical of others who described this “culture shock” that led to a shift in his cultural identity: “I don’t think I ever felt as strongly about Latino issues until I came here, only because I saw what a real minority was.” The lack of structural diversity—the relative absence of “people like me,” as one student put it—led to a sense of isolation and feelings of being an outsider on campus for many black and Latina/o students.

PERCEPTIONS OF BLACK MEN AS THREATENING

Black men face specific stereotypes as being aggressive, threatening and criminal (Arnett Ferguson, 2000; Collins, 2004; Smith et al., 2007) and many reported that they experienced more frequent interactions with campus and local police compared to other students (see also Smith et al., 2007). Chris, a black sophomore, described experiences on his dorm floor of black men³:

It just bugs me, that we have police on our floor *all* the time, and...it seems like the RAs really pay more attention to our floor than everybody else's floor... And then the whole citation thing... [when the police] found liquor on our floor, we're going to jail, and it's like, Why is that? They [white students] just got a citation! I don't understand that.

Several racial and gender microaggressions are evident in Chris' discussion. Most glaring is the omnipresence of authorities: campus and city police and dorm Resident Assistants appear more frequently on the floor housing black men than elsewhere, contributing to black students' feelings of hypervigilance. Moreover, the authorities hand stricter penalties to black men—including a trip to jail—than to other students for the same offenses. Chris went on to describe travelling with his black male friends to jail to bail out their friends, where the authorities ignored them. The "paradox of invisibility" is that black men are either ignored or are hyper-visible and treated as stereotypes (Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000:34). Either form of treatment can be experienced as a microaggression.

Black men described numerous occasions where they felt others perceived them as a threat. Steve explained feeling that when some white students see "a doo rag on my head," they think "I'm scared, I'm not gonna talk to him." Martin described how you can glimpse "the way we [black men] are seen in other people's eyes, whether or not the lady walking down the street clutches her purse tighter and steps away from you or she walks over and says hi." Black men also described run-ins with campus police who were searching for black male crime suspects. In one incident, reported in the student and city papers, police allegedly beat and detained black male MU students who were simply walking to their cars after a campus event. From the perspective of many, having the wrong race-gender combination was enough to make them seem dangerous and a target for police attention.

Chris' perceptions, along with those of other black men and women interviewed, suggest that authorities in place to protect college students often perceive black men as criminals and act on that perception to control black men's bodies and activities. Another black student, Sean, notes that "being a black male, I'm not really looked upon...as easily approachable. I'm viewed as harder. But a black female has it easier because people are more susceptible to approach her." While the data does not provide evidence directly about black women being seen in this way, the experiences of another group of women of color—Latinas—along with those of black men, just described, suggest that the way that racial and

gendered identities interact do shape experiences of being seen as threatening or approachable.

PERCEPTIONS OF LATINAS AS SEXUALLY AVAILABLE AND EXOTIC

Latinas' experiences suggest that at least some of them are perceived by others as nonthreatening and, in fact, available to men's sexual advances. While these stereotypes may seem preferable to being viewed as a threat, they have costs: unwanted attention from white men and harassment from peers. For example, Teresa described an experience at an off-campus party:

I remember he [a white man] was trying to hit on me a lot (*laughs*) and I wasn't very interested, and I remember he told me... "Forget you, just go back to your own country," and I was just like, I am in my own country, stupid (*laughs*)... I just felt uncomfortable.

His response to Teresa's rejection of his overture, "Go back to your own country," was based on her ethnicity, and he is unlikely to have made it to a white or black woman.

Her encounter with racial and gender microaggressions was part of a pattern that included other incidents. Teresa also described how white men speak "Spanish" to her and her Latina friends "all the time."

Like last night when we were at the bars and someone was saying "Oye, Mamie" to me, and I was like, He doesn't speak Spanish! He just picked up random stuff! They [white men] think that's interesting to us and so they always try to speak Spanish to hit on us and stuff. And I'm just not very impressed.

Teresa's experiences reflect broader stereotypes in the U.S. of Latinas as "Hot Tamales" (Ortiz Cofer, 1993), exotic, sexual, and available. Keller (1994) refers to this stereotype from films as the "Cantina Girl," a Latina who teases, dances, and is sexually alluring. White college men who act on these stereotypes with Latinas are engaging in microaggressions.

Racial and gender microaggressions were felt not only in campus night life. Many women and men of color experienced anonymous harassment in their residence halls, but Latinas reported racial and gender slurs written on the dry erase boards on their dorm room doors. Ana's board read "Take that Mexican stuff outta here" and "What a whore." She also had unknown dorm residents shoot shaving cream under her door. Adriana reported reading "Whore" and "Go back to where you came from" on her board. Not knowing the identities of the perpetrators was distressing to the recipients. This creates an environment where anyone, even a next-door neighbor who is friendly face-to-face, could be the harasser. It was

stressful, these women said, to be aware that someone is racially prejudiced and sexist but not be able to safely rule out anyone as the perpetrator.

Even in the academic realm, some classmates viewed Latinas as foreigners and as exotic. For example, Adriana described a classroom interaction:

I got a little uncomfortable after some [white] girl...was like, "Oh, where are you from in Mexico?" She's like, "I just thought you were from there because you spoke English like you knew Spanish."...I guess she said I had an accent...I've never even left the country...I don't even know Spanish. So, it was just kind of weird.

In addition to the race and gender connotations of the exotic Latina, this also illustrates a theme of racial microaggressions referred to as "Alien in own land" that conveys the message that the individual is a "perpetual foreigner" (Sue et al., 2007:281).

Microaggressions are also committed by students who make comments in classes suggesting racist and sexist views, as Claudia, a Latina student explained:

I was kind of surprised at some of the ignorant things that I would hear. For example, in one of my classes we had to do some presentation...It just didn't turn out, I think, as very PC [politically correct] as they thought. It was kind of offensive to be honest because I was the only minority in there. Period. People were laughing. They thought it was funny. But I didn't. I think it was very stereotypical...I guess because the Latina girls have a stereotype, like having their hair slicked back [with] a lot of gel, wearing a lot of real dark makeup, talking with that Chicana accent, and just being kind of ghetto... People were shouting out things like, "Oh, they pop their gum, too." It was definitely not good.

Claudia noted that she is often mistaken for an Anglo and that students may not have known that a member of the parodied group was present. Nevertheless, she experienced this classroom presentation as a microaggression—an insult directed towards her racial and gender group.

BLACK WOMEN: THE CLASSROOM AS A SITE FOR MICROAGGRESSIONS

Like Latinas and black men, black women experienced microaggressions tied to their specific racial and gender identities. However, rather than being tied to a specific stereotype about their group, black women's accounts of microaggressions were tied to a particular setting—the classroom. Other students of color and white women also described classroom microaggressions, but reports from black women were more frequent.

Black women described a range of microaggressions in the classroom. For example, Rachel, discussed how it was difficult, as the only black student in a class, "just speaking or giving your opinion" during discussions because white classmates "just blow it over. Like, oh, it's [her opinion is] really not that important." Concerns that their contributions to class discussion would not be recognized are similar to the invisibility of black men discussed earlier. Harmony, another black woman, explained how her white peers' behavior towards her made her wonder "How do people perceive me as a person?...Are people not sitting by me because I'm black? Is it because I have an odor? What's going on?" She found it painful to constantly wonder whether people were interacting with her based on her merits as a student or based on her race. The subtle nature of microaggressions makes it easy to doubt their existence or to dismiss them as innocuous, which contributes to their power.

Black women also experienced the expectation to be a spokesperson for their race or their race and gender group. Harmony felt the daily pressure of "just being the spokesperson for the black race, being the only person of color in your class--in what, two of my classes [this semester]... That's happened throughout my whole college career... It is very frustrating." Mya, another black senior, explains:

Or like professors, we'll be discussing something about race or racial stereotypes and the first person they ask-- me! And I'm like, no, don't ask me! (*laughs*) Just go to someone else. [The professor says] "Mya, what do you think about it?" I don't think about this.

Experiences such as these, covert verbal and non-verbal indications on the part of professors or peers that they are different, leave black women with a sense of anxiety and isolation. In this way, these racial and gender microaggressions take a toll on students' mental and emotional well-being. Students reported feeling isolated, alienated, and burdened by the task of representing their racial group or race-gender group. These feelings become more intense as class topics explicitly focus on race, as Margaret explained:

It's very difficult—especially if you're talking [or] dealing with anything about race—when you're the only person in the class because it feels like everything you say has to be representative of your whole culture, and that's a big burden to carry. We all don't think alike. No! No group of people all think alike. I'm sure nobody's family all thinks alike, so just imagine having to carry that burden.

At a majority-white institution, students feel this "burden of representation" particularly heavily.

Black women expressed doubts about whether their contributions were taken seriously and about their place in the university. They expressed frustration over others expecting them to represent their entire racial or race-gender group.

Alienating classroom experiences were reported most frequently to me by black women, followed by Latinas, and not very frequently by Latinos, black men and white women. White men did not report any such experiences.

WHITE WOMEN: MALE-DOMINATED ACADEMIC MAJORS AS A SITE FOR MICROAGGRESSIONS

White women's experiences with microaggressions are tied to a specific university context—a major or program with a gender imbalance favoring men. For example, Kathryn, a white woman, explained that there is a “really sexist stereotype in the business school” and that she had “some bad experiences there” where men would say things like, “‘Oh, you're more business management. All the girls do management because it's easier. The reason there's so few girls in the business school is because girls aren't smart enough to get in.’” Kathryn expressed her frustration about this gender microaggression: “‘Seriously, it really bothers me because I've had all the same requirements as they have, I've gotten just as good of grades as they have. So it's kinda frustrating.’” This is a microaggression that insults women's intellect and skills. Similar experiences were described by other white women in the business school and in the natural sciences, majors dominated by men historically and currently. These experiences parallel those reported in a recent study which found that male peers' questioning of women's competence was particularly pronounced in male-dominated fields of study (Allan & Madden, 2006). Outside of these specific academic settings, white women did not report experiencing microaggressions.

STUDENT RESPONSES TO MICROAGGRESSIONS

Because they are covert and subtle insults and often invisible to the perpetrator, racial and gender microaggressions are difficult to cope with. Adriana explained, “‘You have to realize that you can't be paranoid about it. There's a difference between being a minority and feeling like a minority, and I realized that when I came here.’” The fear that white students might regard a response to these microaggressions as “paranoid” was not unfounded. Although I only heard one instance of a student directly confronting a microaggression (discussed below), evidence from a recent exchange among psychologists in a professional journal shows the “powerful emotional reactions” whites have to being implicated in racism (Sue et al., 2008:277). Reports by people of color of microaggressions were labeled “extraordinary claims” (Harris, 2008:275), “pure nonsense,” “irrational,” and “ridiculous, if not a bit pathological” (Thomas, 2008:274). The vehemence of the responses illustrates why the recipient would think very carefully about responding to a microaggression. The covert character of microaggressions gives them power to psychologically affect recipients and limit their ability to respond.

Students nevertheless found several ways to cope with these experiences, including bonding together based on similar experiences, embracing the role of group spokesperson, and confronting the perpetrator. Students often assumed a humorous, rather than angry, demeanor while recounting their experiences of injustice. Students regularly laughed as they talked about these disturbing interactions and they typically described reacting to the perpetrator in a friendly, even cheerful, way rather than an accusatory one. They tended to give the benefit of the doubt, as Teresa explained, "I know you're not doing it to be mean. You're just doing it because you don't know better." However, the emotional work of managing their reactions took a psychological toll on top of the toll of experiencing the microaggression itself.

Support from others appeared as a strong theme in students' solutions to the range of microaggressions discussed in this paper. Students bonded with others in the targeted racial or race-gender group. Harmony, a black woman, described why she finds support from other black students to be particularly beneficial:

Minority students anywhere at any university...already feel marginalized by being a minority in college... Being a biology major, for instance, which is not likely to see any minorities in that field, it's hard (*laughs*). It's really hard on a day-to-day basis and to have other minorities lift you up, like, "We can do it! We can become doctors! We can be surgeons! We can complete and finish this exam!" is encouraging. That's encouraging.

Bonding that happens as a result of microaggressions can provide students with a support structure to help them through this unwelcoming environment. Martinez Aleman (2000) finds that women of color sought friendships with one another to give and receive academic encouragement and support related to racist incidents, while white women sought out these relationships as a respite from academic pressures. Her study did not include men. However, my research suggests that friendships are important for students of color and white women, not only women of color as a way to cope with microaggressions. Sean, a black student, explains:

I think things would've been easier had I had more of a support structure set up in the beginning. Just as far as, "This is my struggles, this is the things I went through," instead of me having to fall dead flat on my face first to realize a lot of things. Somebody to tell me their own testimony.

Sean highlights the lack of mentoring and social support for students of color, particularly black men, on campus. This isolation makes it difficult to connect with others who have had similar experiences and who can guide them through their experiences. However, this "testimony" is important, so they would not have to learn on their own by "fall[ing] dead flat on [their] face."

Although he was unable to find a mentor at MU, Sean did serve as a mentor to others and joined a historically-black fraternity that provided him with

a community of like-minded black men and an opportunity to "be more vocal about my experiences so that people can learn from them." He describes his fraternity as "a service...to the community...that's why [the organization] was founded, to bring African American men together to help each other succeed and graduate do better." Solórzano et al. (2000:70) describe similar responses by black students: bonding creates "counter-spaces" within black student organizations, black sororities and fraternities, black peer groups, organizations and offices that serve black students, and study halls organized by black students. Lasley Barajas and Pierce (2001) describe how successful Latina college students, but not Latinos, respond to negative stereotypes by bonding with other Latinos. Latinas create "safe spaces" in their relationships with friends, family, and community (Lasley Barajas & Pierce, 2001), similar to those created by black women in their relationships with one another, as described by Collins (2000:100-105). Similarly, some white women in the business school joined a club for women business students as a way to bond with others who experienced this male-dominated program as isolating.

Students responded to microaggressions in other ways, as well. Rather than letting others speak for them, some ensured that the positions of their group were heard. Students' accounts reveal two ways that they did this. Margaret, a black woman, describes a shift in her thinking:

When I was younger it made me want to say less. I just wanted to hurry up and get through the topic and move on. But now...it really makes me want to speak out to stop either the stereotypes or the negative thinking or somebody that is kind of confused.

A Latino student, Alberto, describes a similar shift:

My first semester here I was kind of intimidated by being the only minority at all in a classroom full of all white people, but I think actually I kind of grew to like that because when certain issues come up, I feel that I'd rather be the one person in that classroom speaking up about a racial issue or something else rather than...that room not hearing [it].

While Margaret's and Alberto's examples were aimed mostly at dealing with microaggressions instigated by peers, another Latino student, Julio, describes confronting a professor's actions:

He was talking about race and he was talking about white and black, how there's been tensions there in the past...One time in this class, I just lost it and I just said, "I'm tired of hearing just one version of the story," I'm like, "Where's the Asian version? Where's the Latino version? There's other versions besides just the black and white experience..." He [the professor] is shocked because I just bursted out out of nowhere. I didn't even raise my hand, I just said it. And then after class he pulled me over and he said, "Well, I'm glad you said that. I didn't even realize that it

meant that much. I should change my criteria and I should acknowledge that there's other situations that are happening." So, he started recognizing Asian Americans and Asians [and] Latino Americans.

Julio's outburst of indignation about a microaggression received a response that validated his concerns, but his is the only account of a direct confrontation with the perpetrator of microaggressions. Nevertheless, it is one of a range of possible responses—along with building communities of support and embracing the “burden of representation”—to microaggressions.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has discussed four patterns of racial and gender microaggressions confronting students on a predominantly-white campus. Microaggressions take particular raced and gendered forms through treatment of black men as threatening and Latinas as sexually available and exotic, which contributes to students of color's isolation and sense of MU as unwelcoming. “Controlling images” operate as “powerful ideological justifications” for the existence and maintenance of the intersecting oppressions of race and gender (Collins, 2000:69). Collins (2004) discusses controlling images of black men as dangerous and threatening and Keller (1994) discusses the stereotype of Latinas as sexually available and exotic. The classroom context is a site where black women frequently experience microaggressions, and male-dominated academic majors and programs are specific sites where microaggressions are experienced by white women. These microaggressions have an impact on the self and on students' sense of belonging at the university. Students on the receiving end perceive that others hold negative views of them and that they are “outsiders” on their own campus and in their own classrooms.

Some students respond to microaggressions by making their positions heard either through embracing the role of being a spokesperson for the group or confronting the perpetrator. Another response is to bond with other students based on a shared racial, gender or race-gender identity, which has a protective effect by creating relationships as social support structures. Peer-based support structures are not unique to this university. For example, coping organizations were formed by black students at predominantly-white universities for support in dealing with racism at the university (Solórzano et al., 2000; Willie, 2003). Solórzano et al. (2000) refer to these as “counter-spaces”; the phenomenon occurs for Latinas as well, and Lasley Barajas & Pierce (2001) refer to these relationships as “safe spaces.” Similar support structures are found in black women's relationships with each other (Collins, 2000; Martinez Aleman, 2000). Race-based student organizations, organizations serving students of color, and informal friendship groups all have the potential to help students cope with microaggressions.

Two limitations of this study deserve mention. Most importantly, the results of a study based on one university are not meant to be generalizable to all youth or even all students at large, public universities. They might have been different if the city in which the university was located included a substantial Latino or black population or if a historically-black or Latino university were chosen as a research site. Context matters in assessing microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007). The fact that the interviews and focus groups do not represent a random sample of students at MU represents another limitation. Students on this campus likely had experiences that were not captured by the relatively small and non-randomness of the sample.

In line with the tenets of critical race theory, implications for educational policy deserve mention. The results of this study suggest that universities should continue and even increase their support of student organizations since such groups help students create a sense of belonging with others who support their racial, gender and race-gender identities. Several students noted with sorrow the demise or transformation of racially-based organizations on campus that had helped them make the transition to college. Finding others who could relate to their experiences on campus and help them cope with the stress of microaggressions in the broader campus environment was very important to them. Because interracial interaction has developmental benefits for students (see for e.g., Antonio et al., 2004; Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005; Smith et al., 1997), increasing student diversity would seem to contribute to an effective, diverse learning environment for all students. While it can contribute to a stereotype of black or Latino students as inferior academically, affirmative action also necessitates more diversity in the university, which, in turn, should support students' identities and diverse and effective learning environments.

A university-wide peer mentoring program could also provide students with support and help buffer the impact of microaggressions. The need for mentoring programs was noted specifically by several students, particularly black men. A black senior, Sean, stressed the importance for himself and for others of "getting someone, first of all, an undergraduate peer mentor who is like yourself [and] that can relate to the experiences that they will go through." This relationship would help combat the sense of isolation expressed by students of color and help them empower each other through sharing their successful strategies for coping. Past research has demonstrated the need for mentors for black men in college (Hayes, Cunningham, & Courseault, 2006) and has found that mentoring programs are beneficial to the mentors as well as the mentees (Lasley Barajas & Pierce, 2001). Capitalizing on self-empowerment and the momentum resulting from a student-initiated program likely would benefit students as well as the institution (Rhoads, Lachica Buenavista, & Maldonado, 2004).

In conclusion, this study represents the first investigation of how the intersecting oppressions of race and gender influence how microaggressions are experienced by black, Latina/o and white women and men. The findings

correspond with a recent study that found microaggressions aimed at black men centering on views of them as aggressive and violent (Smith et al., 2007). This study adds to these findings by discussing additional ways that microaggressions are impacted by intersections of race and gender, such as perceptions of Latinas as sexually available and exotic, the classroom as a specific site for microaggressions experienced by black women, and male-dominated academic majors as specific sites for microaggressions experienced by white women. Future research in this area will benefit from exploring the experiences of additional identity groups (e.g., Asians Americans) and interlocking oppressions (e.g., class) and by doing so in different educational and community settings.

NOTES

¹ This research was funded by a dissertation research improvement grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF Award Id: 0425478) and a dissertation fellowship from the Association for the Study of Higher Education/Lumina Foundation. I thank Daphne Holden, Brandon Jackson, Verna Keith, Irene Padavic and Doug Schrock for comments on earlier drafts and Sarrah Conn for her research assistance. I also would like to thank the undergraduates who graciously shared their experiences with me.

² All proper names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

³ This floor was part of an African-American interest living-learning center housed inside a "traditional" residence hall.

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