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Challenging the Utility of a Racial Microaggressions Framework Through a Systematic Review of Racially Biased Incidents on Campus

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In February 2010, we were doctoral students at UCLA when we heard about the “Compton Cookout,” a racially themed party held at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) in which participants were invited to wear FUBU and Baby Phat, drink 40s and “that purple drank,” and start fights and drama – among many other harmful stereotypes about Black people and the City of Compton. We were outraged, yet felt helpless, as we were in Los Angeles, 300 miles from San Diego and were not able to participate in the numerous demonstrations and community forums that arose as a result of the incident. We wanted to express our anger. We wanted to sit in solidarity with the Students of Color who were speaking out about the racism they experienced at UCSD. We wanted to make a change within postsecondary institutions, which to us were clearly bastions of white supremacy and discrimination, designed to exclude, exploit, and demean people like us, populations who have been historically and continue to be minoritized, colonized, and oppressed in the U.S. We were students in the higher education and organizational change program at UCLA, yet we struggled to understand how we could actually promote change within institutions of higher education. After many conversations about the “Compton Cookout” and other incidents like it, we decided to do what doctoral students do, which is to make arguments through writing.

We, along with our colleagues Felisha Herrera Villarreal (San Diego State University), Juan Carlos Garibay (University of Virginia), and Luis Giraldo (Claremont Graduate University), published an article in the Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice (JSARP) called “When Parties Become Racialized: Deconstructing Racially Themed Parties.” In that article we used critical race theory (CRT) as a lens for understanding the harmful impact of racially themed parties. Looking back on that article, we seemed to waver between calling these parties racist and identifying them as racial microaggressions, or those subtle, everyday incidents that communicate negative, hostile insults to racialized groups. We fell back on our CRT lens in order to communicate that racially themed parties are in fact racist, yet could see how they might be better classified as racial microaggressions. Being students at UCLA with some of the leading scholars on microaggressions in education, we were excited about using the framework of microaggressions, especially given its increasing popularity in education scholarship. After our publication was released, we received positive feedback on the article, learning that it was one of the most downloaded articles in the 48th volume of the journal.

As doctoral students, we realized the power of writing, noting that our own research might be able to affect change within postsecondary institutions. Yet, nothing changed. We continued to see regular reports of racially themed parties, including an “Asia Prime” party at Duke University in 2013, an “MLK Party” at Arizona State University in 2014, and a “Cripmas Party” at Clemson University in 2015. There was even a “Kanye Western” party at our beloved UCLA in 2015. These are just a few examples of the numerous incidents we see reported in the news regularly. Yet we know that beyond those that make the news, there are many, many more that go unreported. We were frustrated and wondered if our scholarship could really make a difference.
Examine the Impact of Racially Biased Incidents

Moving from the theoretical argument we made in the JSARP article, we decided to statistically test the effects of racially biased incidents on student outcomes. Although we had access to data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) housed at UCLA, there were no variables within the data that would allow us to test this type of effect. CIRP data, which primarily include student level responses to questions about their experiences, involvement, and self-perceptions before and during college, were limited in this regard. Drawing ideas from articles within the discipline of sociology, we decided to create our own variable that could be added to the CIRP dataset that would measure the frequency with which racially themed parties and other racially biased incidents occurred on the college campuses that were included in the CIRP dataset.

We began our search using Lexis Nexus, first playing with the search engine to determine if it could actually provide the information we were seeking. As we began reading the numerous articles about racially biased incidents on college campus, we realized the problem was not only pervasive, but much more complex than we had originally imagined it, and more problematic than just parties. We expanded our search and spent several months reading through article after article, learning about the experiences that students across the U.S. were dealing with when it came to racially biased incidents on campus. The months we spent in the data were often painful, as we became emotionally invested in reading about experiences that intentionally and unintentionally had a negative impact on minoritized people like us. As People of Color, we wanted justice; as educational researchers, we continued to believe that we could make a difference through our writing. While we eventually used the data collected through our systematic review of news-making racially biased incidents on college campuses to develop several quantitative variables for our CIRP database, we felt the insights we gathered about the incidents themselves would be important to share. For one, it became very clear to us that blatant acts of racism – not just microaggressions – were still very common on college campuses. We ultimately hoped that college and university administrators would read our documented evidence about how pervasive these incidents were and feel compelled to take proactive steps towards preventing future racially biased incidents on campus. We also felt we had some important contributions to make to the racial microaggressions literature based on the data.

The Current Study

Writing the article entitled “Challenging the Utility of a Racial Microaggressions Framework Through A Systematic Review of Racially Biased Incidents on Campus” for the Journal of Critical Scholarship in Higher Education and Student Affairs (JCSHESA) was empowering for us. Not only were we able to share what we had found through our systematic review of news-making articles, we were also able to return to our original argument about racially themed parties being microaggressions while challenging our own thinking. Our content analysis had proven otherwise and we no longer wavered over whether racially themed parties were overt forms of racism or covert forms of racial microaggressions. The data had shown us that there were far too many incidents that could be considered overt forms of racism to ignore. As such, we focused on this argument in developing the manuscript. As we wrote, more incidents occurred, prompting our introduction, which highlights a recent incident taking place in August of 2014, where Oklahoma State University students displayed a banner that read “Send ‘Em Home #trail_of_tears #gopokes” in hopes of intimidating their football opponent, the Florida State University Seminoles. As scholars who recognize the legacy of American Indian relocation and mass genocide, we struggled to understand how anyone could see this incident as anything but racist. Here is where we still felt some value to the microaggressions framework, considering how some might contest the racist nature of this incident and others like them.
Why are racially biased incidents so pervasive on college and university campuses, and why aren’t we more upset about it? Perhaps living in a so-called “post-racial” society has prompted us higher education and student affairs scholars to steer clear of naming biased incidents as racist because of the perceptions that the nature of racism in the U.S. has changed. We questioned the extent to which higher education scholars, and scholars across multiple disciplines, have shifted from calling racialized incidents overt, blatant, and intentional acts of racism, to naming them racial microaggressions. As the concept of microaggressions becomes more prevalent in higher education and student affairs scholarship, we wondered how the framework could be used to understand racially biased incidents, particularly considering our own visceral response to these events as former college Students of Color and now Faculty of Color. In our article, we argue that racially biased incidents on college and university campuses are “racist” and encourage people to use this term, rather than shying away from it, which Shaun Harper (2012) suggested is the status quo in higher education and student affairs scholarship.

In reviewing the current literature on racially biased incidents, we found that several systematic reviews had been conducted over the years, but none since 1997, when Adalberto Aguirre Jr. and Melinda Messineo conducted their content analysis, identifying the frequency of different types of racially motivated incidents occurring on U.S. campuses between 1987 and 1993. We agreed with authors like Farrell and Jones (1988) and Aguirre and Messineo (1997), who argued that biased incidents are harmful, racist, and have the potential to negatively alter the experiences of Students of Color on campus. With the regular occurrence of racially biased incidents on college and university campuses, we wanted to conduct an updated review of racially biased incidents. With this article we offer a contemporary review of racially biased incidents on college and university campuses and question the extent to which these incidents represent covert versus overt forms of racism (i.e., naming them as microaggressions or clearly racist).

What We Found

We found that between September 1, 2005 and May 1, 2010, there were 205 news-making incidents across college campuses in the U.S. We first classified these incidents by their mode of delivery and racialized content/symbol. The most common modes of delivery included graffiti/vandalism (61), physical media (29), noose hangings (27), parties (24), verbal remarks (23), and assault/fighting (22). Examples include an offensive word used against Jewish people written on the wall of a Jewish fraternity house at University of California, Berkeley (graffiti/vandalism), a flyer mocking Black people and Black History Month at Colorado State University (physical media), a likeness of Senator (presidential candidate) Obama hanging from a tree at the University of Kentucky (noose), and a "South of the Border" themed party at Santa Clara University (party) in which attendees were encouraged to dress like stereotypical Latinas/os, with pictures on social media sites revealing attendees dressed like “janitors” or “pregnant teenagers.”

We also revealed the most common racial content/symbol delivered through these incidents, which is the element that makes the mode of delivery racist. The most common racial content/symbol included racial slurs or comments (91), a depiction of lynching (33), swastikas (27), and cultural (mis)appropriation (23). Examples of these incidents include racial slurs targeting American Indian students being posted on Facebook at the University of Illinois (racial slurs), a noose found hanging outside the Black Cultural Center at the University of Maryland (lynching), dozens of swastikas found written on walls and in the bathrooms across campus at Saint Cloud State University (swastikas), and students painting themselves black and dressing as “African tribesmen” for Halloween at Hamline College (cultural (mis)appropriation).

We then used Derald Wing Sue and colleague’s (2007) definition of racial microaggressions as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group” (p. 273), to classify racially biased incidents as microassaults (explicit verbal, behavioral, or environmental attacks), microinsults (unintentional demeaning actions or remarks about one’s racial heritage), or microinvalidations (actions that invalidate a person’s racial reality). But what we discovered was that these categories were insufficient for classifying all the incidents we had identified. Like other scholars, we began to question the accuracy of the term “microas-
saults” which Sue et al. (2007, p. 274) describe as:
an explicit racial derogation characterized pri-
marily by a verbal or nonverbal attack meant to
hurt the intended target through name-calling,
avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory
actions. Microassaults are most similar to what
has been called “old fashioned” racism conducted
on an individual level. They are most likely to be
conscious and deliberate.

We began to see many of the incidents we identified
as more closely resembling overt racist manifesta-
tions “of the past.” Similar to Julie Minikel-Lacocque
(2013), who critiqued the umbrella term microaggres-
sions for certain instances of racism, we wondered if
the term, “micro” was more damaging, as it indicated
that the insult was small or less harmful than other
forms of racial incidents. As such, we followed Mini-
kel-Lococque’s lead in expanding Sue et al.’s (2007)
original microaggressions typology to include more
aptly named “racialized aggressions.”

While we agree that racial microaggressions are
common occurrences that People of Color deal with
regularly, daily even, the data in our study suggested
that a majority of the news-making racially biased
incidents on college campuses in the five year time-
frame we reviewed were more blatantly racist, or
what Sue and colleagues identified as “old fashioned
racism.” We found that a large percentage of incidents
are best understood as microassaults, or the type of
aggressions that Sue et al. consider more blatantly
racist. We also added a category to Sue et al.’s origi-
nal taxonomy, microintimidation, which we used to
further categorize several incidents as blatant forms
of racism. Guided by a racial microaggressions frame-
work, we view the incidents as both complex and
multifaceted, while highlighting the largely covert
and often overt levels at which racism manifests itself
on college and university campuses.

Rather than assuming that all racially biased incidents
are either blatantly racist or subtler forms of micro-
aggressions, we argue that it really depends on the
incident. In the article we propose a new taxonomy
that distinguishes various forms of racism, classifying
some incidents as microaggressions (microinsults
and microinvalidations) and others as racialized ag-
gressions ([micro]assaults and [micro]intimidations).
We argue that the key distinction is how debatably
racist or contested the incident is. For racialized
aggressions, the harm and/or threat is so blatant that
the incident is not questioned for its racist nature,
relative to microaggressions. A well-known example
is the 2015 incident at the University of Oklahoma
where SAE fraternity members’ were caught on video
singing a racist chant. Yet, for microinsults and mi-
acrovalidations, the incidents, and particularly their
impact on the targets, appear to be more debatable,
and the microaggressions framework centers the
targets of such incidents to name their racial realities.

Whether racial incidents are racialized aggressions or
microaggressions, and whether the action is inten-
tional or unintentional, the consequences are deep
and pervasive and should not be ignored. People
of Color feel as though they do not belong in post-
secondary settings. Furthermore, these incidents
have long-term psychological effects on minoritized
populations. The students, faculty, and staff who are
targets of these racially biased incidents feel invis-
able, othered, and criminalized on the campuses
that should be protecting them from the realities of
racism. White people within institutions of higher
education must take responsibility for actively edu-
cating themselves on historical issues of race, while
institutions must proactively create environments
where issues of race and racism can be discussed,
debated, and learned about.

We wanted to make a change within
postsecondary institutions, which to us were
clearly bastions of white supremacy and
discrimination, designed to exclude, exploit, and
demean people like us, populations who have been
historically and continue to be minoritized,
colonized, and oppressed in the U.S.
Implications:
An Open Invitation to Read the Full Article

In practice, we argue that a better understanding of the contemporary landscape of racially biased incidents on college and university campuses can help to improve racial climates. Although our systemic review included a majority of incidents that were more overt forms of racism, it should be noted that these are only news-making incidents. The reality that racial microaggressions are occurring much more often – yet not necessarily being reported to news outlets – is important to recognize. Practitioners must acknowledge that these incidents take on a range of forms and recognize that both racial microaggressions and racialized aggressions are rampant on college and university campuses. Practitioners can use the evidence from our study to show how racism occurs on campuses, not just in small or subtle ways, but also in blatant and aggressive forms. In doing so, practitioners must be ready to address the overt and blatant forms of racism we found to be widespread.

In the article we make several recommendations for research and practice, and encourage people to do something about racialized incidents on college and university campuses. With this article we encourage more action, and less reaction when it comes to addressing racially biased incidents on campus.

This research in brief provided us an opportunity to share the background story to the article and our thoughts on what we considered to be the highlights. Just as we grappled with challenging our previous ideas about racially themed parties, we know that our thinking will likely continue to evolve. We invite readers to review the full article and engage in dialogue with us about how our findings and arguments may be helpful and beneficial for your own work. We also invite readers to challenge our ideas toward the goal of shared understanding.