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**Leadership during a Racial Microaggression on Campus**

**Abstract**

The study aimed at understanding students' perspectives on university response to a racial microaggression on a campus. Responses were collected in the form of an online survey and analyzed using qualitative data analysis to identify themes from students' perspective. Insights about how students processed the incident were gained. Although students were thankful of the university response, concern for another incident, and how leadership will equip students to handle situations lingers. Implications for educators are provided.

Keywords: Social justice issues, Qualitative research, Multicultural issues, Leadership; Counselor Education; Family Sciences Education

## Introduction

*America is a “melting pot” where everyone is the same, thus denying or invalidating the unique experiences of the many people of color.*

*(Bennett, McIntosh & Henson, 2017, p. 2)*

In alignment with this quote, it is widely believed that racism has vanished from America because of the increase of people of color who have gained social, economic, and political recognition in the past decade, i.e. Barack Obama or Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson (Bennett *et al.*, 2017). Contrarily, research suggests that racism and acts of microaggression will continue to persist in America with a more frequent occurrence among college students (Smith, Hung & Franklin, 2011; Green, Pulley, Jackson, Martin & Fasching-Varner, 2018).

One such incident happened on September 28<sup>th</sup>, 2016 at the researchers’ home institution. Students were holding their third day of a peaceful Black Lives Matter protest when a White student directly approached the students wearing an ape mask and by holding bananas on nooses. Despite anger and agitation, at what appeared to be clear provocation, the students who were protesting remained calm until campus public safety officers were able to detain the White student. The university administration responded swiftly, holding a community discussion on the same day, where students, faculty, and staff were invited to speak about racism on campus. Among the attendees were twenty counseling students from the Department of Counseling and Human Services. Subsequent to the discussion, students were invited to further process the event by writing their thoughts in an anonymous online survey.

Such overt incidents seem to contradict the dominant narratives of equality and of the celebration of multiculturalism, both of which are promoted at US educational institutions, and have been found to impact African-American college students’ psychological well-being and

academic performance (Linley, 2018). However, only a handful of researchers have investigated the topic of racial tensions among college students (see for example Stuckey & Addo, 2015; Harper, 2015; Cole & Harper, 2016) which therefore leaves a relative gap in our knowledge about what students' think they need from university leadership in such times of separation and distress. It is within this context that the researchers situated this present study to examine counseling students' perspectives of how university's leadership responded to the racial incident with the aim to provide novel understanding about how stakeholders, faculty as well as peers, especially within helping fields such as social work, family science, human service, and counseling, can provide services to help manage these situations more effectively in the future.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, it provides three dominant themes within current literature to sketch the context of racism and microaggression among US higher educational institutions. Second, it details the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of this study. Third, it presents findings by using direct quotation from participants. Fourth, it discusses findings in the context of the wider literature and further outlines limitations of this study. This paper concludes with a summary of the main findings as well as with implications for leaders in helping professions and university policies.

### **Literature Review**

College campuses are places which present opportunities for students to be culturally immersed and to gain an understanding as well as an appreciation of socio-cultural differences (Jamaludin, Sam, Sandal & Adam, 2018). Researchers have recently recognized that campuses have increasingly grown hostile and become outlets for racial microaggressions (Cole & Harper, 2016). Even though racial incidents among educational institutions can be traced back all the way to the civil rights era (Stotzer & Hossellman, 2012), awareness of such incidents did not start to

spread until the 1990s, when the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) mandated that hate crimes in regard to ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, or creed be reported (Davis & Harris, 2015). Notwithstanding, research suggests that most such incidents on campuses do not get reported due to the “*normalized, pervasive nature of racism and discrimination within education*” (Davis & Harris, 2015, p. 63). Such unequal and unethical handling of information among higher education in the US, as well as the growing number of racial incidents on campuses has encouraged social scientists to be more invested in understanding and discerning the ways in which universities and colleges can manage racial microaggression (Kezar, Fries-Britt, Kurban, McGuire & Wheaton, 2018; Nadal, Wong, Griffin, Davidoff & Sriken, 2014; Sanchez, Adams, Arango & Flannigan, 2018).

Literature suggests that there are two ways in which racial tension and microaggression is managed in higher educational settings: By university leadership and when students are integrated in leadership roles. The role of university leadership has a significant impact on students’ resiliency and processing (Gigliotti, 2016). Cole and Harper (2016) investigated a college president’s response to a racial incident and concluded that the president’s responses failed to acknowledge the systemic and institutional issues which foster racial hostility. Further, Fortunato, Gigliotti and Ruben (2017) found that good stakeholder communication can help eliminate students’ mental health and stress and that student’s frustration and hostility may be heightened if:

*Leaders fail to respond in an appropriate and timely manner, which [may] offer the perception that racial issues and those articulating them are not a priority and that leaders are not in control of the situation (p. 206)*

In addition, qualitative inquiries into the ways in which multiculturalism is promoted in US higher education found that the formation of ethnic student groups and activities thereof aids students in

their college integration phase, but also in feeling validated and accepted throughout their studies (Kiang, 2002, 2009; Museus, Lang, Huang, Kem & Tan, 2012; Museus, 2014).

The managing of racial incidents at US colleges has been attributed to students' roles within campus leadership as well as their engagement in student organizations (Harper, 2015). One way in which students have increasingly engaged in campus leadership is through the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which was formed in response to the highly-disputed trial of George Zimmermann for the murder of Trayvon Martin (Garza, 2013). According to co-founder Alicia Garza (2014), the BLM movement is:

*[an] ideological and political intervention in a world where black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise and shall serve as affirmation of black folks' contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression (p. 1)*

Further, through the avenue of social media, the BLM movement has reached people nationwide and continues to be one of the biggest platforms for political and social advocacy (Wellington, 2015). As such, this movement provides an avenue for students of color and members of black communities to feel validated and supported as well as for their engagement in local and nationwide protests, so that their voices can be heard and their perspectives on the marginalizing power that society holds can be shared (Garza, 2014).

Researchers have quantitatively analyzed how racial climates at colleges can impact graduate students' academic performance and degree completion and have found that training and education on combatting prejudice and segregation must be made available to students to enhance their career prospects during, and after graduating (Museus & Maramba, 2011; Dowd, Sawatzky & Korn, 2011; Museus, 2014; Harper, 2015, Ring, 2017). Consequently, higher educational

settings will have to incorporate students' perspectives in order to prepare, manage and facilitate through racial microaggression, as, according to the prospects of our time, these will not 'fade away' but may even increase in the future.

### **Methodology**

As the overall aim of this study was to explore and interpret counseling students' perspectives of the racial incident, the grounded theory method was most fitting. This method allowed for an inductive approach to exploring and interpreting students' responses, and to thereby generating theories about their underlying meanings of the racial incident (Glaser, 1992; Khan, 2014).

### **Sampling of Participants**

Main participants for this study included twelve graduate counseling students with ages ranging from 21 years to 45 years. Participants were recruited through a convenience and criterion sampling strategy (Mayan, 2016). As such, participants who successfully met the criteria for this study were (1) currently enrolled in ETSU's counseling program, and (2) spoke at the open dialogue event held after the incident. As data was collected through an anonymized online survey, the researchers had neither influence on the race, ethnicity or on the gender of participants.

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected through an online survey which contained one open ended question that asked them to "*Please write your current thoughts, comments, suggestions following the incident on September 28th in Borchuck Plaza and the university response.*" This survey was sent securely and confidentially via the university's email address to twenty counseling students who were enrolled at that time, of which twelve participants responded.



**Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed through the thematic analysis method (Stuckey, 2015), involving two stages: In the first stage, the data were searched for themes and coded independently by all four researchers involved. The second stage involved a discussion by all four researchers about their process of analysis until consensus on identified themes was found (see Table 1).

**Findings**

Two dominant themes emerged: (1) rational response, and (2) emotional response, from which two inter-related themes emerged: (1) appropriateness for student advocacy, and (2) appropriateness for faculty advocacy. As shown in Table 1, from within each inter-related theme, six sub-categories emerged. This section presents each inter-related theme as well as their connected sub-categories in relation to their main theme.

**Table 1**  
Categories which emerged from students’ responses

<i>Main Theme</i>	<i>Inter-related Theme</i>	<i>Sub-Category</i>
Rational Response	Appropriateness for student advocacy	Timeliness Hope Pride
	Appropriateness for faculty advocacy	Awareness Training Space to talk
Emotional Response	Contempt	

**Rational Response**

This main theme includes students' responses which focused on the action that campus security, faculty and staff undertook. As shown on Table 1, within this main theme we identified two inter-related themes:

### *1. Appropriateness for student advocacy*

This inter-related theme emerged from responses which indicated that the action that was taken by faculty, peers and the university's authorities following the incident promoted feelings of value, hope and belonging, and thus was identified as appropriate act of advocacy for students.

The sub-category of *timeliness* emerged from responses which indicated that the amount of time that passed between the incident and the police showing up as well as the open dialogue, which was held just a few hours afterwards, made students feel valued and safe. This seems to be in agreement with Fortunato et al's (2017) argument that university leadership is best presented by dealing with the racial incident quickly. Additionally, the sub-category of *hope* emerged from responses which proclaimed that the ways in which the university's 's campus security, administration and university council approached the situation and called for the open dialogue to process as a 'student community', made students feel respected as well as reassured that the university will effectively manage any such racial incidents in the future. Lastly, the sub-category of *pride* emerged from responses which viewed the attribution of a 'student community', as developed from the open dialogue process, during this time of separation as catalyst for a sense of belonging and familiarity. Further, responses included feelings of pride about how their peers chose to respond, as one participant pointed out:

*"I was extremely proud of the students for remaining calm and dealing with the situation in a rational manner"*

As such, the students seemed to identify with their peers and with the ways in which these responded, and thus seemed to promote an overall connection and as though one individual represents the whole student-community.

In summary, the timeliness of a call for action, the ability to process as a ‘student-community’ and the ways in which the university’s students were able to keep a collected and respectful manner throughout this racial microaggression seemed to have encouraged students to feel safe, valued, connected, appreciated and overall, to feel advocated for.

### *2. Appropriateness for faculty advocacy*

This theme emerged from responses which indicated that faculty and staff did not seem prepared for such a racial incident, and that the university may need to equip faculty and staff for such forthcoming events.

One sub-category that emerged in this theme was *awareness* (see Table 1). Responses indicated that in such crisis incidents, students look to faculty and staff to bring awareness and to provide leadership. However, in alignment with Davis and Harris’ (2015) argument that most racial tensions do not get reported, students’ responses indicated that awareness about the racial climate on campus was undermined. A second sub-category was identified to be *training* provided by faculty and staff as well as more intentional education for students to know how to respectfully advocate and support their peers of color. This theme seemed to be related to responses which indicated feelings of desperation and frustration about not having been able to help and support their peers. As this theme indicates the willingness and importance of students’ agency in being actively involved in the leadership and in being trained, it validates Harper’s (2015) as well as Ring’s (2017) findings. Lastly, a third sub-category which emerged from this theme was *space to*

*talk* as the majority of responses included the appreciation for students and faculty to process together through open dialogue. The additional space for processing in classrooms and online surveys following the incident was appreciated and was recognized as fostering awareness, belonging, and hope.

Further, following this incident, one student posted the note “I Heard You” all around campus as form of ‘silent reaction’ which later turned into a region-wide symbol of advocacy. The student stated:

*“I Heard You- will be a message of compassion, a silent and symbolic reaction to the BLM protest, and is not intended to cause any harm.”*

In summary, faculty and staff seem to play an important role when it comes to racial incidents in higher educational settings. The availability of training and education on how to effectively manage such incidents as well as on how to support those affected is seen as important factor. Further, the promotion of an open space to talk and to process with students and with faculty seems to have been recognized by students as key element of university leadership.

### **Emotional Response**

This main theme includes students’ responses which focused on the emotional repercussions of the racial incident. As shown in Table 1, within this main theme we identified the inter-related theme of *contempt* with social and cultural issues.

#### *Contempt*

Responses indicated frustration about the reality that racial/ethnic microaggression increases among US higher educational settings and seemingly persists across the USA. This finding seems to stand in contrast to Harper’s (2015) and Garza’s (2013) idea that ethnic student

groups as well as the engagement in university leadership and advocacy, such as in the BLM movement, provides a 'safe haven' for students of color. Furthermore, the prevalence of anger and frustration in responses indicated the need for an outlet through which students can process safely and without judgment. This aligns with interim president Michael Middleton, who, after the racial incident in 2015 at the University of Missouri argued, that:

*One of the things impeding our ability to get beyond these issues [of microaggression] is our inability to talk about it. We have to understand our ugly history permeates everything we do at [relevant] institutions and in this country. Once we get this truth on the table, we're poised to reconcile those differences* (Stuckey & Addo, 2015, p. 6).

In summary, the incident of racial microaggression seemed to trigger the need for discussion and care for students and seemed to have provided a 'reality check' which helped students and educators to understand that racism, still remains.

### **Discussion**

These findings highlight the importance of university's quick, appropriate and respectful response in such racial incidents Kezar et al (2018). Aligning with Fortunato *et al* (2017), students' responses indicated that the timely nature of the university's response was critical to students feeling validated, supported and respected on their campus. As such, this illuminates that there is a sensitive window of time between the racial act and the call for action. However, in contrast to literature which suggests that students of color feel most secure and less targeted for hate crimes when they are engaged in university activities, roles or ethnic groups (see Kiang, 2002, 2009; Museus *et al.*, 2012), our findings indicated that training and education on how to effectively manage such racial incidents as well on how to best advocate for student victims would have fostered feelings of security. Additionally, whilst our findings validated that the communication

and prompt action of university leadership was helpful, the space to process in form of an open dialogue with students, staff, faculty and higher university authorities, such as the president, was more important for students to feel validated and protected. Our findings suggested that in the midst of frustration and perplexity, feelings of hope were present. One student stated that:

*the student who appeared that day in a gorilla mask came to the BLM protest in an act of hate but was met by ETSU students and faculty with appropriate responses that embodied love.*

This further seems to agree with Ring (2017) who stressed that with preciseness and thoughtfulness, a university is offered an opportunity to create a corrective experience for students, and a sense of safety among those affected.

### **Limitations**

The researchers recognize that several limitations to this study. This study was a case-specific study, so it has limited generalizability. Additionally, we recognize that the sample was specific to counseling students at one university. There are a number of questions that this research did not address. Although open ended, our limiting the question to one item certainly may have missed out on key discussions about this incident. As with any qualitative study, there is also the inherent bias of the researchers. We hoped to minimize bias by using a team approach, with national, international, and minority members, this is still a limitation of our work.

### **Conclusion**

This study sought to inductively investigate counseling students' perspectives on how one university managed an act of racial microaggression on their college campus to provide understanding about how student victims can be supported more effectively and about how universities can prepare and manage such incidents more efficiently in the future. Our findings

highlight the importance of open dialogue, multicultural leadership training, empathic communication skills as well as space offered for processing and debriefing within an educational institution. These findings support the work highlighted in the report from the American Council on Education articulating three aspects of a recovery framework after a racial incident: active listening, speaking from the heart and “acting with” (Kevar et al (2018).

Several implications can be drawn from this study. Racism exists and manifests in overt and covert ways. The response is critical to combat perpetuation of such acts and can serve to be sign of inclusion and belongingness. Universities can be more prepared if we recognize no place is immune and that building capacity and resilience can mitigate the effects of racial acts (Kezar, et al (2018). Professions such as counseling, family studies, human services, or other helping professions with strong ties to social justice and advocacy can lead the way by the incorporation of more nuanced multicultural and diversity training so that students are equipped to provide adequate services to the student-community. Additionally, educating faculty members on how to address cultural diversity within classrooms, may serve to reduce incidents but also build capacity for how to respond should they occur (Niehuis & Thomas-Jackson, 2019). Another implication is for university authorities to consider more effective management of such racial incidents in their policies as well as to promote ongoing leadership training, especially in form of open dialogue, for educators and members of staff. Finally, this study has provided evidence on which subsequent research can be built and further include perspectives of other students, such as perhaps international students or students of color, so that a valid and more nuanced evidence-base can be generated.

Conclusively, we hope that this evidence will encourage researchers, educators, practitioners and other leaders in helping and service-oriented fields to re-shape their management

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and curricula as to reduce anxiety and fear of current as well as prospective, international and national students, and to promote a safe environment in which these students can learn to appreciate diversity.



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