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Increasing Student Comfort with Addressing Microaggressions: Ouch! That Stereotype Hurts

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Abstract

Students on college campuses are not prepared or equipped to defend themselves or their peers when they experience or witness a microaggression. The purpose of this study was to measure the impact of the Ouch! That Stereotype Hurts program on student comfort level when addressing microaggressions and other gender, racial and cultural insults. This educational program provides examples of different types of microaggressions seen in classrooms and workplace scenarios. The program is a 30-minute individual, self-paced, guided eLearning program that enables learners to explore communication skills for promoting inclusion and respect among their peers. Participants were 91 undergraduate students (primarily White women) attending a mid-south university enrolled in a 3-hour online general elective course in Fall 2020 or Spring 2021. Students completed a pre-assessment in the 5th week of classes, and the Ouch! 30-minute training program and post-assessment the following week. On average, students' knowledge did not change; however, students' comfort level did increase significantly: On average, 50% of students reported feeling comfortable addressing microaggressions, which increased to 95% of students after completing the 30-minute Ouch! program. The present study's participants were primarily White students living in the mid-south. This research indicates that students, especially those who identify as White, would benefit in their comfort level when exposed to diversity educational training on a college campus. **Keywords:** stereotypes, microaggressions, training, higher education.

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Profiles of the Authors



Devin Boggs Riley is a recent graduate (BS) of Human Development and Family Sciences in the School of Human Environmental Sciences in the Dale Bumpers College of Agricultural, Food and Life Sciences at the University of Arkansas. His research examines the harmful effects of stereotypes and microaggression on faculty and students in higher education learning. He currently works in the College of Education and Health Professions in curriculum and instruction for the EMPOWER program. His focus is on creating functional academics for students with intellectual disabilities within post-secondary education.



Breanna Lewis Wade is a recent graduate (BS) of Human Development and Family Sciences in the School of Human Environmental Sciences in the Dale Bumpers College of Agricultural, Food and Life Sciences at the University of Arkansas. She is currently pursuing her MS degree at Clemson University in Youth Development and Leadership and working as a 4-H Program Assistant at the University of Florida.



Dr. Jacquelyn Wiersma-Mosley is Professor of Human Development and Family Sciences in the School of Human Environmental Sciences in the Dale Bumpers College of Agricultural, Food and Life Sciences at the University of Arkansas. Her research program has largely been dedicated to investigating violence against women, including risk factors for victimization among marginalized populations. Her teaching program has focused on creating curricula to increase cultural competence (via the Intercultural Development Inventory) in courses she developed, including a new general elective course, *Introduction to Cultural Competence*. She is a trained administrator of the Intercultural Development Inventory and conducts trainings across campus with students, faculty, staff, and campus leaders, as well as the local NWA community.



Bryan Hill earned a B.S. and M.S. in Industrial Engineering and a Ph.D. in Public Policy from the University of Arkansas. Currently, Bryan is the Associate Dean for Student Success in the College of Engineering.

Introduction

Students on college campuses are not prepared or equipped to defend themselves or their peers when they experience or witness a microaggression. The purpose of this study was to measure the impact of the *Ouch! That Stereotype Hurts* program on student comfort level when addressing microaggressions and other gender, racial and cultural insults. This program educates and gives examples of different types of microaggressions seen in classrooms and workplace scenarios. In total, *Ouch!* is a 30-minute individual, self-paced, guided eLearning program that enables learners to explore communication skills for promoting inclusion and respect among their peers.

One of the challenges for high impact learning in higher education is the shifting demographics and increased diversity in the communities of the United States, which can challenge administrators, faculty and students to be more knowledgeable and responsive to their diverse communities. The student population is increasing in terms of race/ethnicity, gender, and different SES backgrounds on university campuses (Locke & Trolan, 2018). The ideal higher education space is to have a diverse population and acceptance of all backgrounds. Unfortunately, higher education institutions are not faring well in race equality (D'Arcy & Galloway, 2018). Many students will experience the harmful impact of microaggressions during their time on college campuses. “Ouch moments” or brief exchanges are where an indignity, insult or slight is expressed, intentionally or not, from one person to another (especially towards a member of a minoritized or oppressed group) (Genhart, Garófoli Viviana, & Nadal, 2016). Research on microaggressions has grown exponentially (Wong et al., 2014), and schools and workplaces have sought ways to address them. Microaggressions were initially understood to describe discrimination towards African Americans (Nadal et al., 2014), however over the past several years, this research has extended to include other students of color, women, individuals with disabilities, ethnic and religious minority groups, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning (LGBTQ+) individuals (Nadal, 2011).

While there are many forms, race-related microaggressions increasingly impacts students’ academic experiences. Racial microaggressions create race-related stress and can be described as the everyday, commonplace, and often ambiguous forms of racism faced by students of color (Grier-Reed, 2010). One study found that African American college students attending Primarily White Institutions (PWI) encountered a range of microaggressions in classroom settings and other campus settings by their white peers, faculty members, administration, and staff (Watkins et al., 2010). Yosso et al. (2009) discovered that Latina/o students experienced interpersonal and institutional microaggressions, as well as racial jokes. Microaggressions can be seen by some as harmless, but without correction, they can lead to dangerous actions towards minoritized groups. Thus, it is imperative that faculty, staff, and students on university campuses be educated on the effects microaggressions have on marginalized groups while also learning to feel comfortable and equipped to address microaggressive behaviors among their peers.

Unfortunately, individual barriers to responding to microaggressions include confusion, uncertainty and low comfort level. Byrd (2018) defines a “target” as an individual who experiences stereotypes or microaggressions; an “aggressor” refers to those who say or do something aimed at the target, and a “bystander” is someone who witnesses the situation. Targets and bystanders often feel confused and uncertain on how to respond to a microaggression (Ashburn-Nardo et al, 2008). It especially becomes difficult when microaggressions are typically said in a joking manner and seem unintentional, so targets and bystanders may be unsure on how to react. An effective response is confrontation, defined as verbal or non-verbal expressive displeasure with an aggressor’s behavior (Focella et al., 2015). Confrontation effectively reduces the potential of future comments because aggressors are less likely to make biased remarks later (Czopp et al., 2006). However, confrontation is difficult for individuals who do not have the skills or resources to react in a situation.

The *Ouch! That Stereotype Hurts* program works alongside students and educators alike to provide a safe space for learning and growth while working towards dismantling microaggressions across campus and beyond. *Ouch!* started as a workshop in the mid-1990's and became a book and video-based training program ten years later. The program was created to address: "*Staying silent in the face of demeaning comments, stereotypes or bias allows attitudes and behaviors to thrive. This undermines the ability to create an inclusive environment where all are welcomed, treated with respect and able to do their best work. Yet, most who want to speak up don't know how. So, we say nothing.*" This 30-minute training is an individual, self-paced, guided eLearning program offered online that enables learners to explore communication skills for speaking up when microaggressions occur in situations. The objectives are to help participants understand the impact of stereotypes and biased statements even when spoken casually, to identify the most common reasons people stay silent in the face of bias and other stereotypes, and to enhance skills for speaking up against stereotypes without blame or guilt (Aguilar, 2006). The current study was designed to measure the impact of the *Ouch! That Stereotype Hurts* program with undergraduate students on a college campus.

Materials and Methods

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 91 undergraduate students (83% identified as women, 88% identified as white) attending a mid-south university, enrolled in a 3-hour online general elective diversity course in Fall 2020 or Spring 2021; the asynchronous courses were offered on the university's learning management system which students are already familiar with (i.e., Blackboard). Students completed a pre-assessment in the 5th week of classes, and then the *Ouch!* 30-minute training program and identical post-assessment the following week. All students were required to participate in the assessments and training as requirements for the course; IRB was deemed exempt by the primary institution of data collection.

Ouch! That Stereotype Hurts is a training program that includes multiple videos with vignettes and a final 10-question quiz. Our team used the identical 10 questions to survey students in the pre-assessment in the 5th week of classes; students were told that it was a survey and not a quiz and to provide their best guess (but were not being graded). These 10 items included definitions and terms related to: Inclusion, Diversity, Stereotype, Bias, Silent Collusion, and Ally; the final 4 questions were scenarios used in the *Ouch!* program (e.g., "*A friend says: Those people don't even try to speak English. You respond: You sound frustrated. What happened? Was there someone who couldn't understand?*" *This was an example of...*); students were asked to answer with one of the following: Ask a question; make it individual; interrupt and redirect; Say Ouch!; Assume good intent and explain the impact. Scores were tallied by the survey (in Week 5) and by the *Ouch!* program in Week 6, giving students immediate access to their quiz results; a 70% score or above was required to finish the *Ouch!* program. Finally, an open-ended follow-up question about students' comfort level was added for the study to assess pre- and post-comfort levels: *How comfortable are you in speaking up when someone says something that is offensive to you, or about other people (i.e., stereotypes, biases, racist comments, etc.)?* The research team coded the open-ended responses to indicate comfort level (0 = not at all comfortable, 1 = comfortable).

Results

Pre-assessment knowledge scores ranged from 60 to 100% and post-assessment knowledge ranged from 70 to 100%. The students' average comfort level was 44% at Week 5 and 93% at Week 6. We used a paired samples *t*-test to reflect changes in scores of the pre- to post-assessments in both knowledge and comfort level. Students' knowledge actually *decreased* (89.34% to 85.56%, $t = 2.48$, $p = .015$), while students' comfort level significantly *increased* from 44% (Week 5) to 93% at post-comfort level (Week 6), $t = -7.71$, $p < .001$.

One example of a student's Week 5 response indicated anxiety and uncertainty about speaking up: *"I would like to say I would defend myself or others in situations that I see as unfair, but I usually do not speak up. I am not confident in myself, my information, or my arguments, and I constantly over think the response to the point that I just do not do anything."* After completing the program, common student responses included: *"After the training, I feel more comfortable speaking up in various situations because I have had the proper training of how to say something in an uncomfortable situation without being rude or blaming others. It gave me many options to choose from depending on the setting and person. I am most likely to use the "assume good intent" method because I feel it is an appropriate and nice way to redirect someone and allows them to realize the impact that their words make on others";* and *"Now that I've completed the training I feel like I actually learned practical ways to respond in situations where I feel like comments are racist, bias, etc. I've never really known the correct way to go about responding in those type of situations which is where the discomfort was coming from. Now, however, I learned 6 different ways that I can act as an ally and speak up for others. I would feel more comfortable now that I'm more educated."*

Discussion

This study investigated the impact of the *Ouch! That Stereotype Hurts* program with undergraduate students. It was surprising that students' knowledge actually decreased over one week after participating in the *Ouch!* program; however, it should be noted that it was only a slight difference from 89% to 86%. Perhaps students felt less pressure in Week 5 since it was noted that their quiz was not being graded, whereas the *Ouch!* training program stated that a score of 70% was required to complete the training. Also, students participated in the pre-assessment at Week 5, likely already establishing several weeks of curriculum education on topics, such as diversity, equity, and cultural competence, which could have accounted for their initial correct responses.

The most promising finding from the training was that students' comfort level about speaking up in response to hearing a microaggression significantly increased, and substantially from 44% of students at Week 5 to 93% of students at Week 6 after participating in the training. Thus, in one week, after viewing a 30-minute training, students reported a huge shift in their comfort level to speak up in situations with aggressors. The *Ouch!* program has the potential to help both targets and bystanders become more comfortable and less uncertain on how to respond to a microaggression (Ashburn-Nardo et al., 2008).

The online platform of *Ouch!* is very versatile, allowing students to participate in online training videos and a final quiz on their own time. The program was placed on the university's learning management system which students are already familiar with. Although this study used an online training with two online diversity courses at one institution, the findings can be replicated with other delivery modes, such as in-person courses, virtual, remote, online or hybrid. This program could be applied to various educational settings, including but not limited to: high school education, student-life organizations, religious groups, study abroad or international internship experiences.

The present study's participants were drawn from a small sample of primarily white undergraduate women attending college in a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) in a mid-sized community in the mid-south in the U.S. However, some research (Hu & Kuh, 2003; Loes, Pascarella, & Umbach, 2012; Wiersma-Mosley, 2019; 2020) indicates that white students benefit in critical thinking development when they are exposed to diversity trainings and assessments. In addition, data were based on self-report pre- and post-assessments, thus there may be testing effects and other potential biases in this sample.

Future research should seek to measure the effects of the *Ouch!* program longitudinally with larger and more diverse sample sizes, rather than over one semester; as with any development, this skill may take additional effort and time to fully form. This study was conducted at a PWI that assessed a homogenous group of white students, thus future studies must also capture how students of color view and respond to

the *Ouch!* program as they are likely the targets experiencing racial microaggressions (Byrd, 2018). Additional qualitative data using reflections and interviews would help capture the full extent of all students' learning and comfort level. Finally, assessing how the *Ouch!* program impacts faculty and staff on a college campus is highly warranted. Without proper faculty and staff support in the process of unlearning biases, there remains a continued tolerance of white-dominant education and educators at PWIs, which can be detrimental to the path towards equity. It is also important to understand that microaggressions are not a single-issue problem, instead they are multifaceted and impact all levels of academia. For example, one study found that graduate students benefitted most from educators who supported and accepted them with authenticity and validation (Linder et al., 2015).

Conclusion

This study indicates that college students, especially those who identify as white, may benefit in their comfort level in speaking up against microaggressions when exposed to diversity educational training (i.e., *Ouch!*) on campuses. This study used an assessment that could be implemented online across all types of college campuses with large student enrollment to increase comfort in speaking up when addressing microaggressions. It is a valuable and innovative assessment because it is online, can be measured with multiple attempts and post-assessments, and students have immediate access to their assessment scores.

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