

**“He didn’t really say that, right?”:
The Impacts of Racial Microaggressions in Learning Environments**
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Executive Summary

In the fall of 2017, the Sociology/Anthropology 371 course conducted research on racial microaggressions in classes and curricula. We sent an anonymous online survey to 2844 students at St. Olaf College. We received 718 responses, a 25.2% response rate.

Prior studies have found that racial microaggressions (MAs) alienate students of color from their learning environments, causing physiological and psychological stress and worsening their academic experiences (Harwood 2013, Harper 2015, Smith et al. 2007). Our research focuses on 3 main questions:

1. How do MAs impact students’ psycho-emotional well-being?
2. How do MAs impact classroom social dynamics?
3. How do MAs impact student learning outcomes?

The most important results of our research are:

- 86.5% students reported being negatively impacted to some degree by microaggressions in the classroom.
- 65.4% of students who observe and students who are targeted by racialized microaggressions report negative academic impacts, indicating microaggressions affect more than just the person targeted.
- Of the respondents who reported witnessing or experiencing microaggressions, 73.2% report negative impacts on their psycho-emotional well-being. As targets, students of color are significantly more negatively impacted than white students, scoring 26.4% below the expected no impact point.
- Microaggressions negatively impact relationships with classmates and professors of students of color, who scored on average 14.6% lower than white students on a 15-point index.

Based on our research, we offer four recommendations:

1. The school should work to educate the St. Olaf community that microaggressions are real and harmful experiences, countering opinions which deny or diminish racism.
2. The school should educate professors to be at the forefront of microaggression reduction. Professor-enacted microaggressions can be more difficult to address and professors may influence microaggressions in curriculum or from their students.
3. Classes should establish guidelines for addressing and reducing microaggressions. Actively committing to these may potentially mitigate the alienating effects of microaggressions.
4. The school should better address psycho-emotional and academic well-being by expanding services like the Academic Support Center and Boe House and lowering barriers to access.

Introduction

Research on racism in higher education has produced a significant body of literature in past decades. Areas of focus include racially differentiated outcomes in attending college, experiences while at college, and graduation prospects of racial and ethnic minority students. Recent studies such as those by Smith et al. (2007), Harper (2013), and Harwood (2015) have focused specifically on microaggressions, or the racialized aggressions in the classroom that may not be as overt as traditional forms of explicit racism. However, as outlined by Minikel-Lacocque (2013), the responses to and aftermath of microaggressions are severely understudied.

In turning this lens to St. Olaf, it is essential to consider the various dimensions of impacts that classroom racism has on students of color, including on psycho-emotional wellbeing, social dynamics between professors and students, and academic outcomes. We focus on how these impacts differ between those who are more frequently the targets of these microaggressions (students of color) and those who are more frequently observers of microaggressions.

Taxonomy and Terminology

The term “microaggression” describes minor but frequent interactions and incidents that denigrate and invalidate people of certain social groups, whether intentional or unconscious (Sue et al. 2009). The term provides a framework for understanding interactions that are driven by racism but may be ambiguous to spectators or plausibly denied by the perpetrator. Sue et al. (2007) also sorted microaggressions into three major categories – microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations – which variously describe the environment, message, and intentionality of the incident. Included in the taxonomy is the term environmental microaggressions, which captures microaggressions that do not require an actor and that refer to the organization of and institution or setting, such as a classroom setting.

Microassaults capture interactions that are usually consciously perpetrated and are intended to hurt the targeted person. Avoidant and discriminatory behaviors, like a white person moving away from a person of color who sits down next to them, show targeted people that they don't belong. Microassaults also include verbal and nonverbal violence directed at a specific person or persons.

Microinsults are often unconsciously perpetrated, informed by implicit racism that degrades one's racial background through rudeness and insensitivity. For example, a white student's sudden attention to their belongings when a black student sits next to them in class may not seem apparent or like a problem to the white student, but it rests on an assumption that black people are more likely to steal. Assuming that certain negative traits and norms are inherent in a specific racial/ethnic group may not be a conscious thought, but the assumption nonetheless stems from racism.

The third category, *microinvalidations*, includes behaviors that negate the worldview, experiences, and thoughts of people of color. This often involves assuming people of color are foreigners, or that black people generally occupy a lower socioeconomic status because they do not work as hard as whites. Lewis et al. (2000) note that this includes a trend of White people endorsing “colorblindness,” or claiming to “not see color” and distancing themselves from the continuous perpetuation of racism. When they refuse to see that race has an impact on people's lives, they effectively discount the experiences of black people and other people of color and they obscure other manifestations of racism.

As predominantly white institutions (PWIs) of higher education begin to diversify their campuses, racial microaggressions may be committed with increasing regularity (Sue et al. 2009). Without intentionally addressing institutional and interpersonal racism, institutions which host student bodies of greater diversity may inadvertently expose minoritized populations to racism. As microaggressions grow in frequency, the effects on students of color are compounded, with the impact of microaggressions stemming from their cumulative weight. Moreover, microaggressions frequently serve as triggers for race related discussions, or “difficult dialogue,” as discussed by Sue et al. (2009). These difficult dialogues often are grounds for yet *more* microaggressions to be committed, as white students and white professors unprepared to discuss racial issues sensitively instead stumble or avoid the dialogue.

Both Minikel-Lacocque (2013) and Harper (2012) pay close attention to the nomenclature surrounding terms such as “microaggression” and “minority students” to update the relevance of important aspects. Minikel-Lacocque believes that the prefix “micro” diminishes the lived experiences and severe mental and physical problems faced by those targeted by aggressions. Problematically, when compared to the word “aggression,” the word “microaggression” is often presumed to indicate a less significant impact. Minikel-Lacocque proposes instead using the term “racialized aggression.” However, she also argues that including intentionally racist events and interactions diminishes the relevance of the term “microaggression”, because it was coined to include aggressions which are not clearly (inarguably) attributable to racism. The term is important in that it emphasizes this nuanced aspect and calls attention to harmful actions that often go unnoticed.

Minikel-Lacocque (2013) emphasizes the post-incident reactions to microaggressions, arguing that if microaggressions were understood as stemming from racism, then the resistance, anger, and frustration of the targeted individuals would be perceived as normal and justifiable. However, when the occurrence of microaggressions is diminished or denied, the same reactions are seen as problematic unfounded overreactions, and the targeted person may be seen as being at fault.

In attending to the established terminology in the dialogue surrounding inequality, Minikel-Lacocque (2013) and Harper (2012) call attention not only to the specific word choices, but also to the power hierarchy exemplified in the taxonomy. For example, Harper (2012) suggests that the term “minoritized” replace “minority” when referring to misrepresented populations of people. In doing so, he emphasizes that the concept of “minority population” is constructed by social institutions, like those in higher education, while “minoritizing” depends on situation and context. It is vital to recognize the role of power in determining the terminology.

Psychoemotional Impacts

Smith et al. (2007) use the term “racial battle fatigue” to describe the theoretical framework used to understand the cumulative psychological and emotional impacts on Black students on historically White campuses. They emphasize that each individual microaggression is experienced in the context of past racism. As a result of chronic racial microaggressions, students of color perceive their environments as “extremely stressful, exhausting, and diminishing to their sense of control, comfort, and meaning” and as “eliciting feelings of loss, ambiguity, strain, frustration, and injustice” (Smith et al. 2007). Harwood (2015) reported numerous examples of racial battle fatigue within the narratives of non-white students at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. In this study, an Asian male student described examples that show a condescending assumption that he does not speak English, and remarks from classmates that he should “go back to running the Laundromat,” a derogatory Asian stereotype. In the words of that student, “this happens all the time, in and out of the classroom,

any time of day. It makes me angry” (Harwood 2015). Another student reported feeling “marginalized, hurt, upset” and resorting to cynical views of the institution after a professor repeatedly and inappropriately used the N-word. As Harwood reports, insensitive classroom dynamics that targeted students of color created a hostile environment and used “ineffective pedagogy.”

Racialized stressors at the societal, institutional, interpersonal, and individual levels invoke responses such as physical avoidance, emotional withdrawal, verbal and nonverbal resistance, or even acceptance of racist attributions as coping strategies symptomatic of racial battle fatigue (Smith et al. 2007). For example, the same Asian male student cited above shared that although this is very disrespectful, “most of the time, I just tried to ignore it and shrug it off” (Harwood 2015). According to Harwood’s research, 73% of students of color respond to incidents by ignoring them and only 33% verbally respond to the perpetrator. While students likely want to speak up, or feel a moral obligation to repel these aggressions, the cumulative weight of microinsults, microinvalidations, and microassaults day after day leaves students exhausted, feeling that it is more often than not “pointless” to confront incidents when they occur.

When targeted students routinely encounter emotionally charged environmental stressors, the consequences include psychological burdens and physiological responses. Harrell et al. (2003) focused on the physiological stress responses to racism, finding that direct encounters with discriminatory events led to negative health outcomes including higher heart rates and blood pressure in participants debating a racial charged issue as opposed to those debating a non-racial issue. Additionally, they found higher blood pressure in those who fail to report discrimination and are passive when treated unfairly as opposed to those who challenge the unfair treatment and report the incident. Reynolds (2010) also found evidence supporting the association between internalized racism, a product of racial battle fatigue, and negative health outcomes such as dysregulation of cortisol and increased risk for metabolic abnormalities. Furthermore, these impacts become “communicable as the psychological and emotional pain of the incidents is passed onto family, friends, and the larger social group” (Smith et al., 2007). In understanding the extent of psycho-emotional impacts of racialized microaggressions in the classroom, it is vital to use the framework of racial battle fatigue not only to understand the emotional states of targeted students, but also to understand the health ramifications of prolonged exposure to these states. These reports provide substantial evidence that racially motivated stressors and practices associated with processing these experiences can lead to traumatic psychological and psychological outcomes, helping us to better understand how the weight of the campus racial climate substantially impacts the educational experiences and learning outcomes of students of color (Smith et al. 2007).

Social Impacts

Harper’s (2013) concept of “onlyness” has allowed researchers to understand how minority students are likely to isolate themselves from social interactions or avoid becoming leaders in fear of being labeled as the spokesperson for their entire race. Harper noted that being the only minority student makes it easier for the student to be identified as “different” and subjected to more intense scrutiny. This puts them in a vulnerable situation where they become targets of racial aggressions. A Black male residence assistant expressed how the absence of other Black leaders in residential life makes him feel like he does not fit in. It caused him to rethink his position and leadership, but encouragement from his graduate student supervisor who is also Black, convinced him to not quit. It is important to understand Harper’s concept of “onlyness” because it can help explain how minority students at St. Olaf College may feel about being the only student of color in their classrooms and why they may avoid participation and taking

leadership positions. Furthermore, it is important to understand how “onlyness” limits social interaction between students of color and their White peers.

Through the narratives Harwood (2015) collected from students of color, we learn that most students of color do not like being the only student of color in their classrooms. As Harwood found, “thirty-nine percent of students of color who responded to the survey reported feeling uncomfortable on campus because of their race.” Harwood’s research highlights how often racial microaggressions occur in the classroom and how often they negatively impact students of color. Harwood (2015) showed that 51 percent had stereotypes made about them in the classroom because of their race, 27 percent reported feeling that their contributions in the classroom were minimized and made to feel inferior because of their race, and 25 percent experienced not being taken seriously in their classroom because of their race. The racial microaggressions in these classrooms have limited the participation of students of color and made them uncomfortable to the point that they do not feel like contributing to class. As an African-American student stated, “Classmates don’t talk to me and when it is time to gather in groups they seem to not want me in the groups.” Narratives like this illustrate how some White students choose to separate themselves from students of color, making it much harder for students of color to interact with them. Students of color feel unwelcomed and alienated by their White peers. Harwood’s study allowed us to get a better understanding of why and how students of color feel alienated by their White peers and professors. Furthermore, Harwood illustrated how students of color continuously feel unwelcome in these predominantly White institutions.

Ford (2011) notes that women of color (WOC) faculty also experience microaggressions in the classroom at the hands of their students. According to Ford, college students make false presumptions about WOC faculty’s claim to knowledge and intellectual pursuits – presumptions that are often linked to raced and gendered bodily stereotypes. The study found that WOC faculty perceive White students’ bodily misrecognition regarding Black women’s bodily adornment practices and Asian American and Latina language use. While microaggressions against faculty members are not the focus of our research, this is important to acknowledge the range of microaggressions in the classroom and their impacts, including the impacts on faculty of color.

Impacts on Learning Outcomes

Facing a barrage of racialized aggressions in the classroom can, unsurprisingly, impact success in the classroom. However, as argued by Minikel-Lacocque (2013), categorizing students’ academic journeys as successes or failures based on GPA and graduation rate alone can obscure significant facets of the college experience. Metrics like those are important, but more dimensional evaluation of the experiences of students of color adds depth to understanding the challenges and support that affect students of color.

Students who are targeted by racialized aggressions may choose to disengage from environments that foment these aggressions. They may drop a class in which the occurrence of microaggressions is high or consider leaving the university altogether (Harwood 2015). These factors might be visible on student transcripts, but the motivation for dropping a class or leaving school goes unnoticed without further investigation into students’ full experiences. Students of color report pressure from advisors and professors to enroll in classes and majors perceived as more suitable for students of color, often in ethnic study fields. Instead of working with students of color to overcome challenges in their chosen fields, academic authorities may believe their students are unable to succeed in those areas and thus should choose a different field (Harwood 2015).

Being a minoritized student in a primarily white classroom can make a student of color feel “out of place...disappointed...kind of lonely...isolated” (Museus and Park 2015). These feelings of racial isolation often discourage students from full participation in class, particularly in small group work where white students may subtly but actively avoid working with students of color. Invalidating or ignoring the contributions made by students of color contributes to those students’ distancing themselves from the classroom (Harwood 2015).

Stereotypes regarding the inherent intelligence of certain racial groups also beleaguer students when their performance does not match up to expectations. East Asian students report that academic support centers sometimes promote the “model minority” myth which assumes a “genetic predisposition” of these students toward math and science disciplines, rendering these “support” centers inaccessible for those students (Museus and Park 2015). Conversely, Black and African students report their White classmates speak over and reinterpret their statements or are surprised when black students easily understand class material (Harwood 2015).

Responses and Strategies

Given that racialized aggressions often go unnoticed by those who are not targeted by them, a student who is targeted must carefully and quickly weigh the possible responses when determining how to react. Important factors include the instructor’s awareness of and comfort with race-related topics, whether race-informed perspectives were welcomed and validated in the classroom, the student’s perception of emotional support by peers and instructors, possibility of potential academic retaliation by professors and social isolation by peers, and one’s sense of “onlyness” (Sue et al. 2009; Harper 2013; Museus and Park 2015), each of which influence target reactions.

Challenging a microaggression can compound the initial harm of the event, as those targeted are frequently presumed to be overreacting, unnecessarily aggressive, or overly sensitive. Thus non-resistance to microaggressions is a common reaction. Commonly, targeted students give the aggressor the benefit of the doubt, presuming they are simply ignorant of the impact of their actions (Minikel-Lacocque 2013). Alternatively, the targeted student may recognize the intentionality of the act but determine that resisting would be more costly than ignoring the event. The aftermath of a microaggressive act can carry more weight than the act itself, as the student is forced to explain their reaction, which, in light of racial stereotypes, is often interpreted by witnesses as anger or as indicating potential physical danger (Minikel-Lacocque 2013, Sue et al. 2009, Harwood 2015).

Students targeted by microaggressions may respond in a variety of ways beyond ignoring or minimizing the incident. Some students establish networks with other minoritized students through culturally specific student organizations and social relationships, relying on those with similar experiences to share in processing and understanding microaggressions (Harwood 2015, Harper 2013). Targeted students may also attempt to engage with the aggressor, working to prevent future instances of racialized aggression. These reactions indicate the variety of negotiations students consider when responding to racialized aggressions, depending on their perceptions of the situation and actors involved.

Based on this review of literature, our research focuses on three main questions about microaggressions in St. Olaf College classrooms:

1. How do MAs impact students’ psycho-emotional well-being?
2. How do MAs impact classroom social dynamics?
3. How do MAs impact student learning outcome?

Methods

We conducted our research on racism for our Research Methods course in the fall of 2017 at St. Olaf College, a small liberal arts college in the Midwest. As a research group, we decided to focus on how microaggressions impact St. Olaf students. Specifically, we wanted to understand the impacts on students' psycho-emotional and social well-being and on their academic experiences. To gather data, we used an online questionnaire with an index of 12 items measuring various aspects of student well-being such as students' perceptions of their classroom relationships, professorial support, dedication to classwork, etc. The participants in our survey were anonymous. This online questionnaire allowed us to reach as many as students as possible in a short period of time. The survey was sent to every student who was enrolled for the fall of 2017, excluding those studying abroad and the student researchers conducting this study. See Appendix B for the specific survey questions.

Variables

Our primary interest was in the relationship between the occurrence of microaggressions in the classroom and the impacts on students' psycho-emotional well-being, social relationships, and learning outcomes. We measured microaggressive occurrences using survey questions regarding the types and frequencies of statements, actions, or incidents of indirect or unintentional racism against members of racially or ethnically marginalized groups in the classroom.

We were interested in a potential correlation between the frequency and types of racialized microaggressions and their effects on measured aspects of psycho-emotional health. To capture a range of facets of psycho-emotional well-being, we included items asking about changes in students' stress levels, self-esteem, and sense of belonging in the college community. Stress is extremely salient to college students, and other studies have found that people who experience discrimination are at risk for negative psychological and physiological outcomes (Harrel et al. 2003). St. Olaf College characterizes itself as "intensely residential," presumably in accordance with its dedication to "sustained engagement among students who are demographically different from one another," in all aspects of student life. This provides the foundation for our measure of sense of belonging as integral in the classroom. Prior research has found that repeatedly experiencing microaggressions can diminish one's view of oneself and sense of control and comfort, reducing how one feels able to interact with the world, leading to our measure of self-esteem (Smith et al, 2007). These items together capture the essential aspects of psycho-emotional well-being.

We operationally defined social relationships to include both student-to-student and professor-to-student dynamics. We were interested in the relationship between microaggressive occurrences and perceptions of the student's ability to succeed, be included in small groups, socialize, and feel like their presence and contributions in class are valued by their classmates and professors.

The impacts on learning outcomes that we focused on are those that impede the student's ability to succeed in the classroom and academic environment as a result of being targeted by or observing frequent microaggressions in the community. We measured this using an index of overall learning outcomes with questions regarding the frequency with which students feel discouraged from participating in class, consider dropping the class, have difficulty focusing in

class, and feel their motivation to study for the class decrease after an occurrence of a specific microaggression during the semester of our study.

Validity and Reliability

We took several steps to ensure that we achieved validity. To maintain face validity, we drew on previously established research for measurable aspects of student experiences of microaggressions. In order to create survey questions that validly measured impacts on students, we first needed to gather qualitative data about the issues specific to St. Olaf College. After reviewing the literature, we conducted a 90-minute focus group with about 9 participants to ensure that these aspects were relevant to St. Olaf students. These standards, drawn from the scientific community and checked against our target population, were reviewed by fellow researchers and our supervisor, Prof. Ryan Sheppard, to ensure they adequately matched our research questions.

We took several steps to ensure reliability. Our questions focused on microaggressive incidents that occurred during the first 11 weeks of the semester of our study (we launched the survey during week 12), reducing the likelihood of incorrect recall, since students may have difficulty recalling events in past semesters. Additionally, those students who were on campus during the semester prior to our survey saw significant student protests on campus which drew attention to institutionalized racism and to microaggressions in particular. Because of this, students may now be more inclined to think about and notice microaggressive behavior *or* to deny the existence and study of microaggressions, increasing the chance that classes during the semester this research occurred might be experienced different from past semesters and adding support for a more recent time frame.

We developed multiple indicators for each area of well-being, ensuring that we captured the dimensions of each research question. For example, to measure the psycho-emotional well-being of students, we asked about their stress level, self-esteem and sense of belonging in the St. Olaf community. Grouping these items together allowed us to provide a stronger approximation of the overall psycho-emotional well-being of St. Olaf students. We used 5-point Likert response scales ranging from negative to positive impacts, including “worsened a lot”, “worsened somewhat”, “didn’t change”, “improved somewhat” and “improved a lot.” Including a “did not change” response option meant that students who did not feel impacted could not indicate being affected by a microaggression.

Sample and Sampling Procedure

Our study aimed to identify patterns of racism as experienced by students at a small, predominantly White college. The perspectives offered by students of color are obviously crucial in understanding racism, but we also view white students’ perceptions and reactions to racism as essential components of anti-racist resistance. To this end, we opened the survey to students of all racial backgrounds.

The survey was open to all students enrolled at the college for the fall semester excluding those on study abroad programs and the students conducting the research, a total of 2,844 students. Of these, 718 responded, which is a response rate of 25.2%. Given a total student population of just over 3,000 students, this sampling ratio and response rate are in accordance with the generally accepted rule of thumb for sample sizes (Neuman 167).

Our final sample of 718, was composed of 59.5% female (427), 11.6% other/self-described (83), and 29.0% male (208). 1.5% self-identified as Black or African American (11), 7.9% as Asian (57), 2.8% as Hispanic/Latinx (20), 65.6% as white (471), 0.4% as American Indian or Alaska

Native (3), 0.1% as Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (1), 5% as International (36), and 5.2% as multiracial (37). This is roughly representative of the demographics of the school as a whole. The school and thus our sample is predominantly white. However, students of color did respond at a slightly higher rate than white students. The perspectives of white people are important, but given that this study is about racialized microaggressions (which cannot be committed against white people), this does limit the scope of our data.

A variety of majors and academic disciplines were represented in the sample. The class distribution of our population was 25.2% first years, 25.5% sophomores, 21.3% juniors, and 20.1% seniors.

Ethics

Our research dealt with experiences that may be difficult for many survey respondents, as we asked subjects to recount behaviors and events they deemed to be inappropriate and socially, emotionally, and academically harmful. Participants may have been reminded of previous racism they observed or witnessed, potentially re-experiencing racial trauma. However, reflecting upon these previous experiences may also bring relief or catharsis.

Moreover, the intent of this research is to shed light on real but unexplored experiences, thus providing empirical evidence for efforts to combat patterns of racism in higher education. The possibility of re-inflicting emotional harm on survey respondents was mitigated by the possibility of reducing racism for future generations of students and by the contribution to a growing body of research detailing the very real effects of racialized microaggressions.

The email inviting respondents to complete the survey detailed who designed it –sociology and anthropology research methods students - and whom to contact with questions and concerns -- Prof. Ryan Sheppard. It references the sponsoring department -- the Sociology and Anthropology department -- and that the data will be used to inform application of St. Olaf's Mellon Foundation grant and other future work to address racism at the school. Respondents were not deceived into completing the survey and they were notified that they could decline to take the survey or take the survey but skip any questions they wished.

To maintain anonymity for respondents, a third party selected subjects and compiled their email addresses into an anonymous alias which the research team could contact but not identify. The survey at no point asked for students to identify themselves but did collect demographic information, which at a small college could potentially be used to identify respondents. However, the inclusion of these data in our research was a critical component of meaningful analysis and all data were only accessible through a username and password combination available only to the students and professor conducting the research. We also agreed that we were able to identify any respondent (e.g., via gender, year, major, plus race/ethnicity, for example) that we would keep that information confidential.

Respondents completed the survey voluntarily and were informed they could withdraw from the survey at any point without consequence. Those who did complete the survey were offered the opportunity to be entered into a raffle for a gift card to the college bookstore or to Amazon.

Results and Discussion

Univariate Analysis

Among the respondents who reported being targeted by and/or observing a microaggression in the classroom, many reported negative impacts on their well-being, as shown in Table 1 below. More than half of these respondents reported experiencing downturns in their interest in class participation (54.6%, or 14.5 + 40.1), desire to socialize with classmates before or after class (57.9%, or 15.8 + 42.1), stress (57.2%, or 6.6 + 20.6), and sense of belonging (51.3%, or 13.4 + 37.9). At least one-quarter of respondents reported downturns in the following additional measures: their ability to focus in class (46.7%), interest in continuing to take the class (40.1%), comfort asking the professor for help outside of class (33.3%), motivation to study for the class (30.2%), self-esteem (29.9%), inclusion by classmates in class groups (29.7%), and support from classmates (28.1%). At the same time, a small percentage of respondents reported improvements in these measures, with the largest percentages reported for improvements in comfort asking the professor for help outside of class (14.0%) and improvements in professor's support for one's contributions in class (13.8%). Note that improvements in well-being could stem a range of factors such as assessing one's self as being able to successfully handle MAs, experiencing an MA as being handled effectively, or assessing one's professor and/or classmates as providing support in response to an MA. Nonetheless, the data provide compelling evidence of harm.

Table 1. Impacts of Microaggressions on Student Well-Being*

	Worsened a lot	Worsened somewhat	Didn't change	Improved somewhat	Improved a lot
My stress level	6.6%	50.6%	41.7%	0.8%	0.4%
My self-esteem	4.6%	25.3%	68.2%	0.8%	1.1%
My sense of belonging in the St. Olaf community	13.4%	37.9%	46.7%	1.1%	0.8%
My interest in participating in the class	14.5%	40.1%	39.7%	3.8%	1.9%
My ability to focus in class	8.4%	38.3%	50.2%	1.9%	1.1%
My motivation to study for the class	8.8%	21.4%	66.4%	2.7%	0.8%
My interest in continuing to take the class	10.7%	29.4%	57.6%	1.9%	0.4%
My classmates' inclusion of me in group work and small groups	5.6%	24.1%	66.7%	1.9%	1.9%
My desire to socialize with classmates before or after class	15.8%	42.1%	38.6%	1.8%	1.8%
My classmates' support for my contributions in class	5.3%	22.8%	63.2%	5.3%	3.5%
My professor's support for my contributions in class	3.4%	15.5%	67.2%	12.1%	1.7%
My comfort with asking my professor for help outside of class	17.5%	15.8%	52.6%	7.0%	7.0%

*For frequencies for each cell, see Table 1 in Appendix A.

Research Question 1: Psycho-emotional Impacts

How do racialized microaggressions impact students' psycho-emotional well-being?

We calculated a psycho-emotional impacts index, combining the scores on items of stress level, sense of belonging, and self-esteem. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of the frequency of the scores. The midpoint of this index is 9, indicating either “no change” or a balance of worsening and improving on these indicators. While 24.9% of those who were targets or observers of microaggressions were at the midpoint and 1.9% reported a positive impact (that is, improvements that outweighed worsening factors), 73.2% of respondents indicated experiencing negative impacts (that is, negative impacts only or negative impacts that outweighed the improvements) following a microaggression in class. The range of values across these scores suggests a variety of magnitudes of the reported negative impacts.

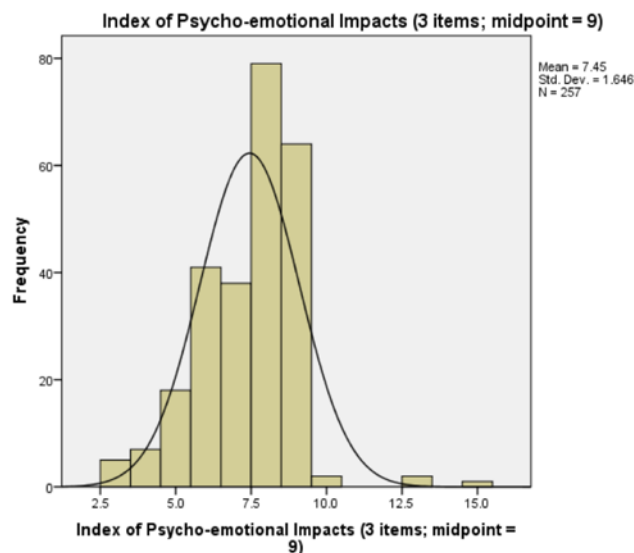


Figure 1: Histogram for the Psycho-Emotional Impacts Index

Some respondents indicated that they reflected on their own actions after experiencing and enacting microaggressions, prompting them to learn from an otherwise negative experience which perhaps would account for those had a slight positive impact. However, nearly three-quarters of students reported a negative impact on their psycho-emotional well-being due to experiencing or observing a microaggression.

The psycho-emotional impacts illustrated in Figure 1 support previous research that has found physiological evidence of increased stress levels reported by the majority of those experiencing or observing microaggressions. Harrell et al. (2003) found that direct encounters with discriminatory events led to negative health outcomes such as increased heart rates and heightened blood pressure. Reynolds (2010) found dysregulation of cortisol and increased risk for metabolic abnormalities. With 73.2% of targets and observers of microaggressions reporting negative psycho-emotional impacts, it is likely that these students are also experiencing negative physiological impacts. These findings together with previous literature highlight the need for efforts to reduce the occurrence of microaggressions and to provide support networks to relieve stress and reduce their impacts.

Research Question 2: Social Impacts

How do racialized microaggressions impact students' relationships with their peers and professors?

Impacts on relationships with peers:

Similar to the way in which we analyzed psycho-emotional impacts, we measured the impacts on the targets' and observers' relationships with peers by creating an index that summed the scores on the items asking about students' support for their contributions, their desire to socialize with peers after class, their inclusion in small group activities, and their comfort asking for help. Figure 2 represents the frequencies of the distribution of the index scores. Among the respondents who were targets or observers of microaggressions, 64.8% had scores below the midpoint of 9, indicating negative social impacts. Students reported being less likely to maintain classroom-related social relationships after experiencing or observing a microaggression. This suggests that the social alienation that the literature reports as frequently following microaggressions also occurs with St. Olaf students (Harper 2013, Harwood 2015, Smith et al. 2007).

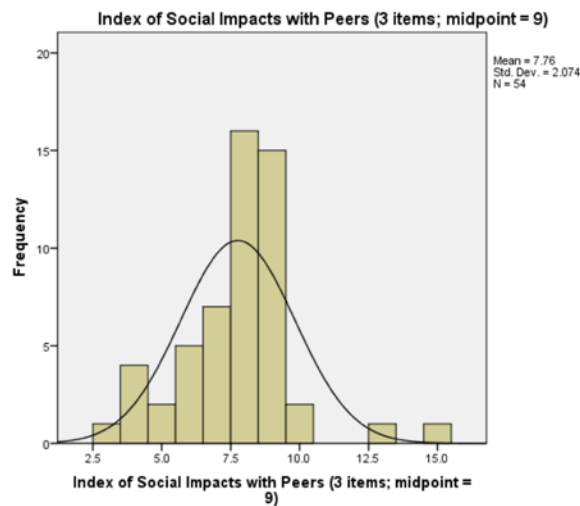


Figure 2: Histogram of Social Impacts with Peers Index

Qualitative responses to our survey suggest additional layers in students' reactions: some students who commit, experience, or observe microaggressions are able to leverage them as an opportunity to "defend the people targeted," and "be more conscious of what [they] say," laying the groundwork for improved relationships with peers.

Impacts on relationships with professors:

We summed scores on the two professor items – comfort asking the professor for help and feeling supported by the professor for one's contributions in class – to create one variable for impacts on relationships with professors. Among our respondents who reported being targeted by or observing a MA in the classroom, 29.8% indicated that racial MAs negatively impacted their relationship with their professor.

Because this variable consisted of only two items, it is likely less consistent than other, more thorough indices. We believe that if we had included more thorough questions that asked about

more specific aspects of professor relationships, as we did for peer relationships, we would see more scores below the midpoint. Comments in our focus group suggested that MAs enacted by professors may have greater impact than MAs enacted by students because the disparity in power limits students' ability to respond or resist. , but the data here suggests that most students experience no changes in social relationships with professors. This is something that we would recommend further analyzing in future research.

Impacts on relationships with peers and professors overall:

To examine impacts on relationships with classmates and professors, we created an impact that summed all of the items about these social relationships. Among our respondents who indicated being targeted by or observing an MA in class, 64.2% reported their relationships with both professors and peers being either somewhat or extremely negatively impacted by the occurrence of microaggressions, while an additional 24.2% indicated no change, as shown in Figure 3.

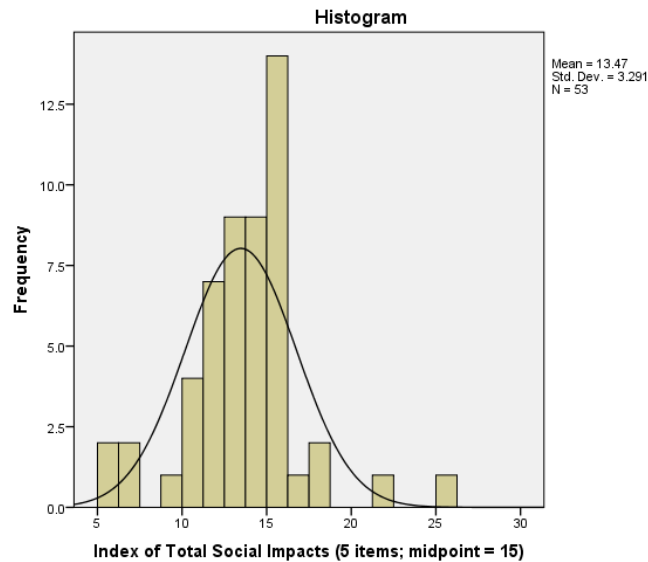


Figure 3: Histogram of Total Social Impacts Index

Because the Total Social Impacts Index combines relationships with peers, which showed greater negative impacts, and relationships with professors, which showed lesser negative impacts, the combination of these factors may have diluted the strength of the negative impacts overall. The positive impacts reported by 9.4% of the respondents might be explained by qualitative responses stating that witnessing or committing microaggressions encouraged students to reach out to professors, explain the incident, and discuss how to respond better to possible future microaggressive events.

Research Question 3: Academic Impacts

How do racialized microaggressions impact students' academic well-being?

We created an index of academic impacts by summing the scores for the relevant items. As shown in Figure 4, a plurality of students were at the midpoint score of 12, which indicated that they recognized MAs in class but did not experiencing an overall negative impact their academic well-being. (If they experienced negative impacts, this was offset by positive impacts.) The scores indicating overall negative impacts vary in intensity, but the distribution of counts below 12 shows the overall negative impacts students report, representing 65.4% of the respondents who responded regarding the academic items. This variation demonstrates a wide range of impacts which ought to be further explored.

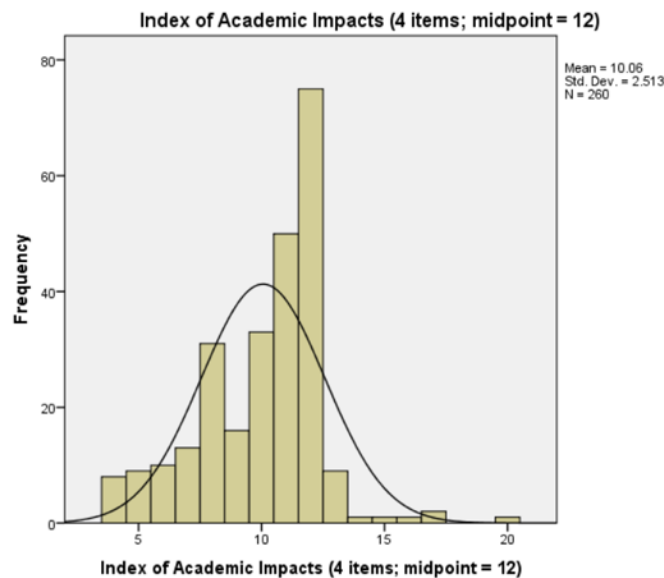


Figure 4: Histogram of Academic Impacts Index

Our findings conform to previous studies that have found that being targeted by microaggressions negatively correlates with academic success in the classroom. Sue et al. (2009) found that microaggressions are specifically influential on classroom participation, often causing targeted student to challenge the aggressor or to ignore the MA and continue with class.

Among the respondents who answered the academic items, 5.8% reported that microaggressions positively impacted their academic well-being overall. However, some qualitative responses on our survey indicate that students may reach out to professors or fellow students after committing or observing microaggressions and then find that this enables them to better articulate their contributions in class. As this explains, experiencing microaggressions that are recognized and addressed effectively may provide an opportunity for academic growth.

Internal Impacts:

We created an index of internal impacts, summing scores from the items on psycho-emotional and academic impacts. : stress level, self-esteem, sense of belonging, interest in participating in class, ability to focus, motivation to study, and interest in continuing the class. Among respondents who reported being targeted by or observing an MA in class, 81.6% indicated at least one of these aspects had worsened after a microaggression and 14.9% indicated none of

the items changed, positively or negatively. Overall, these findings indicate that an alarming majority of students who experience MAs find their well-being harmed.

The negative internal impacts may be exacerbated by the social isolation that can occur with microaggressions, as discussed above. Without a strong support network to buffer against the isolating effects of microaggressions, internal well-being may worsen further. Because previous studies have found more severe negative internal impacts of racial microaggressions in class, we believe that we may have seen even more negative effects if we had asked more questions addressing the combined psychological, emotional, and academic well-being of students.

Total Impacts:

This index combines the scores on all 12 items in order to measure total impacts on students targeted by microaggressions. As Figure 5 shows, 64.2% of students witnessing or experiencing a microaggression reported scores below the midpoint of 36. These scores range in severity but indicate that microaggressions have an overall negative and sometimes very severe effect on students at St Olaf College. This conclusion is supported by nearly every piece of literature we reviewed, indicating negative impacts on students' psychological and emotional health as well as on the relationships with peers and professors that are essential parts of living a healthy life and achieving their academic potential.

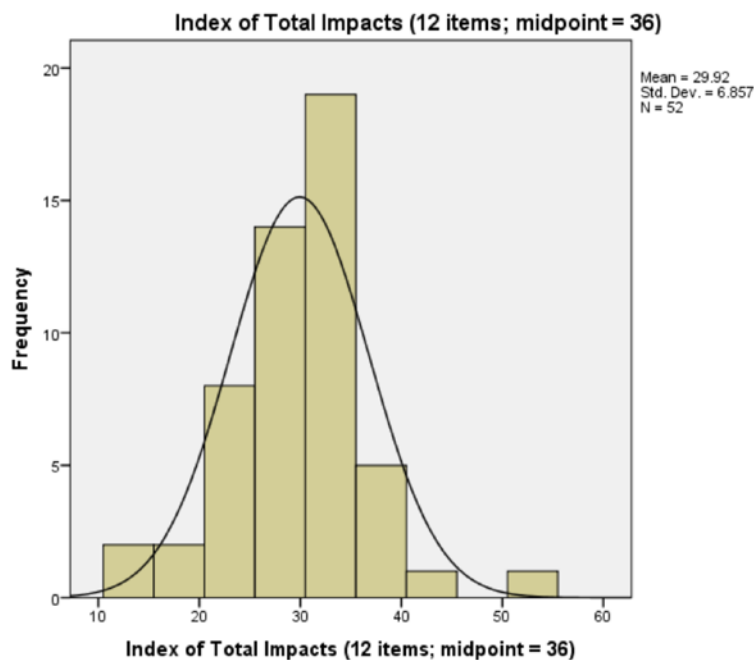


Figure 5: Histogram of Overall Impacts

Like previously discussed indices, the few scores on the positive end of the Total Impacts Index could be explained by those students who stated in the open-ended question and in the focus group discussion that the occurrence of microaggressions in class gave them the opportunity to speak up and attempt to create a more positive learning experience out of the situation. The positive scores shown in Figure 5 represent far fewer students than the negative scores and should not be used to justify the occurrence of microaggressions in class. Although some

students may encourage the discussion of MAs and gain from opportunity to speak up to peers and professors, it is not the responsibility of the targeted students to initiate or even participate in these discussions. As explain by Smith et al. (2007), MAs can result in “racial battle fatigue,” a term for the accumulation of exhaustion, stress, frustration, and isolation stemming from experiences with racism.

Bivariate Analysis

We conducted a Mann-Whitney U-test to compare the scores of students of color and white students on indices measuring the impacts of microaggressions (see Table 1 for index scores; see Table 2 in Appendix A for fuller information). The mean scores of students of color was significantly lower than the mean scores of white students on psycho-emotional well-being ($u=2387.5$, $p<.005$), internal impacts ($u=5132$, $p<.05$), and overall impacts ($u=44.0$, $p<.05$). We did not find a statistically significant relationship between academic impacts and race/ethnicity. We did not test relationships with professors or peers because only students who had been targeted by a microaggression were directed to answer questions relating to social impacts. White students cannot be targeted by racial microaggressions as defined in the scholarly literature because they hold structural racialized power.

Table 1. Negative Impacts and Race/ethnicity

Mean index scores	Students of Color	White Students
Psychoemotional impacts	6.63	7.81
Academic impacts	9.80	10.07
Social impacts in relation to peers	7.14	NA*
Social impacts in relation to professors	5.35	NA*

*These questions only applied to students of color. There is no comparative data from white students.

To further explore the impacts of microaggressions on social relationships, we ran a Mann-Whitney U-test for our index of impacts on relationships with classmates and found a significant difference between the scores of students of color and those of white students. The gap in mean scores, with students of color at 7.14 and white students at 10.07 ($p<.05$) suggests that *relationships with classmates are more negatively impacted for students of color*. This echoes previous research findings that predominantly white classrooms provide a more positive experience for white students but can make minoritized students feel isolated and overlooked (Harwood 2015, Minikel-Lacocque 2013). This has direct implications for academic success, as this research indicates that students perform better in classroom environments where they feel supported by their peers.

In light of St. Olaf’s emphasis on a strong community identity, it is important to consider the sense of belonging item on the psycho-emotional index. *Students of color were significantly more likely than white students to report a decreased sense of belonging* in the St. Olaf community as a result of microaggressions ($u=3112.5$, $p<.005$). The relationship between a sense of belonging and the likelihood of attaining an undergraduate degree, as found in previous research (Harper 2013), should raise concerns about classrooms in which students of color are under-represented. Responses to qualitative questions on our survey indicate that students of color feel less able to intervene when witnessing a microaggression if they are the only student of color in the class or one of a few.

We conducted a Mann-Whitney U-test to compare the scores of students of color with those of white students on the index of impacts of microaggressions on academic well-being. There was no statistically significant difference between the mean score for students of color at 9.8 and that for white students, 10.07 ($p > .05$). This indicates that while microaggressions are harming students' of color social relationships with peers, *microaggressions negatively impact the academic well-being of all students regardless of race or ethnicity*. This finding departs from previous research that found that students of color are less able to productively participate in class and feel intellectually discredited by peers who commit microaggressions (Harwood 2015).

This discrepancy between expected and actual results indicates a need for further analysis. We broke the academic index into its specific components to ensure that aggregating the items was not hiding important relationships. We ran a Mann-Whitney U-test of race/ethnicity against the individual items of the academic well-being index, which include interest in participating in the class ($u=4705$, $p > .05$), interest in continuing to take the class ($u=4995$, $p > .05$), and comfort with asking the professor for help outside of class ($u=88$, $p > .05$). The lack of statistical significance here was again unexpected by the research team. It contradicts the experiences discussed in our focus groups and in previous literature on the subject, suggesting that the insignificance of these results may be a fault of the survey design or the researchers ourselves (Harper 2013, Harwood 2015). It should be noted that these items were answered by students who had been targeted by a racialized microaggression in the current semester, limiting the responses to 56 people. This small size limits our ability to accurately test the data for statistically significant relationships and indicates a need for more research focused specifically on the experiences of students of color.

Table 2. Target vs. Observer Frequencies

	MA Target, MA Observer only, and Neither	N	Asymptotic Significance (p-value)
<i>Psycho-emotional Impacts</i>	Target	63	.001
	Observer	193	
	Total	256	
<i>Academic Impacts</i>	Target	62	.719
	Observer	194	
	Total	256	
<i>Internal Impacts</i>	Target	62	.090
	Observer	193	
	Total	255	

Previous research has found more negative psycho-emotional, social, and academic impacts on those who are targets of microaggressions compared to those who observe microaggressions. We conducted a Mann-Whitney U-test to compare the scores on indices measuring psycho-emotional and academic well-being of students targeted by microaggressions and those who only observed microaggressions. Due to low cell counts, we excluded the social impacts from this analysis. The psycho-emotional index indicated significant differences ($u=4413.5$, $p < .005$); the academic well-being impacts were not significant ($u=5835.0$, $p > .719$) (see Table 2).

Interestingly, we found no statistically significant results when we compared the academic impacts of targets and observers ($p = 0.719$). Although students of color are more likely to be targets of racial microaggressions, the data indicate that academic well-being is negatively impacted regardless of one's role as a target or observer of microaggressions. Regardless of

whether targeted students' well-being is more negatively impacted than that of observers, the occurrence of racial microaggressions worsens the learning environment as a whole.

Student Objections to Identifying and Responding to Microaggressions

An alarming number of students utilized one of the open-ended questions to report not believing in the existence of microaggressions. Examples of these responses include:

It is sad that today we have created a society where whenever I meet someone regardless of color I ask where they are from but now it is considered a microaggression if I do this.

Personally, I have noticed a lot of belittling of white people, especially white men.

Honestly it's problematic how much this school focuses on race I think it's making race relations worse.

By structuring all your questions within a very far left leaning racial paradigm you've ensured you can't come up with any result other than that that "racism" is a major problem on campus.

This focus on microaggressions and sensitivity is hurting the community at large and pandering to ideologies and zealots

I feel as if a lot of this microaggression discussion and other such discussions simply move us steps backward in the battle against racism. The best way to fight racism would be to ignore it.

Microaggressions can be hurtful, but most of the time, they are exaggerated and not truly an issue.

This whole "microaggression"/diversity push is about identity politics, not education. It would be best for the school to quietly abandon it.

Haven't seen anything. Don't see racism on campus

I have literally never seen an instance of racism, "institutional racism," or microaggressions on this campus.

I've seen more microaggressions from people of color towards white people than the opposite. Stop trying to convince us that ALL white people are racist and that all people of color AREN'T racist. It's a two way street.

A friend indicated they didn't believe microaggressions existed and if they did, the targeted group was overly sensitive. They also felt the protests last semester were an overreaction and endangered themselves as a white student.

Racism won't be solved with a mindset focused on microaggressions, nor by throwing the word "racism" around. The word "racism" ends up lumping all white people with violent hate groups and no one will listen if this continues.

I have never seen a racist act between students or professors.

Microaggressions as a concept can and I believe is being taken too far.

Honestly, I don't think racism inside the classroom is the problem at St. Olaf.

I have not seen microaggressions in my experience on campus.

It should be noted that the responses listed here represent only some of these reactions expressed through the survey. They do not include students who share these beliefs but did not mention them in the open-ended question or did not take the survey. Some of our data could be skewed because we asked about the impacts of something that some students believe does not exist. These responses highlight a perspective of many students at St. Olaf that is detrimental to efforts to eliminate racism on campus. This view is not something that is shared by only a handful of participants. Instead it may be commonly held and needs to be addressed. More research should explore what portion of the campus community holds these views, how to make students aware of racism, and how to tangibly support students who are targeted by these views.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

Strengths

Despite the underrepresentation of students of color at St. Olaf as a whole, their response rate was higher than their percentage among the student population, strengthening our sample. Additionally, qualitative data from self-identified students of color helped contextualize the quantitative data and supported our inferential statistical analysis.

To reduce the likelihood of incorrect retrospective recall, we asked respondents to consider only events during the semester when the study was conducted in the survey. Although this did not capture the cumulative effect of microaggressions, qualitative survey items provided respondents the opportunity to expand upon previous items and add more detail and context.

During the spring semester of the prior academic year, student protests against racism gained significant momentum. This movement drew much attention to aspects of racism, including in classrooms, which many students had not been aware of earlier. This likely increased some students' abilities to recognize microaggressions when they occur and motivated them to participate in this study, given its relevance to campus issues.

Limitations

The grouping of students as either white or of color elides the empirically different experiences of various ethnic and racial groups. The student body comprising the target population was, at the time of this research, 18.6% domestic students of color and 9.8% international students. Although white students responded at a rate slightly lower than their proportion of population, our sample was still 65.8% white-identified. Grouping students as white and as of color allowed us to test statistical relationships, but it does not indicate a universal experience of students of color.. Similarly, grouping gender categories into a gender binary was necessary only to ensure the reliability of statistical tests and is not intended to devalue the experiences of non-binary people at St. Olaf who experience microaggressions.

Despite the research course's focus on recognizing and addressing microaggressions, some aspects of the study unintentionally inflicted microaggressions on the students invited to

participate. In particular, the subject of the email announcing “Help Oles! Win Prizes!” in reference to the incentives offered for students who would take the survey was insensitive to the seriousness of the topic at hand. Additionally, questions at the end of the survey seeking to assess the stress of completing the survey by comparing it activities such as giving blood appeared to minimize the harm of racism. The researchers responsible sincerely regret this insensitivity and hope that it does not impact the undertaking of future racism-related studies.

Conclusion

Our analyses indicate that microaggressions occurring in St. Olaf classrooms harm the psycho-emotional, social, and academic well-being of students who are targeted by MAs and who observe MAs. Our findings concur with previous literature establishing that students of color feel alienated and invalidated as legitimate members of the classroom by the perpetuation of racist stereotypes, beliefs, slurs, symbols, and ideas. Future research should focus on the experiences of students of color specifically for a richer understanding of microaggressions’ impacts. Additionally, because microaggressions are also committed outside the classroom, research should investigate extracurricular microaggressions. Lastly, research should also investigate how students who believe that racism is neither real nor harmful can learn otherwise and better support their peers.

Recommendations

Based on our findings, we have five recommendations for the college. These are intended to promote community dedication to anti-racist work and should be undertaken with ongoing input from anti-racist organizations and individual students of color.

1. Educate students, professors, and other college community members about microaggressions. Responses to open-ended questions on the survey indicated that many St. Olaf students believe that microaggressions do not exist and that students who feel targeted by them should “grow up,” “get over it” or “stop wasting everyone’s time.” In accordance with the STOGOal to “recognize and confront injustice and oppression,” the college should respond to the commonly held idea that microaggressions are not real and work to validate the experiences of students who are impacted by microaggressions in the classroom.
2. Following the StOGOal to “speak and act in ways that respect others and built community,” the college should encourage professors and students to establish personal relationships in classrooms in order to enable students who are targeted by and/or who observe MAs to respond to and process those microaggressions. This should be addressed at the beginning of each semester, to insure maximum opportunities for students to build open environments for discussion and listening. Following this recommendation would help the college to abide by its mission to “live in community with all people.”
3. Educate and train professors to reduce MAs enacted by themselves and by students in the classroom. Many responses to our focus group questions and to open-ended questions on our survey indicated that microaggressions are also enacted by professors. In order to reduce microaggressions in the classroom, professors should be educated through reading groups, workshops with and without students, and long-term departmental development about the implications of power dynamics and what they can do to avoid committing microaggressions themselves and to address MAs when they are committed by students.

4. Expand services to address students' psycho-emotional and academic well-being. In accordance with To Include Is to Excel's goal that education "raise no bars to particular groups of students," St. Olaf College should lower barriers to services such as those provided by Boe House and the Academic Support Center in order to increase support for students who are not diagnosed with a learning disability or mental illness but who suffer from the effects of racialized microaggressions.

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Appendix A

Table 1. Impacts of Microaggressions on Student Well-Being: Percentages and Frequencies

	Worsened a lot	Worsened somewhat	Didn't change	Improved somewhat	Improved a lot
My stress level	6.6% 17/259	50.6% 131/259	41.7% 108/259	0.8% 2/259	0.4% 1/259
My self-esteem	4.6% 12/261	25.3% 66/261	68.2% 178/261	0.8% 2/261	1.1% 3/261
My sense of belonging in the St. Olaf community	13.4% 35/261	37.9% 99/261	46.7% 122/261	1.1% 3/261	0.8% 2/261
My interest in participating in the class	14.5% 38/262	40.1% 105/262	39.7% 104/262	3.8% 10/262	1.9% 5/262
My ability to focus in class	8.4% 22/261	38.3% 100/261	50.2% 131/261	1.9% 5/261	1.1% 3/261
My motivation to study for the class	8.8% 23/262	21.4% 56/262	66.4% 174/262	2.7% 7/262	0.8% 2/262
My interest in continuing to take the class	10.7% 28/262	29.4% 77/262	57.6% 151/262	1.9% 5/262	0.4% 1/262
My classmates' inclusion of me in group work and small groups	5.6% 3/54	24.1% 13/54	66.7% 36/54	1.9% 1/54	1.9% 1/54
My desire to socialize with classmates before or after class	15.8% 9/57	42.1% 24/57	38.6% 22/57	1.8% 1/57	1.8% 1/57
My classmates' support for my contributions in class	5.3% 3/57	22.8% 13/57	63.2% 36/57	5.3% 3/57	3.5% 2/57
My professor's support for my contributions in class	3.4% 2/58	15.5% 9/58	67.2% 39/58	12.1% 7/58	1.7% 1/58
My comfort with asking my professor for help outside of class	17.5% 10/57	15.8% 9/57	52.6% 30/57	7.0% 4/57	7.0% 4/57

Table 2. Negative Impacts and Race/ethnicity, with standard deviation and respondent numbers

Mean index scores	Students of Color	White Students
Psychoemotional impacts - mean	6.63	7.81
Standard deviation	1.884	1.385
Number of respondents	59	165
Academic impacts	9.80	10.07
Standard deviation	2.815	2.394
Number of respondents	59	167
Social impacts in relation to peers	7.14	NA
Standard deviation	1.817	
Number of respondents	35	
Social impacts in relation to professors	5.35	NA
Standard deviation	1.620	
Number of respondents	37	

*These questions only applied to students of color. There is no comparative data from white students.

Appendix 2: Survey Questions

Questions about Psycho-Emotional Well-being (Index): Thinking about the racial microaggressions in your St. Olaf classes this semester, how have they affected the following aspects of your feelings and relationships? If you have been targeted, please base your answers on your reactions to being targeted. If you have NOT been targeted but have observed another student(s) be targeted, base your answers on your reactions to observing racial microaggression(s).

Questions:

- Question 1: My stress level
- Question 2: My self-esteem
- Question 3: My sense of belonging in the St. Olaf community
- Question 4: My interest in participating in the class
- Question 5: My ability to focus in class
- Question 6: My motivation to study for the class
- Question 7: My interest in continuing to take the class

Possible responses:

- Worsened a lot
- Worsened somewhat
- Didn't change
- Improved somewhat
- Improved a lot

Questions about classroom relationships (Index): If you were targeted by racial microaggression(s) in your St. Olaf classes this semester, how has this affected your classroom relationships?

Questions:

- Question 1: My classmates' inclusion of me in group work and small groups
- Question 2: My desire to socialize with classmates before or after class
- Question 3: My classmates' support for my contributions in class (such as them listening and paying attention to my comments)
- Question 4: My professor's support for my contributions in class (such as my professor calling on me and paying attention to my comments)
- Question 5: My comfort with asking my professor for help outside of class

Possible responses:

- Worsened a lot
- Worsened somewhat
- Didn't change
- Improved somewhat
- Improved a lot

Positionality on Microaggressions: Emphasis on who is enacting microaggression or who is observing them.

Question: Have you been a target or observer of any racial microaggressions in your classes this semester?

Possible responses:

- I have been a target.
- I have been an observer.
- I have been BOTH a target and an observer.
- I have been NEITHER a target nor an observer.

Open-ended Question: If you have engaged in (enacted or perpetrated) a racial microaggression in a class this semester, how has the experience impacted you?