Examining The Microaggression and Microaffirmation Experiences of First Generation College Students

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Recent events on campuses around the United States demonstrate continued diversity challenges faced by predominately White colleges and universities. Campus relations among students, faculty, and staff across race, class, and gender are a challenge that university leaders must address head-on if institutions are going to successfully fulfill their diversity mission. One way for colleges and universities to begin to improve campus relations, and support the success of its diverse student body, is to understand student perceptions of microaggressions and microaffirmations on college campuses.

Microaggressions, a form of everyday discrimination, are subtle verbal and nonverbal assaults against persons - such as racial minorities, women, or individuals of low socioeconomic status - by one or more persons who embrace group superiority and propose group inferiority (Sue et al., 2007). Microaggressions are manifested in three areas: microassaults (explicit derogations), microinsults (demeaning a person’s background or identity), and microinvalidation (invalidating or discrediting an individual’s experiences with discrimination). Evidence suggests that microaggressions have adverse mental health, physical health, and academic consequences, and impede undergraduate student persistence through college (Panter, Daye, Allen, Wightman, & Deo, 2008; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). In contrast, microaffirmations are small acts that foster inclusion, comfort, and support for individuals who feel unwelcomed or invisible in an environment (Rowe, 2008). Higher education scholars emphasize the importance of incorporating microaffirmations into academic advising practices in order to positively support college student persistence and completion (Powell, Demetriou, & Fisher, 2013). However, little research has explored experiences of microaggression and microaffirmation among first generation college students (FGCS), whose makeup often include individuals from racial minority groups and low socioeconomic backgrounds.

This study investigated microaggressions and microaffirmations among FGCS at a predominately White, public university. Respondents were 452 FGCS who completed an online survey that assessed student demographic characteristics and microaggression and microaffirmation items from the Everyday Discrimination Scale (EDS) (Stucky et al., 2011). Item response and factor analysis were performed to examine psychometric properties of the EDS. Analyses of variance assessed whether student reports of microaggressions and microaffirmations differed by demographic characteristics, including race, gender, and transfer.
status (a proxy for SES).

The study findings showed a main effect of being African American on overall *microaggressions* experienced by FGCS’ $F(1,530)= 6.426, p = .012, \eta^2_p = .015$. Gender had a small, but significant main effect on overall microaggressions experienced by FGCS $F(1,382)=4.63, p = .032, \eta^2_p = .011$. Results also indicated a main effect of being a transfer student on overall *microaffirmations* experienced by FGCS $F(1,1344)= 16.40, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .036$.

Findings suggest understanding experiences of microaggressions and microaffirmations among FGCS who are African American or transfer students is an important consideration for college leaders. Thus, these findings can inform the implementation of diversity efforts designed to create inclusive campus climates. Future efforts should consider how students, faculty, and staff cohesively, and with humility, acknowledge, welcome, and support the experiences of FGCS, particularly those who identify as African American or transfer students.

**References**


