Examining First-Generation College Student Lived Experiences With Microaggressions and Microaffirmations at a Predominantly White Public Research University

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Objectives: Studies have described the experiences of racial microaggressions in everyday life and on college campuses, yet prior research has not explored how microaggressions and microaffirmations are experienced by students who are first in their family to attend college. Method: This qualitative investigation of 296 open-ended survey responses described the lived experiences of first-generation college students at a large, public, predominately White institution. Results: Students experienced microaggressions in the form microinsults, microassaults, and microinvalidations, and microaffirmations in the form of microsupports, microcompliments, and microvalidations on campus. Conclusions: Study implications include the development and implementation of regular positive and intentional communications by faculty, staff, and peers on college campuses.

Keywords: first-generation college students, microaggression, microaffirmation, lived experience

Everyday discrimination is daily and chronic experiences of unfair treatment due to a person’s racial and gender identity (Essed, 1991; Williams, Yu, Jackson, & Anderson, 1997). Everyday discrimination can occur in workplace (Colella, Hebl, & King, 2017), law enforcement (English et al., 2017), and educational settings (Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003), and adversely affect individual mental health, physical health, and stress (Lewis et al., 2006; Panter, Daye, Allen, Wightman, & Deo, 2008; Perez & Fortuna, 2008; Wong et al., 2003). Microaggressions are a form of everyday discrimination that describes innocuous and explicit discriminatory communications to persons from racially and socioeconomically marginalized groups (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Wills, 1977; Sue, Buccheri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2009). Microaggressions are intentional or unintentional brief exchanges that communicate hostile, derogatory, negative slights and insults that result in harmful or unpleasant psychological influence on an individual or group (Sue, 2010; Sue et al., 2007). Individuals marginalized by race, gender, sexual orientation, civic beliefs, disability status, job title, or other identities can encounter microaggressions (Chan & Latzman, 2015; Dávila, 2015; Domingue, 2015; Sue, 2010; Woodford, Howell, Kulick, & Silverschzan, 2013; Young, Anderson, & Stewart, 2015). Microaggressions have three subdimensions microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidation (Sue et al., 2007). Microassaults are conscious and deliberate derogatory and discriminatory communications and actions meant to hurt and demean a person from a marginalized group. Microinsults are communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity demeaning a person’s heritage or identity. Microinvalidations are communications that exclude, negate, or nullify experiential reality of a person from a marginalization group.

With incidences of overt racism and discrimination remaining prevalent at colleges and universities (Larimer, 2017), understanding how undergraduate students experience microaggressions are of great interest among higher education leaders. Helping incoming students identify microaggressions during summer orientation is one strategy some colleges are implementing to contend with everyday discrimination (Saul, 2016). Such institutional responses demonstrate that failing to address directly microaggressions leaves students from historically underrepresented backgrounds vulnerable to discriminatory experiences on college campuses (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999; Vega, 2014). Racial-ethnic minority college students experience racial microaggressions in the form of written or verbal racial jokes and racial slurs, excessive surveillance based on racial stereotypes, denial and minimization of ethnic identity and experiences in college, being questioned while in a position of authority, and pathologizing interethnic cultural differences and communication styles (Blume, Lovato, Thyken, & Denny, 2012; Cerezo, Lyda, Beristainos, Enriquez, & Connor, 2013; Domingue, 2015; Harper et al., 2011; Harwood, Hunt, Mendenhall, & Lewis, 2012; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007).
The effects of microaggressions on racial-ethnic minority college students’ psychological and academic outcomes are well understood (Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009). However, microaggressions experienced by individuals whose identity is informed by their socioeconomic background, such as first-generation college students (FGCS), has been not explored in the research literature. Without a family history of postsecondary education, FGCS face unique challenges in their college transition, retention, and graduation compared with their non-FGCS counterparts. These difficulties include academic preparation, knowledge about college life, lower financial support, and balancing academic and family responsibilities and expectations (Choy, 2001; Harper & Quaye, 2009; Hawley & Harris, 2005; Hurtado, 2007; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Lowery-Hart, & Pacheco, 2011; Pascarella, Pierson, Woniak, & Tereznitz, 2004; Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nuñez, 2001). These circumstances may affect microaggressions if norms, policies, and practices at PWIs do not reflect the identities and experiences of underrepresented students who identify as an FGCS.

**Microaggressions**

Microaggressions are intentional or unintentional brief exchanges that communicate hostile, derogatory, negative slights and insults that result in harmful or unpleasant psychological influence on an individual or group (Sue, 2010; Sue et al., 2007). Microaggressions subtly demean or invalidate a person’s identity, experiences, and historical background and are conveyed in derogatory verbal, behavioral, and environmental undertones (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008; Sue et al., 2007). They are interpreted by individuals as if they do not belong to a setting or group, are intellectually inferior, cannot be trusted, and often adhere to racial stereotypes. The subtlly of microaggressions may prompt a person to question their belief of whether they occurred because of their race, socioeconomic status, or sexual orientation; thus, requiring them to process with trusted others about whether they experienced a microaggression.

Critical race theory (CRT) is used by scholars to describe racial microaggressions experienced by racial-ethnic students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs; Harper et al., 2011; Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano et al., 2000). CRT’s interdisciplinary framework elucidates the intersection of race and class and how it informs educational inequality and inequity for marginalized groups in the United States through shared social norms, cultural norms, and implementation of policies and practices (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; L. Patton, 2016). Whiteness as property, or the disposition and preservation of legal rights and policies that result in privileges and advantages for Whites, drive the implementation of norms, procedures, and practices in social contexts (Harris, 1993). Whiteness as property consists of: (a) the right to pass along rights and privileges to heirs (i.e., disposition); (b) the right for Whites to use Whiteness as they see fit with protection by the law (i.e., use and enjoyment); (c) the right to protection of good reputation and elevated social status (i.e., status and property); and (d) the right to decide who is protected under the law (i.e., exclude; Harris, 1993). Intersectionality, or the combination of race, sex, class, sexual orientation, or national identities, is another dimension of CRT to examine how individuals negotiate and process contexts driven by Whiteness as property (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Intersectionality within CRT emphasizes an inter-group analysis of how individuals process whiteness as property because of the variation in one’s attitudes toward the policies, practices, and norms of a particular social context (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). For our study, CRT is an essential framework for examining FGCS experiences at a predominantly white institution because FGCS are more likely than non-FGCS to be racial-ethnic minority students at 4-year college and universities (Choy, 2001; Hurtado, 2007; Saenz et al., 2007). Moreover, FGCS are more likely to have intersecting racial, socioeconomic, and gender identities and are denied equal collegiate experiences and supports that facilitate college degree attainment compared with their non-FGCS counterparts (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005).

In PWIs, marginalized groups have to negotiate campus environments that are driven by White cultural and social norms, policies, and practices that can shape their college experience (Cabrera, 2014). Racial minority and low-income students at PWIs have difficulty identifying specific spaces on campus where their cultural heritage is present and valued. For instance, in Harper and Hurtado’s (2007) racial climate study, racial-ethnic minority students attending PWIs shared that the academic standards, social activities, and cultural heritage privileged Whites and non-FGCS students over those from racial-ethnic and low-income backgrounds. Negotiating these spaces leaves students vulnerable to microaggressions if norms, policies, and practices at PWIs do not revere the identities and experiences of racial-ethnic students or FGCS.

Studies have identified students encounter racial microaggressions at PWIs in the form of racial stereotypes, negative assumptions of academic merit, social alienation, denial, and minimization of identity and racialized experiences in college (Blume et al., 2012; Cerezo et al., 2013; Domingue, 2015; Harper et al., 2011; Harwood et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2007). According to Sue et al. (2007) microaggressions consist of overt and covert messages of discrimination in the form: (a) microinsults, (b) microassaults, and (c) microinvalidations. Microinsults are subtle communications that demean a person’s heritage or identity as a member of a marginalized group. Microassaults are intentional communications conveyed in small or private settings that are explicitly meant to hurt an individual belonging to a marginalized group. Microinvalidations nullify or diminish the experience, thoughts, or feelings of a member of a marginalized group. Although research provides insight into how racial microaggressions as a global category affect the lives of college students, not much is known about the how microaggressions, and its subdimensions, are experienced
by FGCS. Thus, we purposed to describe how FGCS experienced microaggressions communicated from faculty, university staff, peers, and others at a PWI.

**Microaffirmations**

Less commonly discussed are subtle messages related to affirmation. To understand affirming communications that may emotionally and strategically support first-generation college students on campus, we examined microaffirmations or intentional or unintentional exchanges that convey inclusion, support, and appreciation to individuals or groups who may feel unwelcome or invisible in an environment (Powell, Demetriou, & Fisher, 2013; Rowe, 2008). Affirmation, in general, is essential because the academic and social experiences provided at colleges and universities enable students to explore, develop, and affirm their racial-ethnic and socioeconomic identity and a sense of belonging to one’s social group (Phinney, 1992).

Studies have shown high school and college students with high levels of identity affirmation are more likely to have: (a) higher self-esteem, self-concept, and academic achievement; (b) fewer mental health problems; and (c) positively cope with and respond to everyday discrimination (Ghavami, Fingerhut, Peplau, Grant, & Wittig, 2011; Umaña-Taylor, Vargas-Chanes, García, & Gonzales-Backen, 2008).

This previous research discusses how affirmations provide a fruitful and positive college experience for students from marginalized groups and promote identity and psychosocial well-being. A taxonomy of messages affirming the uniqueness and experiences of marginalized groups in nuanced dimensions is not currently available in the research literature. Informed by the definitions in Sue et al. (2007) microaggressions taxonomy, we conceptualized a taxonomy of microaffirmations to capture overt and covert messages from faculty, staff, and peers, that affirm the academic success, personal success, and identities of first-generation college students.

Following Sue et al. (2007) for positive behaviors, we propose microaffirmations consist of microcompliments, microsupports, and microvalidations. Microcompliments are subtle communications implying praise, admiration, or respect for an individual’s identity or heritage. Microcompliments suggest that the person giving the compliment perceives that the recipient possesses something of high value, including uniqueness or experiences. Microsupports are intentional communications that provide feedback and scaffold resources with the intention of supporting an individual who may feel unwelcome or invisible in an environment. Examples of microsupport include a person who actively listens, and scaffold resources to students.

**Method**

**Data Collection Procedures**

Our institution’s review board approved this study. At the time of the study, we obtained a list of enrolled undergraduate first-generation college students from the university registrar’s office. FGCS were identified based on the definition of having either parent or guardian not receiving a 4-year degree. This list was used to create a study panel using Qualtrics online survey software to distribute to 3,453 first-generation college students enrolled at a highly selective, public research university in the southeastern United States. Students were recruited by e-mail and consented to participate in the study online. Of the 3,453 FGCS recruited, 524 students provided study consent and completed survey items asking them about their undergraduate FGCS experiences with microaggressions and microaffirmations.

**Measures and Study Design**

Students completed demographic items followed by a 10-item modified version of the Everyday Discrimination Scale (Stuck et al., 2011; with affirmation items added). After completing these questions, each participant was randomly assigned to one of four sets of qualitative prompts and were asked to describe: (a) an experience of microinsult and a microcompliment (n = 114); (b) an experience of a microassault and a microsupport (n = 116); (c) an experience of a microinvalidation and microvalidation (n = 115); and (d) an experience of a microaggression or a microaffirmation (n = 115). This design was selected to reduce respondent burden and to ensure that the study addressed a range of types of microaggressions and microaffirmations. Within each set of prompts, we counterbalanced the valence so that half of the participants first received the positive example prompt and half first received the negative example prompt.

Each open-ended prompt (see Table 1) asked students to think about a time in which they have experienced a type of microaggression or microaffirmation in their everyday life. Definitions of a type of microaggression or microaffirmation a person may experience due to being a FGCS were given to survey respondents. After, students were asked to provide an example of microaffirmation and microaggression that they experienced due to their identity as a FGCS. Students were more likely to provide an example for positive prompts (microcompliment = 41.2%; microsupport = 30.2%; microvalidation = 40.0%; microaffirmation = 38.3%) compared with negative prompts (microinsult = 30.7%; microassault = 6.9%; microinvalidation = 30.2%; microaggression = 17.4%). Given our study’s purpose, we analyzed responses to these open-ended questions, which generated 296 coded instances in which students described having experienced a microaggression and microaffirmation.

**Study Participants**

The average age of students who took the survey was 22.9 years (SD = 4.32). Most participants were female (70%), White/Caucasian (60%), identified as a FGCS (94%), and did not transfer from another institution (73%). Table 2 displays the demographic characteristics of students who completed the survey. We also con-
Table 1
Questions and Probes of Microaggressions and Microaffirmations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Microaggression</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Probe</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Microinvalidation</td>
<td>Sometimes people overtly act or make verbal remarks (consciously or unconsciously) about a first-generation college student that conveys rudeness, insensitivity, or dehumanizes one's background. If this happened to you, can you provide a specific example of this? If never happened, write &quot;no example&quot; in the space.</td>
<td>When you write, you do not need to provide actual names, unless you are comfortable doing so. We appreciate as much detail as you can provide! For example, what were the circumstances, what happened, who was present, who acted in a particular way, how did you feel, and how was it resolved?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microassault</td>
<td>Sometimes people overtly act or make verbal or nonverbal attacks (consciously) toward a first-generation college student that are meant to harm through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions. If this happened to you, can you provide a specific example of this? If never happened, write &quot;no example&quot; in the space.</td>
<td>When you write, you do not need to provide actual names, unless you are comfortable doing so. We appreciate as much detail as you can provide! For example, what were the circumstances, what happened, who was present, who acted in a particular way, how did you feel, and how was it resolved?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microaffirmation</td>
<td>Sometimes the [name of college]—as an institution—conveys a commonplace form of support related to being a first-generation college student, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicates kind, empowering, or positive gestures and compliments. If this happened to you, can you provide a specific example of this? If never happened, write &quot;no example&quot; in the space.</td>
<td>When you write, you do not need to provide actual names, unless you are comfortable doing so. We appreciate as much detail as you can provide! For example, what were the circumstances, what happened, who was present, who acted in a particular way, how did you feel, and how was it resolved?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microcompliment</td>
<td>Sometimes people act or make verbal remarks (often unconscious) about a first-generation college student that conveys support, sensitivity, and compliments one's background. If this happened to you, can you provide a specific example of this? If never happened, write &quot;no example&quot; in the space.</td>
<td>When you write, you do not need to provide actual names, unless you are comfortable doing so. We appreciate as much detail as you can provide! For example, what were the circumstances, what happened, who was present, who acted in a particular way, how did you feel, and how was it resolved?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microsupport</td>
<td>Sometimes people overtly act or make verbal or nonverbal remarks (consciously or unconsciously) about a first-generation college student that are meant to support with intentional, positive, and inclusive behaviors. If this happened to you, can you provide a specific example of this? If never happened, write &quot;no example&quot; in the space.</td>
<td>When you write, you do not need to provide actual names, unless you are comfortable doing so. We appreciate as much detail as you can provide! For example, what were the circumstances, what happened, who was present, who acted in a particular way, how did you feel, and how was it resolved?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microinvalidation</td>
<td>Sometimes people overtly act or make verbal remarks (often unconscious) about a first-generation college student that excludes, negates, or nullifies one's psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality. If this happened to you, can you provide a specific example of this? If never happened, write &quot;no example&quot; in the space.</td>
<td>When you write, you do not need to provide actual names, unless you are comfortable doing so. We appreciate as much detail as you can provide! For example, what were the circumstances, what happened, who was present, who acted in a particular way, how did you feel, and how was it resolved?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Institutional Characteristics

This study occurred at a highly selective, public research university in the southeastern United States. During the academic year we conducted this study, 18,415 undergraduate students were enrolled full-time. Fifty-eight percent were women, 64% were White, 9% Asian, 8% Black or African American, and 7% Hispanic (UNC Office of Institutional Research & Assessment, 2017). Additionally, 5% of students reported having more than one racial background, 5% race and ethnicity were unknown, 1% American Indian or Alaskan Native, less than 1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (UNC Office of Institutional Research & Assessment, 2017). Twenty percent of undergraduate students were the first in their family to go college (UNC Office of Institutional Research & Assessment, 2017). Study participants were regarded as an...
FGCS if they came from a family in which neither parent has earned a 4-year undergraduate degree. Among undergraduate FGCS enrolled, 55% received a federal Pell grant, and 63% were female. Additionally, out of the FGCS who reported their race or ethnicity, 52% were White, 15% were Black or African American, 14% Latino, 16% Asian or Pacific Islander, 1% American Indian or Alaskan Native, and 2% race and ethnicity was unknown (UNC Office of Institutional Research & Assessment, 2017).

**Coding Procedures**

Because the purpose of this study was to describe FGCS’ experiences with microaggressions and microaffirmations within existing theoretical frameworks, we used an a priori coding approach such that we established categories before coding data (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). A priori coding was used to capture FGCS experiences with types of microaggressions and microaffirmations. Microaggression a priori codes were aligned with Sue et al.’s (2007) microaggression taxonomy consisting of microinsult, microassault, and microinvalidation. The same alignment was used with Rowe’s definition of a microaffirmation. However, microaffirmation a priori codes for microsupport, microcompliment, and microvalidation were developed and adapted Sue et al.’s (2007) taxonomy of microaggressions. Table 3 displays a priori codes and their definition used in our coding process. Definitions of our a priori codes came from the open-ended survey prompts where we asked students to describe a type of microaggression or microaffirmation experienced in their everyday life. Before coding, four trained researchers (graduate-level, doctoral-level) read the entire data set to develop a holistic appreciation of student responses to our open-ended questions. After, each researcher read through the data again with an a priori coding approach to identify types of microaggressions and microaffirmations experienced by study participants. Each researcher was responsible for assigning an a priori code of a type of microaffirmation or a type of microaggression experienced by FGCS study participants. For example, one researcher was assigned to code microinvalidation and microcompliment, whereas another researcher coded for microsupport and microvalidation. Each researcher engaged in individual memoing, or the process of recording notes and reflections by researchers (Creswell, 2013) to evaluate the case or difficulty of assigning a priori code to data, note general thoughts and reflections on the coding process, and inform thoughtful conversations with the entire research team throughout the coding process. Table 4 shows the frequency and percentage of coded students experiences with types of microaggressions and microaffirmations based on our a priori codes. Finally, we identified alternative codes from students’ descriptions of their college experience as an FGCS on campus. We found seven categories describing the college experience of study participants and consisted of: challenge, family, finances, transfer, resources, and FGCS status is not an issue and sense of belonging. However, given the scope of our study, findings from these categories are not reported.

### Table 2

*Demographic Characteristics by Percentage (N = 524)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender (n = 518)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>30 (157)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>70 (361)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/ethnic background (n = 503)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American/Black</td>
<td>12 (61)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiracial/multiethnic</td>
<td>6 (29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White/Caucasian</td>
<td>60 (303)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>9 (45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>12 (60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-generation college student (n = 501)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>94 (470)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>6 (31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfer status (n = 500)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfer student</td>
<td>21 (107)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nontransfer student</td>
<td>79 (393)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year in school (n = 517)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First year</td>
<td>22 (116)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>22 (114)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>28 (142)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>25 (131)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3 (14)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3

*Microaggression and Microaffirmation A Priori Codes and Definitions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A priori code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Microaggression</td>
<td>Subtle demeaning of an individual’s identity especially racial identity (Sue et al., 2007); e.g., a White instructor fails to acknowledge students of color in the classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microinsult</td>
<td>Explicit, intentional communication in a small or private setting meant to hurt an individual belonging to a racial minority group; such communications are most likely conscious and deliberate (Sue et al., 2007); e.g., a student uses racial epithets during daily conversation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microassault</td>
<td>Communication nullifying or diminishing the experience, thoughts, or feeling or a person of color (Sue et al., 2007); e.g., an advisor tells a black student “I don’t see color;” this negates the student’s racial experience (variation on Helms (1992) example) assumptions made/not acknowledging differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microinvalidation</td>
<td>Subtle communication implying praise, admiration, or respect; e.g., an instructor tells a student, “I am glad you are here”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microcompliment</td>
<td>Explicit, intentional communication providing feedback, scaffolding, or resources intended to support an individual who may feel unwelcome or invisible in an environment; e.g., active listening and eye contact; expressing interest and attention, providing referrals or academic/personal strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microsupport</td>
<td>Communication appreciating the experience, thoughts, or feelings of an individual who may feel unwelcome or invisible in an environment; e.g., verbally affirming student’s feelings: “I see how frustrating this is” or “I appreciate how difficult this is”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4

Frequency and Percentage of Coded Types of Microaggression and Microaffirmation Experienced by of First-Generation College Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Microaggression</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Microassault (n = 99)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microassault</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microinsult</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microinvalidation</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microaffirmations (n = 83)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microsupport</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microvalidation</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microcompliment</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The table above reflects the number of cases whose descriptions were coded into a priori categories of microaggressions and microaffirmations. Cases not reported were students who described not wanting their FGCS to be known by others or acknowledged the existence of other identities that might have led to encounters with microaggressions and microaffirmations.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

Credibility and trustworthiness were established using negative case analysis, external review, and external raters. Negative case analysis, the process of searching for and examining negative cases, was applied (Creswell, 2008; M. Patton, 2002). All identified negative cases were reviewed to see whether themes or data patterns needed to be broadened or revised. We also conducted an external review. Research collaborators from outside of the study analysis team reviewed and evaluated the merits of how we assigned student descriptions of microaffirmation and microaggression experiences from our open-ended survey prompts to our a priori definitions and codes. During this process, we performed a formal interrater reliability analysis to observe the average variance of ratings given across external raters and determine their consistency with our a priori codes. Four independent raters were recruited based on their qualitative methodological expertise as well as professional expertise working with FGCS on campus. Each rater attended a training session on the different forms of microaggressions, microaffirmations, and the coding process. The four external raters each coded 50 segments of chunked data.

Results

External raters were in very high agreement in their assignments of microaggressions and microaffirmations to student descriptions, as measured by their intraclass correlation (ICC; two-way random effect = .95). Their agreement was lower when distinguishing among a priori codes associated with students’ negative experiences with microinsult, microinvalidation, and microassault (ICC = .51). Their agreement was higher for raters’ judgments about a priori codes for microcompliments, microvalidations, and microsupports (ICC = .70). The following sections provide descriptions of students’ experiences with microaggressions and microaffirmations and their subforms from faculty, university staff, peers, and others on campus. We use pseudonyms to protect the identity of study participants.

Microaggressions

FGCS in our study provided examples of microaggressions experienced from persons within and outside of university contexts. Table 5 displays the emerging themes centered on the types of microaggressions experienced and the interpersonal interactions in which these encounters occurred. Study participants reported experiencing microinvalidations and microinsults from university faculty or an adult who is not a faculty member, whereas students experienced microassaults from peers.

Microinvalidations

Two microinvalidation themes surfaced regarding communications that nullified or diminished their experience, thoughts, or feelings about being an FGCS on campus. Students described interactions that made them feel invalidated based on assumptions about the educational background and college experiences of their parents and being in a campus culture that is unwelcoming to students from diverse backgrounds.

Parental education background and college experience. Participants believed faculty, staff, or peers made assumptions about their parents’ educational and occupational background. Maribelle, a senior transfer student shared: “Most people (including faculty and staff) make assumptions that everyone has had the same level of privilege growing up—which isn’t true at all.” Invalidation also occurred when participants felt uncomfortable answering questions asking them to share their parents’ college and professional background during a casual group conversation. Sienna, an undergraduate senior, stated: “There are often assumed questions asked in dialogue to start conversations that may be uncomfortable for me to respond to. For example, ‘Where did your parents go to college?’ or, ‘Are your parents [UNIVERSITY] alum, too?’” Other students felt dismissed when they could not relate to peers about the college experiences of their parents. Adriana, a sophomore, shared: “A lot of times my friends will say things like ‘It was different back when our parents were in college because . . .’ without realizing that nothing she is about to say applies to me.” Finally, Keiko, a sophomore, described feeling dismissed in conversations with friends and their family members because of their first-generation status and assumptions about the academic preparation of individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

I often feel like people do not take me as seriously as they would if I came from a wealthier and more educated family. When I was having dinner with some of my friends and their parents, and a friend’s father was asking about where I went to high school. I went to an early college, and he was curious about how it worked. As I was trying to explain the structure, a friend of mine (whose family is middle-class and educated), said that in her hometown, the only people who went to the early local college were people who were either too stupid to go on to a real university or people who were too poor to afford an education. I tried to explain that I had chosen my high school not because I didn’t plan on going to a 4-year university, but because I thought it would prepare me for a university environment. But by then I had already been humiliated, and everyone was suddenly aware of the fact that my family is poor and I am a first-generation student.

Unwelcoming campus culture for students from diverse backgrounds. Anna, a junior shared her experience with microinvalidation and her assessment of how the university failed to
support and welcome students from different backgrounds. Anna had difficulty navigating campus and felt unsupported by faculty and staff when expressing personal and academic challenges she was having on campus.

**AQ: 10**

I was completely clueless when I came to [UNIVERSITY]. This includes what a dining meal entails and how much I would need, how dorm situations work, how classes work and how they differ from high school, and how to manage my time and extra activities in a way that would be beneficial for me. I struggled and felt extremely alone in my experience, and few professors or faculty reached out to me when it was clear I was struggling, and a few professors were actually hostile when I tried to tell them about my background and issues.

**Microinsults**

The condescension in the domain of assumptions about intellect was inherent in the microaggressions experienced by study participants. Specifically, study participants described communications that demeaned the identities of FGCS and questioned their academic merit. These microinsults came from a university faculty member or an academic advisor.

**Demeaning identity.** Students experienced microinsults when they received academic and career guidance from others. Ariana, a first-year student, shared how low expectations were conveyed based on her first-generation status while receiving career advice: “During an advising appointment, the advisor made me feel unrealistic, and noncapable to study science because I was struggling. He suggested I should major in Spanish. (I already speak Spanish [sic]). I didn’t confront his comments because I felt hurt.”

**Parent college knowledge.** “I was on the phone with my father talking about one of my recitations. He didn’t understand the concept or what a TA is. So I was explaining to him how large lectures and recitations function. One of my suitemates overheard and said, rather loudly, ‘Wait, how do your parents not even know what a recitation is?’”

**Unwelcoming campus culture.** “I was completely clueless when I came to college. I struggled and felt extremely alone and few faculty reached out to me when it was clear I was struggling, and some were actually hostile when I tried to tell them about my background and issues.”
ment his accomplishments despite the limited educational background of his parents.

In my journalism class, we had to write a profile on ourselves and my professors implied that I am achieving something that my parents didn’t have the tenacity to achieve. I corrected him by saying that my parents are successful and my father is a high-ranked veteran who has been tenacious throughout his career.

Will, a senior transfer student, shared how others complimented his success as an FGCS, and how the compliments were immediately followed up by comments regarding his accent.

Often, people comment about how brave, smart, and/or incredible it is that I’m a first-generation college student because I didn’t have someone to guide me through the college process. To a non-first-generation student, it may sound like a good comment, but it is often said in a patronizing tone as if they feel sorry for us. Often the comment is preceded or followed by the second-most common comment, “you speak English so well. You do not even have an accent.” Why should we have an accent? Why is it such a great accomplishment to have equal skills to the majority of students?

**Academic merit.** Students described exchanges from peers that questioned their intellect and academic merit for admission to the university. Michael, a junior, explained insinuating subtle communications regarding FGCS value and intelligence: “People have often insinuated that people [FGCS] who have not received a college degree are inherently less valuable or intelligent.” Students encountered messages regarding their academic merit and FGCS racial identity. Edna, a junior, experienced comments that inferred that FGCS were not admitted to college based on academic merit: “I was told that the only reason I made it to [UNIVERSITY] was because of my race and the fact that I was first-generation.”

Likewise, Oliva, a first-year student, stated: “They also make it sound like the only reason I got into [UNIVERSITY] is because I am a first-generation Hispanic.” Joy, a senior, felt assumptions about her intellect and academic merit discredited her educational effort and success before and during her undergraduate experience.

Many times people have referred to the fact that I am Native American and a first-generation college student from a low-income family as the only reason I got into [UNIVERSITY]—discrediting all of the academic and extracurricular work I did to get here. It does reaffirm my thoughts that I am inferior for being each of these things.

**Microassaults**

Condescension about the “inferior intellect” of FGCS was also inherent in students’ descriptions of microassaults and was experienced in two themes: (a) the academic preparedness of FGCS, and (b) the college degree attainment and knowledge of parents.

**Academic preparation.** Inferior intelligence and lack of academic preparation of FGCS were microassaults experienced by study participants during conversations with roommates. Chris, a junior, described living with a roommate who treated him with condescension because he was attending school in the southeast United States.

The entire year, my roommate would treat me with condescension and as if I was unable to achieve his level of intelligence. At one point in my first year, I was having a discussion with my roommate about my accent. He openly admitted during the conversation that his mother had told him ‘not to come back with a southern accent.’ She had told him it would make him sound stupid and less likely to get a job due to the slow dialect of the south. He didn’t stop there, however, he admitted to completely agreeing with her and began to make a string of derogatory remarks about my accent. He even indirectly noted the fact that I was a first-generation college student and added that to his attack.

Kim, a first-year student, described having a conversation about the difficulty of receiving academic support from her parents and her academic accomplishments being dismissed by her roommate.

I was talking to my roommate about my mom never being able to help me with my homework or studies since the third grade, and I didn’t live with my dad, so he was unavailable to help either, and she kind of scoffed at the idea that I managed a 4.0 in high school, making my high school seem below hers. Or that being a first generation student was the reason I received financial aid. It just hurts me to see how inconsiderate people are about others’ situations that they clearly do not understand.

**Parent college degree attainment and college knowledge.** Students described messages patronizing the college degree attainment and college knowledge of parents. Kelly shared how others placed blame on family members for the challenges she faces as an FGCS. “On several occasions, people have said it was my family’s fault that they did not get a higher education and that I am feeling the consequences.” Kathy, a senior transfer student, observed peers patronizing the educational background of others through a game played at a party:

One time I was at a party where a group of people jokingly talked about how they played a game called “college or no college,” implying that they judge people they see on the streets as to whether or not they went to college or not. It was very insulting and elitist.

Adriana, a sophomore, described her roommate’s reaction to a discussion she had with her father about her recitation.

The other day I was on the phone with my father talking about one of my recitations. He didn’t understand the concept of recitation outside of lecture, or what a TA is, so I was explaining to him how large lectures and recitations function. One of my suitemates overheard and said, rather loudly, “Wait, how do your parents not even know what a recitation is?”

**Microaffirmations**

Table 6 shows the emerging themes centered on the types of microaffirmations experienced by study participants. Students experienced microsupport from university faculty or adult nonfaculty members and microcompliments and microvalidations from an adult nonfaculty member or peer.

**Microsupports**

Microsupports were experienced by FGCS when (a) they felt personally supported by faculty, (b) university staff actively listened and showed genuine interest in their college experience, and (c) they received affirming messages from professors about their college experience as an FGCS on campus.

**Personalized support.** FGCS described receiving personalized support from faculty when resources were scaffolded to show
they cared and believed in them as students and as individuals. Students described receiving explicit affirming messages in formal courses and campus programs which demonstrated awareness of the unique experiences of FGCS in a non patronizing way. Victor described attending a meeting in which a professor shared her philosophy about using pedagogy to support FGCS:

Dr. H. was a giving a presentation on study habits for success in college. She used her own personal data, taken from her classes to show how she was making changes to her teaching styles to better support first-generation students. I was very comforted to know that professors are taking us into consideration and helping to close the performance gap.

The materials faculty require students to have for courses can be a form of microsupport. Emi, a sophomore, shared: “In my chemistry 102 course, my professor does not require us to buy a textbook from the student stores, an online form of homework, or an expensive graphing calculator. Although she doesn’t say it explicitly, I believe she does these seemingly insignificant acts to ‘level’ the playing field for students like myself who do not come from the most affluent backgrounds.”

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<tr>
<th>Faculty</th>
<th>Nonfaculty*</th>
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<td>Microcompliment</td>
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<td>Microsupport</td>
<td><em>Personalized support.</em> “My professor does not require us to buy a textbook from the student stores, an online form of homework, or an expensive graphing calculator. Although she doesn’t say it explicitly, I believe she does these seemingly insignificant acts to ‘level’ the playing field for students like myself who do not come from the most affluent backgrounds.”</td>
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<td>Microvalidation</td>
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Note. Nonfaculty* = consists of persons who not faculty members on campus such as university staff, student peers, or adult figure. Summary of themes are reported in italics.

**Genuine interest.** FGCS in our study felt supported on campus through conversations with academic advisors and university staff who conveyed a real interest in their academic and career success. Microsupport in advising contexts helped students feel autonomous in the types educational and career paths they can take because advisors actively listened to their career and academic goals. Eman, a first-year student, described her first advising appointment.

“I was unsure of what to do about choosing classes as my first year progressed. Since neither of my parents went to college, I was unclear about what to do as far as financial aid and choosing classes went. My advisor took the time to walk me through possible paths I could take . . . it made me feel like I could indeed make it through college and that there is no shame in seeking help.

Similarly, Genevieve, a sophomore, described an advising experience with a career services staff member regarding getting an internship.

“She [career services staff] took the time to hear about me and my wants in an internship. I felt her putting my needs over hers as we spoke. She understood that I had no clue how to go about getting this internship because I feel that it is essentially about networks and using your connections. She referred me to connections she had that would ultimately fulfill my needs.”
networks and using your connections, so she went on to refer me to connections she had that would ultimately fulfill my needs.

**Intentional communications from university programs and services.** Microsupports were also conveyed to study participants by deliberate contact from university programs and services, especially those designed to support FGCS. The presence of a university FGCS program provided feelings of affirmation among study participants. Students described knowing that a student organization dedicated to FGCS existed on campus made them feel supported even if they never interacted with the group or attended its events. Keith, a senior, expressed being acknowledged by the university via emails he received from an FGCS program:

I often receive e-mails from various programs and faculty regarding events that are aimed at empowering first-generation students that always give me a feeling that the university cares about me and acknowledges that I may need a little bit more support.

**Affirmation that FGCS belong at the university.** Study participants believed they had a place on campus when faculty members validated their FGCS identity and their familial experience. Nicolette, a first-year student, expressed how the advice she received from a faculty member about coping with being an FGCS on campus affirmed her sense of place at the university.

My professor gave me advice on how to cope with being a first-generation student and told me that so far I was doing a good job adjusting to the big change. Hearing her say that gave me relief and made me believe in myself.

Nicolette’s experience shows the essential role of faculty in affirming students identity and sense of belonging on campus, and elucidates how microsupport promotes student-faculty interactions for FGCS. Likewise, microsupport is key to improving FGCS retention. Jessie, a sophomore, describes her experience with microsupport through a discussion topic on FGCS posted on an online class management system by her professor.

At the beginning of this semester, I was considering withdrawal. I was in my chemistry class, and my professor always posts an item for discussion on Sakai which we discuss on Thursdays in class. This particular discussion topic revolved around students who come from underrepresented backgrounds and who are first-generation college students. We discussed this topic and took a poll. The numbers were astonishing: 80% of students came from privileged households and were not first-generation. That left me in the other 20%. My professor then said, “You know guys, you all deserve to be here. You are all intelligent and that is why you are here. But we must recognize that some students had to tackle more issues. We are all in the same race, but some of us had a Head Start. If you were in the 20%, remember, you are intelligent. You deserve to be here. We all worked hard, but I applaud you for not giving up.”

**Microvalidations**

Study participants in two themes described microvalidations: (a) peer and faculty appreciation of FGCS experiences, and (b) acknowledgment from university staff of the unique challenges faced by FGCS.

**Appreciating FGCS experiences.** Interactions that welcomed and acknowledged the different college experiences of FGCS provided feelings of validation for participants in classroom discussions when classmates understood the difficulty being an FGCS. Greg, a junior transfer student, shared: “In class discussions, many people understand that it is difficult coming from a background where no one in your family has went to a university and received a degree.” Additionally, students felt validated when peers respected FGCS’s experiences and their backgrounds. David, a junior, described:

I have spoken openly to close friends about me being a first-generation college student and the background I came from. It was very surprising how my friends, who are for the most part quite wealthy, seem to respect my journey more than their own and view my success as more substantial than their own.

**Acknowledgement of unique challenges of FGCS on campus.** Students described how the acknowledgment and support university staff gave to their campus experience made them feel proud and affirmed for being an FGCS. Melanie, a senior, expressed feeling empowered by a staff member who acknowledged her unique position and experience as an FGCS on campus.

He [university employer] mentioned that something that set me apart was my background. He commented that I have had to work two jobs and support myself while maintaining a full-time student workload and that I had still managed to do well. This affirmation of my challenges compared to the experience of most students was important and is rarely acknowledged.

**Microcompliments**

Microcompliments were conveyed to study participants through praise and admiration from university peers and staff, and family members. Many study participants received compliments about their identity, and their educational journey which made them feel proud for being a FGCS. Zach, a sophomore, described an experience where his boss genuinely complimented his FGCS t-shirt.

Just this past week I wore my [first-generation college student organization] t-shirt, and my boss noticed it and told me something along the lines of “hey nice t-shirt” in a genuine way. We were the only two people in the office at the time, and I replied with a simple thanks. It was a very minor compliment to give me, but it really did make me feel positive and brought up my thoughts around being proud of myself for being the first person in my family to attend college.

Students also received compliments from peers concerning overcoming obstacles associated with being an FGCS at a highly selective university. Gabby, a senior transfer student, described her conversation with a friend about graduating from college and the support she received from her grandparents.

My friend/fellow student Rachel and I were talking about who was coming to support us at graduation. I told her that my parents were not coming because they were not supportive of me going to college to get my degree, mainly because I’m older and they thought it was silly to go back to school this late in life, but also because they live in another country and were mad that I was not living in the same country as them. Rachel responded by telling me that she was really proud of me for sticking with college and not giving up and that it was a huge achievement. Furthermore, my grandparents are coming up from Florida to support me at graduation (neither of them went to college either), and they keep telling me they are incredibly proud of me and all that I’ve accomplished during my time at [UNIVERSITY].
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Discussion

This qualitative study of first-generation students’ examples of experienced microaggressions (and their subforms) and microaffirmations (and their subforms) shows that these experiences influenced the extent to which FGCS felt connected to others on campus and dictated decisions to engage with peers, faculty, and formal resources. Microaggressions were conveyed by assumptions made by individuals on campus through conversations that invalidated prior and current experiences of FGCS. Discussions of parent educational, occupational, and prior collegiate experiences may on the surface appear innocuous; however, they can be isolating and detrimental to FGCS who are seeking to connect with others on campus. The stories shared by study participants also highlight how microaggressions demean students’ personal and educational experiences, belittle their efforts and academic accomplishments before and during college, and demonstrate the difficulty of discerning whether or not microaggressions are being directed toward one’s racial identity or socioeconomic status. Students in our study overheard statements by their peers characterizing FGCS and ethnic minorities as being less than qualified opportunists taking advantage of “charity” programs for their own social and economic mobility. These microaggressions illuminate the deficit orientation often communicated to first-generation and racial-ethnic minority college students.

Outcomes related to types of microaggressions experienced by our study participants align with existing research on racial minority students with respect to feeling unwelcomed and out of place on campus (Solórzano, 1998); their academic merit, competence, and intellect being questioned and doubted (Harper et al., 2011; Yosso et al., 2009); and, having to contend with stereotypes and being marginalized on campus (Smith et al., 2007). In our study, FGCS who were also members of a racial or ethnic group described their experiences with microaggressions based on their racial, ethnic background, such as benefiting from race-based affirmative action initiatives and programs, language (e.g., accent), and cultural heritage. Thus, some study participants experienced microaggressions not merely as a result of their FGCS status.

These findings have significant implications for future studies about how students consider, perceive, and are affected by different aspects of their identity and its salience with the type of microaggression they experience in college. Intersectionality, or how race, class, and gender identity and social group membership converge in providing meaning and experiences within national, institutional, social, or cultural settings (Cole, 2009; Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013), is one concept that must be an explicit focus of future microaggression and microaffirmation studies. Guided by CRT with microaggressions being experienced by FGCS at a PWI, future research must consider how racial, gender, and social class inequities converge to shape the experiences of FGCS (Museus & Griffin, 2011; Rosenthal, 2016). This perspective is critical because racial minority students are much more likely to be FGCS based on historical opportunity gaps in education based on racial exclusion (Carter, Welner, & Ladson-Billings, 2013; Harper & Hurtado, 2007) and can shape their interpretations of whether microaggressions experienced in college are due to race or social class identity. In all, investigating these intersections influence how students perceive their interactions with others in the university community with regards to academic expectations, and their background and experiences are acknowledged, appreciated, and welcomed on campus.

The microaffirmation experiences described by students in our study support existing research on the powerful role validation from college faculty and staff can have in the beliefs of FGCS that they can be academically and personally successful in college (Rendon, 1994). In her study, Rendon (1994) found that students felt validated and believed they could be successful on campus when faculty demonstrated genuine concern for teaching, were personable and approachable, provided structured learning experiences that enabled students to experience themselves as capable learners, provided meaningful feedback and experiences that promoted feelings of self-worth, and created an environment that made students feel that what they brought to the college experience was accepted and recognized as valuable. In our study, we were also able to show how microaffirmations can also support FGCS in their college experience at a predominately White 4-year research university. Additionally, we described microaffirmations as intentional and unintentional acts that validate individual identities and experiences of FGCS. Prior studies have found that such acts can be strategically employed to disrupt messages of rejection and low expectations, help FGCS feel worthy and capable of thriving in college, and mitigate stress caused by marginalization (Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014). Microaffirmations can also help students manage and resist internalizing racial stereotypes (McGee, 2016), minimize racial battle fatigue (Smith et al., 2007), and respond to microaggressions by engaging in activities that disrupt and confront microaggressions on campus (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001). Future research is needed to strengthen the evidence that refines and conceptualizes microaffirmations, alone and in the presence microaggressions. Discerning how these experiences relate to identity development can reveal how prior discriminatory and affirming experiences affect student interpretations of microaggressions and microaffirmations they encounter.

Implications

This study has implications for faculty and staff in supporting FGCS at PWIs. One implication is conceptualizing microaffirmations as more than communications of kindness, and instead as intentional and unintentional acts that disrupt the effects of inequity and marginalization on students’ self-concept in environments where they may feel marginalized, hopeless, or lost (Powell et al., 2013; Rowe, 2008). This requires faculty and staff to recognize the effects of microaggressions as they appear within students and their own reflections. A critical skill that distinguishes microaffirmations from surface-level kindness is using a deep understanding of systems of power and privilege to determine which words, what tone, and which experiences to use to address students’ affected self-concept in college.

Another implication for faculty and staff is to reflect on their positional identity critically, or a person’s social power and privilege, about the social positioning and experiences of FGCS (Milner, 2007; Relles, 2015; Taylor, Tisdell, & Hanley, 2000). Active reflection on one’s social position can increase awareness of implicit bias and improve conditions for students who may be marginalized on campus (Relles, 2015). Another implication for supporting FGCS at a PWI is the importance for faculty and staff...
to take the time to listen, to understand, and to make connections to people and resources that FGCS may be less likely to access on their own. Those who go “above and beyond” their regular duties to help students expand their networks and experiences, and affirm their potential for success can significantly influence students’ sense of belonging, academic potential, motivation to persist in college and gain student perspectives about what impacts their path to graduation (Bensimon, 2007; Strayhorn, 2012).

Finally, our study findings have implications for how institutions establish and implement policies that create a campus climate that discourage microaggressions and encourage microaffirmations. A policy institutions can employ is to require faculty who are preparing to teach a course to meet with representatives in faculty affairs offices to evaluate their syllabus of whether its resources and requirements are equitable for their class roster. This would ensure that faculty are being thoughtful in their course preparation and assess how their course may or may not affirm the identities of first-generation and racial-ethnic minority students. Another policy is mandatory training for university personnel who advise undergraduate and graduate students in a formal capacity to reflect and plan on how microaggressions can be incorporated and conveyed in one-on-one meetings. Additionally, institutions may also require training for university personnel, including student orientation leaders and peer advisors on understanding microaggressions and microaffirmations and how each are conveyed to FGCS in various settings on campus. Finally, institutions can incorporate microaffirmations within their automated communications to undergraduate students. Colleges and universities can transform automated communications by delivering critical information while still affirming FGCS and students from historically underrepresented backgrounds with brief statements that affirm and welcome their identities and experiences to the university community.

Strengths and Limitations

A significant advantage of this study is the use of individual descriptions of experiences and themes developed from them in a specific context can be generalized to broaden understanding of theory (Creswell, 2013). Given the scope of this study, we were able to generalize our findings by furthering understanding of how microaggressions and microaffirmations are experienced among FGCS at PWI within a theoretical framework.

Nevertheless, there are limitations to consider despite the merits of this study. We assessed FGCS microaggression experiences at a single PWI; thus, limiting our ability to understand these experiences at other PWIs. Another area for improvement is triangulating different sources of information such as interviews, focus groups, observations, and other PWIs to describe FGCS microaggression and microaffirmation experiences on campus. The triangulation of such data would provide further justification, coherently, the types of microaggressions and microaffirmations experienced by FGCS at PWIs. Despite having a robust theoretical framework, intercoder agreement, and expertise among research team members, our interpretation of the study findings may have been shaped by our racial-ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds and prior experiences with microaggressions and microaffirmations. Future studies should incorporate peer debriefing procedures, or the process of identifying a person who reviews and ask questions about the study (Creswell, 2013), to assess whether FGCS accounts of microaggressions and microaffirmations resonate with individuals others outside of the research team. Finally, our coding approach imposed first-generation status was a central aspect of the identities of study participants and their microaggression and microaffirmation experiences at a PWI. Some students stated that being an FGCS was not a salient part of their identity, chose not to disclose their first-generation status others, and did not inform their college experience at a PWI. Future research should further investigate how student centrality of identity informs perceived discriminatory experiences at a PWI.

Conclusion

An important initial step for higher education researchers, professionals, faculty, and students are to develop institutional strategies that foster campus climates that convey a genuine appreciation of the lived experiences and strengths of FGCS. Higher education institutions and key stakeholders must pay more attention to FGCS’ perspectives on their experiences with social inequities. Understanding how perceptions of FGCS inform staff, faculty, and peers’ interactions with FGCS is key to understanding the students’ sense of connectedness on campus. We believe that institutions that aim to encourage campus communities to build an affirming culture for FGCS may prevent dismissal of their experience and promote their sense of belonging on campus.

References

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