Undergraduate African–American student's experience of racial microaggressions on a primarily white campus

Kyle J. Brezinski, John Laux and Christopher Roseman
Department of Counselor Education and Supervision, University of Toledo, Toledo, Ohio, USA

Caroline O'Hara
Counseling and Human Services Department, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York, USA, and

Shanda Gore
Department of Counselor Education and Supervision, University of Toledo, Toledo, Ohio, USA

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between African–American undergraduate students, racial microaggressions (RMAs) and college retention rates.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were obtained from a survey given out to African–American undergraduate students, recruited from a large, midwestern, predominantly white public university ($n = 53$).

Findings – The results indicate that students did experience a wide range of microaggressions. Furthermore, the data revealed a statistically significant relationship between the participants' perceptions that others viewed them as if they were foreigners and did not belong to the place and the participants' thoughts about dropping out during the ongoing semester [$r(51) = 0.338$, $p = 0.05$]. The results suggest that African–Americans frequently experience RMAs while on campus but these experiences are not significantly tied to their intentions to complete the ongoing semester or return for the subsequent semester.

Practical implications – This study shows that African–American students felt disconnected from the campus that they attend. This information may allow for faculty and staff members to assist in making students feel more welcomed and included in the classroom and on campus.

Originality/value – This is one of the few studies to provide evidence of the relationships between African–American undergraduate students, RMAs and college retention rates. In addition, most studies looking at the relationship between RMAs and retention are qualitative in nature. The use of a quantitative approach helps us eliminating possible observer bias and increasing sample size.

Keywords Retention, Undergraduates, African–Americans, Racial microaggressions

Paper type Research paper

African–American college students are already at a significant disadvantage when it comes to achieving academically in higher education (Forrest-Bank and Jenson, 2015). Many of these students have faced the challenges, prior to entering higher education, brought on because of institutionalized oppression. They come with personal experience of being openly discriminated against and not given the same opportunities to grow and advance educationally as their white counterparts. Students of color are more likely to attend school

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with a significantly lower amount of resources and have teachers that are less likely to notice and push academic success. Recent literature suggests that racial microaggressions (RMAs) negatively influence the lives of African–American college students (Grier-Reed, 2010; Henson *et al.*, 2013; Lewis *et al.*, 2013). One unfortunate trend is that educational institutions reward students for conforming to white norms (Lewis *et al.*, 2013). These norms could be things like the way a person speaks, how an individual dresses and how a person behaves in public. Practices like these reinforce discriminatory RMA statements like "You speak so educated for an African–American".

Enrollment in college for ethnic minorities has increased steadily since 2005 (USA Department of Education, 2015). This increase has resulted in a more diverse campus climate, which in turn created opportunities for students, varying in ethnic and racial backgrounds, to interact with one another. This growth may also lead to an increased opportunity to experience racial discrimination (Rothman *et al.*, 2003). Racial discrimination and inequalities negatively affect academic success (Sue *et al.*, 2008).

Universities struggle to graduate minority students from four-year degree programs (Johnson-Ahorlu, 2013). This is particularly true of African–American college students (Johnson-Ahorlu, 2013). Since the early 1990s, African–American undergraduates have had one of the lowest degree completion rates in comparison to all other races in the USA (Johnson-Ahorlu, 2013; Jones and Williams, 2006) . In response, universities implement retention initiative programs, such as Upward bound, first-year introduction, tutoring services and African–American Student centers (Carter, 2006; Wells, 2008). However, even with these programs, African–American students' four-year graduation rates still lag behind other ethnic groups (Brooks *et al.*, 2013). Studies have shown that one of the prominent reasons why minorities left their current institution was due to racial discrimination (Lewis and McKissic, 2010; Grier-Reed, 2010). Studying the effects of RMAs and retention may assist universities in increasing their multicultural competencies to continue providing a safe and diverse learning environment.

The experience of racism and racial discrimination plays a key role in explaining why African–American undergraduate students have lower graduation rates than do their peers (Grier-Reed, 2010; Wells, 2008). While some of the factors that influence retention are known (Dabney, 2010), little is understood about how RMAs affect African–American students' retention on predominantly white institutions (PWI). A PWI is an institution at which white students make up for 50 per cent or more of the student body (Brown and Dancy, 2009). An RMA is an act, intentional or unintentional, verbal or nonverbal, that sends a hostile, derogatory or racial insult toward an ethnic/racial individual or group (Sue *et al.*, 2008). An example of an intentional RMA would be when a bartender purposefully serves a white patron over a minority patron who arrived at the bar first. Subtle RMAs can be more harmful than blatant discrimination due to their ambiguous nature (Torres *et al.*, 2010; Sue *et al.*, 2008). Subtle acts can leave the targeted individual in a confused state wondering whether the act was meant to be intentional or whether it was a misunderstanding. Eventually this cognitive thought process can lead to a decrease in personal mental health and academic performance (Solorzano *et al.*, 2000; Sue *et al.*, 2008).

To date, research on RMAs on PWIs is limited. Torres *et al.* (2010) examined the influence RMAs have on the mental health of African–American doctoral students and graduates of doctoral programs. The researchers asked their participants to identify the types of microaggressions they experienced. This was followed by an investigation to determine what effect the reported microaggressions had on participants' mental health. The researchers found that the experience of an RMA was partially responsible for psychological distress and depressive symptoms.

McCabe (2009) examined undergraduates' experiences of RMAs at PWIs. McCabe conducted 68 one-on-one interviews and four focus group interviews with participants at a single PWI. Four main themes emerged:

(1) African–American men were viewed to be threatening.

(2) Latina women were viewed as sexual objects.

(3) African–American women were viewed as the voice of their entire race/ethnicity and being viewed as academically inferior in comparison to their peers.

(4) White women experienced gender microaggressions in academic majors that were viewed as being "male dominated".

Furthermore, Smith *et al.* (2007) studied the experiences of 36 African–American male students at PWIs. They found that the constant stereotyping and discriminatory practices led these students to suffer from increased levels of frustration, stress, anger, disappointment, resentment and anxiety.

Based on the limited research in this area, a study that documents the degree to which African–Americans enrolled at a PWI experience RMAs, the degree of stress associated with experienced RMAs and how RMAs are associated with retention is warranted to deepen our understanding, open the door for further dialog on this issue and inform strategic responses about how to improve African–American students' success in higher education. Therefore, the purpose of this study is threefold. First, we document the degree to which African–American college students experience RMAs. Second, we document the impact of RMAs on African–American college students. Finally, we explore the relationship between experiences of RMA and RMA distress on African–American college students' decisions regarding retention.

Method

This study used a cross-sectional survey design to assess whether undergraduate students' thoughts about retention are associated with the experience of RMAs. This design allowed us to ascertain whether there was relationship between RMAs and students' degree of consideration for the following semester and during the semester (retention). This study also allowed us to identify whether there was a difference between witnessing acts of RMAs toward others and students' plans for return the following semester. Permission to conduct this study was provided by the sponsoring institution's Institutional Review Board. The study looked at African–American undergraduate college students who were currently enrolled at the University of Toledo. The researcher used the racial microaggression scale (RMAS) (Torres-Harding *et al.*, 2012) and a self-report Likert scale that assessed thoughts about leaving college to collect the data for our study.

Participants

Participants were recruited from a large, midwestern, PWI public urban university in the spring of 2016. The inclusion criteria were self-identification as an African–American, being enrolled in at least 6 h of undergraduate studies at the sponsoring university and being 18 years old or older. Individuals that were excluded from participation of the study were those who did not identify themselves as African–American. Graduate students and students under the age of 18, regardless of enrollment status, were also excluded from the study.

A total of 53 participants were enrolled. Of these, 50 (94.3 per cent) participants self-identified as black/African–American and 3 (5.7 per cent) said that they were multiracial (part black/African–American). The participants' means age was 22.01 years (SD = 6.96,

range = 18-53). A total of 13 (24.5 per cent) self-identified as being male, 38 (71.7 per cent) self-identified as being female and 2 (3.8 per cent) identified as being transgender. A total of 17 (32.1 per cent) were first-year students, 9 (17 per cent) were sophomores, 11 (20.8 per cent) were juniors and 16 (30.2 per cent) were seniors.

Measures

Demographics. To describe the sample, a demographic data sheet was used to ascertain the participants' age, race/ethnicity, education level and gender. The race/ethnicity is based on their self-report on demographic items of the survey. The participants were classified into male (0) and female (1), non-Hispanic white or euro-American (0), black, Afro-Caribbean or African–American (1), South Asian or Indian-American (2), East Asian or Asian-American (3), Native American or Alaskan Native(4), Latino or Hispanic American (5), Middle Eastern or Arab-American (6) and Other (7). This classification system came from a modified version of the current US Census. Participants' age and gender were also collected through self-report on demographic items on the survey. Educational level corresponded with the number of years of education participants completed post high school. Participants had the option of choosing, first, second, third or fourth year.

Racial Microaggressions. Participants' experiences of RMAs were measured using Torres-Harding *et al.*'s (2012) RMAS. Each of the 32 item asks respondents to identify how frequently they experienced each item's described event and to identify how distressed they felt as a result of the event(s). Respondents indicate whether they have experienced each item's content often/frequently (4 points), sometimes/a moderate amount (3 points), a little/rarely (1 point) or never (1 points). Respondents who endorse any item are further asked to say how stressful, upsetting or bothersome the event was for them. Response options to these questions are: this has never happened to me/not at all (0 points), a little (1), moderate level (2) and high level (3).

The RMSA has six factors: foreigner/not belonging (3 items), criminality (4 items), sexualization (3 items), low-achieving/undesirable culture (9 items), invisibility (8 items) and environmental invalidations (5 items). Torres-Harding *et al.* (2012) reported acceptable internal consistency estimates for each of these six factors. The reported alphas were: foreigner/not belonging (α = 0.78), criminality (α = 0.85), sexualization (α = 0.83), low-achieving/undesirable culture (α = 0.87), invisibility (α = 0.89) and environmental invalidations (α = 0.81). These six RMA factors were used as the study's predictor variables.

Retention. Participants were asked to answer two retention questions. The first question was, "Please rate how you feel about coming back to the University for the fall semester." The five response options were: I am seriously considering not returning to this university (5), I am considering not returning to this university (4), I am not sure if I should stay or go (3), I am fairly sure I will return for the following semester (2) and I will return for the following semester (1). The second question was, "Did you ever feel like dropping out during the ongoing semester?" This question's response options were: I seriously thought about leaving during the ongoing semester (5), I thought about leaving during the current semester (4), I was not sure if I was going to leave or stay (3), I was fairly certain I was staying for the ongoing semester (2) and I always knew I was staying for the ongoing semester (1).

Procedures

The researchers worked with the University of Toledo's Institutional Research Department to reach the participants eligible to engage in the survey. The researchers used a cross-sectional survey design. We sent an email to participants in which link to an online survey was embedded. A total of 1,677 emails were sent out to prospective participants. Only 23

per cent (n = 397) opened the recruitment email. Of those, 21 per cent (n = 84) began the survey and 63 per cent (n = 53) completed the survey thus making our response rate 13.4 per cent. The survey was available from March 23, 2016 to April 11, 2016. Reminder notices were sent on March 28, 2016 and April 4, 2016.

Results

A total of 51 respondents answered the question, "Please rate how you feel about coming back to the University for the fall semester." The mean score for this sample was 1.9 (SD = 1.3, range = 1-5). A total of 30 (54.5 per cent) respondents stated that they were certain to return for the fall, eight (14.5 per cent) were fairly sure, five (9.1 per cent) were uncertain, four (7.3 per cent) were considering leaving and the final four (7.3 per cent) were seriously considering not returning to this university in the fall. One-quarter of the students said that they were unsure or were considering not returning for the following semester.

All 53 participants answered the question, "Did you ever feel like dropping out during the ongoing semester?" Their average response was 1.8 (SD = 1.1, range = 1-5). A total of 28 (50.9 per cent) stated that they never thought about leaving during the semester, 14 (25.5 per cent) were fairly certain that they would finish the semester, six (10.9 per cent) were sure whether or not they would finish the semester, three (5.5 per cent) thought about leaving during the semester and the final two (3.6 per cent) seriously thought about leaving during the semester. One-fifth of this sample was unsure whether or not to finish the semester.

Table I presents the mean, standard deviation, range of scores and internal consistency estimates for each of the RMAS's six factors and the degree of distress associated with each RMAS factor. The two factors on which this sample scored the highest were low achieving/undesirable culture (2.07) and environmental (2.13). Both of these scores were in the moderate range. Scale scores that fell between the rarely and moderate range were criminality (1.5), sexualization (1.01) and invisibility (1.11). The participants' mean score on the foreigner/not belonging factor was 0.62, which is between never and rarely. While it is important to understand the RMAS factors on which these participants scored the highest, group means can mitigate and under-represent the number and the experiences of persons

Factor	Mean	SD	Range	Alpha
FOR	0.62	0.72	0-2.67	0.68
FORD	0.33	0.54	0-2.33	
CRIM	1.50	0.95	0-3	0.88
CRIMD	1.43	1.28	0-3	
SEXU	1.06	0.97	0-3	0.85
SEXUD	0.69	0.97	0-3	
LOW	2.07	0.66	0-3	0.84
LOWD	1.73	1.09	0-3	
INV	1.11	0.84	0-3	0.88
INVD	1.17	0.98	0-3	
ENV	2.13	0.59	0-3	0.55
ENVD	1.35	0.98	0-3	

Notes: FOR = Foreigner/not belonging; FORD = Foreigner/not belonging distress; CRIM = criminality; CRIMD = criminality distress; SEXU = sexualization; SEXUD = sexualization distress; LOW = low-achieving/undesirable culture; LOWD = low-achieving/undesirable culture distress; INV = invisibility; INVD = invisibility distress; ENV = environmental invalidations; ENVD = environmental invalidations distress

Table I. Racial microaggression scale descriptive data

near a distribution's asymptotes. Five (9.4 per cent) and two (3.8 per cent) persons, respectively, said that they sometimes and frequently felt like others saw and treated them like they were a foreigner and did not belong to this sample's campus. Of note, 22 (41.4 per cent) and 10 (18.9 per cent), respectively, scored in the sometimes and often range of the criminality factor. Nine (17 per cent) and six (11.3 per cent) scored in these two ranges on the sexualization factor. A total of 26 (49 per cent) and 18 (34 per cent) scored in the sometimes and frequently ranges of the low achieving/undesirable culture factor, respectively. Fourteen (26.4 per cent) and six (11.3 per cent) scored in these ranges on the Invisibility factor. Finally, 29 (54.7 per cent) participants and 14 (26.4 per cent) scored in the sometimes and frequently ranges of the environmental factor, respectively. This presentation of the frequency of RMAs across the RMSA's six factors demonstrates that while the factor mean scores were in the rare to low moderate ranges, many participants experienced RMAs on a moderately high to frequent basis.

A Pearson product–moment correlation matrix was run to determine whether there were statistically significant relationships between students' experiences of RMAs and their intentions to complete their current spring semester and return to the same college in the following fall semester. Positive and medium-sized relationships were found between students' thoughts about leaving during the semester and scores on the foreigner/not belonging scale and the foreigner/not belonging distress scale. Specifically, as students' scores on the foreigner/not belonging RMAS subscale rose, so did their thoughts about not completing the spring semester ($r = 0.34$, $p = 0.01$). Likewise, as students' scores on the foreigner/not belonging scale rose, so did their thoughts about not completing the spring semester ($r = 0.35$, $p = 0.01$). No other statistically significant relationships were found between students' thoughts about leaving during the spring semester and the RMAS scales. No statistically significant relationships were found between students' decisions to return to the university for the fall semester and scores on any of the RMAS subscales or their associated measures of distress.

More than half of the participants reported knowing that they were going to return for the following semester. Less than 10 per cent of the participants reported that they were seriously considering not returning to the university for the following semester, whereas 7 per cent of participants reported being undecided on whether or not they would be returning. Just over half (50.9 per cent) of the participants were certain that they were going to finish the current semester. A small percentage of participants (3.6 per cent) reported serious consideration of leaving the university before the end of the semester. Only 10 per cent of the participants reported being undecided on whether they would stay or leave before the semester ended. This study uncovered a positive and moderate relationship between students' decisions about dropping out during the ongoing semester and their feelings of not belonging and being a foreigner.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to document the frequency of and distress associated with RMAs and the degree to which RMAs were associated with African–American college students' retention. Previous literature had shown that African–American students who experienced RMAs at PWIs left those institutions to attend colleges known for being historically black (Smith *et al.*, 2007). This study investigated students' intentions and not their actual behaviors. We cannot determine whether these students did persist in college; however, the findings on the subscales of the RMAS indicated that African–Americans frequently experience RMAs. African–American students frequently found themselves in situations where there was a noticeable absence of people representing their own race/

ethnicity. Participants reported that they experienced a moderate amount of situations in which their race was viewed as dysfunctional, and undesirable. African–Americans on campus had moderately high encounters of being viewed as aggressive, threatening or hostile. Finally, participants rated experiences of being overlooked, the invisibility subscale, at the rare to moderate amount. The findings showed that African–Americans perceive themselves to be dismissed in group settings due to their race, as well as they feel that they have their thoughts and feelings invalidated.

The present findings are similar to those of previous studies. For example, previous efforts suggest that African–American college students' had difficulties fitting in and feeling like they belonged on their campuses (Dabney, 2010; Grier-Reed, 2010; Smith *et al.*, 2007). The results were also similar to those reported by Grier-Reed (2010) who found that African–American students at PWIs felt uncomfortable in their surroundings and that they did not belong to it. The students in Grier–Reed's study were more likely to drop out and attend historically black colleges. Likewise, Sue *et al.* (2008) found that African–American students felt as if they did not belong to PWI and that they are outsiders.

The participants' scores on the environmental subscale were consistent with the findings reported by Torres-Harding *et al.* (2012) who found that African–Americans' felt that their race was not being represented in roles of power in their community. Harper (2009) found similar results such that African–American students at PWIs felt that racial stereotypes negatively affected the expectation of black men in leadership positions.

The participants felt that others on campus viewed them as criminals. This finding is consistent with that of Smith *et al.* (2011) who demonstrated that African–American students at PWIs reported high level of stress due to being frequently stopped by the police or "fitting the description." African–American men report being viewed by others as hostile, aggressive or angry. The researchers also found that participants felt that coworkers, bosses and employees were afraid or intimidated, which led to the avoidance of African–American men (Miller and Travers, 2005; Nadal *et al.*, 2014). Additional research from Janice McCabe confirms these results. McCabe (2009) conducted 68 one-on-one interviews and four focus groups using undergraduate students from a single PWI. The researcher found that African–American men were perceived as threatening. During McCabe's interviews, several participants would mention noticing authority members (campus and city police) constantly on their dormitory floors, as well as handing out stricter penalties to African–Americans than to white students who committed similar offenses.

Implications

Educate faculty members and staff. The results of the study showed that African–American students felt disconnected from the campuses that they attend. Greater efforts should be taken to educate faculty and staff of universities on the importance of making all students feel welcomed and included in the classroom. We recommend that universities mandate yearly diversity trainings to all faculty and staff members to increase multicultural competencies. Current programs like "Safe Place" trainings are examples of university-led programs that successfully increase inclusion of diverse students. Another example could include trainings, in-services or CEU workshops at college counseling centers.

Furthermore, faculty and staff members need to be aware of their own personal biases and possible RMAs that they may be unintentionally communicating to African–American students. It is important for authority figures to be aware, recognize and breakdown their own biases to decrease the possibility of unintentional biases slipping out into their profession. Faculty and staff members should also be open and accepting of their students'

stories, which leads to empowering students and allowing them to feel that their voice is heard within the campus society.

Faculty and staff members should encourage African–Americans to consider graduate and professional degrees. This study's participants' scores on the low achieving/undesirable and environmental subscales were the highest amongst all other subscales. These scales indicated that African–Americans do not see people of their own race/ethnicity in positions of power. These scales also indicated that African–Americans feel as if they are viewed as being academically inferior or incompetent to other students around them. Faculty and staff members should increase their efforts in encouraging and supporting minorities to join doctoral programs, which will lead to an increase in diversity amongst graduate programs, which leads to African–Americans being seen in positions of power across campuses.

Teaching students about racial microaggressions

Teaching racial microaggressions across the curriculum. This topic should not only be covered in multicultural counseling courses, but also included across the curriculum for future counselor educators. Counselor educators should educate students on what constitutes a RMA. Educators should then review the three different subtypes of RMAs illustrated by Sue *et al.* (2007) and provide concrete examples or scenarios. Once students are able to properly identify RMAs, counselor educators can create a safe space in which discussions of RMAs can occur. Students would be encouraged to share personal experiences of events that occurred in their own lives without fear of judgment or invalidation.

Talking about racial microaggressions with counselor education students. All counseling students should be aware of how to appropriately handle RMAs. Counseling students should be made aware of how RMAs affect the students around them and the psychological distress RMAs cause. Students, along with faculty members, can create a safe environment, in which students can feel comfortable sharing their experiences with discrimination. Students should also be made aware of how to appropriately confront acts of RMAs. Educators will want to facilitate an exploration about how perpetrators may perceive being confronted. This may be particularly important with African–Americans as stereotypes related to "the Angry Black woman," for example, may place these individuals in an additional double-bind situation. Students will need to examine the benefits and risks of confronting (or not confronting) RMAs, the potential impact on the target and potential power dynamics when considering how to confront RMAs.

Limitations and directions for future research

A limitation to the study is that the answers were self-reported. Students may not have felt comfortable participating in a survey that encourages them to rethink past events of racial discrimination (Sue *et al.*, 2009). The participants may not have been completely honest while taking the survey. Some students may not have felt comfortable sharing all parts of their experiences and may lessen the influence of the perceived microaggression. Some students may have inflated their experiences of RMAs to appear as if they were discriminated against more than what actually took place. Lefever *et al.* (2007) wrote that one difficulty with online surveys is participants lack willingness to participate. This may have caused respondents to speed through the questionnaire without reading the questions.

Students may have engaged in retrospective recall. Retrospective recall occurs when people are asked to remember specific experiences in their past (Solhan *et al.*, 2009). When studies use retrospective reports from participants, the results may be limited in their usefulness due to the participants' recall bias (Hufford, 2007). Participants may have

experienced different emotions, behaviors and thought patterns during the event they were asked to recall. Because of this, their recollection of the event may have been somewhat skewed due to how they perceived the event.

This study used an ex post facto research design. This type of design prohibits one from making causal statements. The main issue with this design was that the research subjects are not randomly assigned to a control and a treatment group. Furthermore, this study was unable to sample participants who had already dropped out of the university, which means we could not confirm their experiences of RMAs and whether they had any influence on their decision to drop out. The study surveyed students who were current university students. There may have been a group of African–American students whose experience with RMAs caused them to drop out prior to having the chance to participate in the study. Future research should seek out those individuals who did not re-enroll to determine which, if any, RMAs influenced their decision to no longer attend the university.

Survey fatigue/burnout may have been a factor affecting the response rate of the participants. The university's Office of Institutional Research administered eight other surveys to the general student population during the time period when this study was conducted. Two of these surveys included questions about and provided a definition for microaggressions. As such, participants may have felt oversampled and decided to drop out of the study prematurely or ignore the participation request all together. Some prospective participants may have been unsure of the meaning of RMAs because the recruitment email did not include a formal definition of RMAs.

The current study was limited to African–Americans students' retention and RMAs. The present methods could be replicated to include a broader range of ethnic groups. With a more diverse sample size looking at other races/ethnicities, researchers could determine whether there was a difference the frequency and type of RMAs experienced on campus. Researchers could also determine whether different races/ethnicities differed in their thoughts on retention when experiencing RMAs.

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Corresponding author

Kyle J. Brezinski can be contacted at: kyle.brezinski@rockets.utoledo.edu