

### Leadership During a Racial Microaggression on a University Campus

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**ABSTRACT.** This study aims at understanding students' perspectives on a university response to a racial microaggression on campus. Responses were collected in the form of an online survey and analyzed using qualitative data analysis to identify themes from students' perspectives. Insights on how students processed the incident were gathered. Although students were thankful for the university response, there is lingering concern for another incident and for how leadership will equip students to handle similar situations. The authors provide implications for educators.

*Keywords:* Social justice, qualitative research, multicultural issues, leadership, counselor education, Family Sciences Education

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America is a “melting pot” where everyone is the same, thus denying or invalidating the unique experiences of the many people of color. (Bennett, McIntosh, & Henson, 2017, p. 2)

In alignment with this quote, it is widely believed that racism has vanished from America because of the increasing numbers of people of color who have gained social, economic, and political recognition in the past decade, e.g. Barack Obama or Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson (Bennett et al., 2017). Contrarily, research suggests that racism and acts of microaggression will persist in America, with more frequent occurrence among college students (Green, Pulley, Jackson, Martin, & Fasching-Varner, 2018; Smith, Hung & Franklin, 2011).

One such incident occurred on September 28, 2016 at the researchers’ home institution. Students were holding their third day of a peaceful Black Lives Matter protest when a white student directly approached the students. The white student wore an ape mask and was holding bananas on nooses. Despite anger and agitation at what appeared to be clear provocation, the students who were protesting remained calm until campus public safety officers were able to detain the white student. University administration responded swiftly by holding a community discussion the same day, where students, faculty, and staff were invited to speak about racism on campus. Among the attendees were twenty counseling students from the Department of Counseling and Human Services. Subsequent to the discussion, students were invited to further process the event by writing their thoughts in an anonymous online survey.

Such overt incidents seem to contradict dominant narratives of equality and the celebration of multiculturalism, both of which are promoted at US educational institutions. These incidents also have been found to impact African-American college students’ psychological well-being and academic performance (Linley, 2018). However, only a handful of researchers have investigated the topic of racial tensions among college students (see, for example, Cole & Harper, 2016; Harper, 2015; Stuckey & Addo, 2015), which therefore leaves a relative gap in our knowledge about what students’ think they need from university leadership in such times of separation and distress. It is within this context that the researchers situate the present study to examine perspectives of counseling students on how their university’s leadership responded to the racial incident. The study aims to provide novel understanding about how stakeholders – faculty as well as peers, especially within helping fields such as social work, family science, human service, and counseling – can provide services to help manage these situations more effectively in the future.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, it provides three dominant themes within current literature to sketch the context of racism and microaggression among US higher educational institutions. Second, it details the study’s theoretical and methodological underpinnings. Third, it presents findings by using direct quotation from participants. Fourth, it discusses findings in context of the wider literature and outlines limitations of the study. The paper concludes with a summary of the main findings and with implications for leaders in helping professions and for university policies.

### Literature Review

College campuses are places that present opportunities for students to be culturally immersed and to gain an understanding as well as appreciation of socio-cultural differences (Jamaludin, Sam, Sandal, & Adam, 2018). Researchers have recently recognized that campuses have grown increasingly hostile and become outlets for racial microaggressions (Cole & Harper, 2016). Even though racial incidents among educational institutions can be traced back all the way to the civil rights era (Stotzer & Hossellman, 2012), awareness of such incidents did not start to spread until the 1990s, when the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) mandated that hate crimes in regard to ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, or creed be reported (Davis & Harris, 2016). Notwithstanding, research suggests that most such incidents on campuses do not get reported due to the “normalized, pervasive nature of racism and discrimination within education” (Davis & Harris, 2016, p. 63). Such unequal and unethical handling of information among higher education in the US, as well as the growing number of racial incidents on campuses, has encouraged social scientists to be more invested in understanding and discerning ways in which universities and colleges can manage racial microaggression (Kezar, Fries-Britt, Kurban, McGuire & Wheaton, 2019; Nadal, Wong, Griffin, Davidoff, & Sriken, 2014; Sanchez, Adams, Arango, & Flannigan, 2018).

Literature suggests there are two ways in which racial tension and microaggression is managed in higher educational settings: by university leadership and when students are integrated in leadership roles. The role of university leadership has a significant impact on students’ resiliency and processing (Gigliotti, 2016). Cole and Harper (2016) investigated a college president’s response to a racial incident and concluded that the president’s responses failed to acknowledge systemic and institutional issues that foster racial hostility. Fortunato, Gigliotti, and Ruben (2017) also found that good stakeholder communication can help eliminate students’ mental health and stress and that student frustration and hostility may be heightened if Leaders fail to respond in an appropriate and timely manner, which [may] offer the perception that racial issues and those articulating them are not a priority and that leaders are not in control of the situation (p. 206)

In addition, qualitative inquiries into the ways in which multiculturalism is promoted in US higher education found that formation of ethnic student groups and activities thereof aids students not only in their college integration phase, but also in feeling validated and accepted throughout their studies (Kiang, 2002, 2009; Museus, 2014; Museus, Lam, Huang, Kem, & Tan, 2012).

The managing of racial incidents at US colleges has been attributed to students’ roles within campus leadership as well as their engagement in student organizations (Harper, 2015). One way through which students have increasingly engaged in campus leadership is through the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which was formed in response to the highly disputed trial of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin (Garza, 2013). According to co-founder Alicia Garza (2014), BLM is

[an] ideological and political intervention in a world where black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise and shall serve as affirmation of black folks’

contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression (p. 1)

Through the avenue of social media, the BLM movement has also reached people nationwide and continues to be one of the biggest platforms for political and social advocacy (Wellington, 2015). As such, this movement provides an avenue for students of color and members of black communities to feel validated and supported as well as for their engagement in local and nationwide protests, so their voices can be heard and their perspectives on the marginalizing power that society holds over them can be shared (Garza, 2014).

Researchers who have quantitatively analyzed how racial climates at colleges can impact graduate students' academic performance and degree completion found that training and education on combatting prejudice and segregation must be made available to students to enhance their career prospects during and after graduation (Dowd, Sawatzky, & Korn, 2011; Harper, 2015; Museus, 2014; Museus & Maramba, 2011; Ring, 2008). Consequently, higher educational settings will have to incorporate students' perspectives in order to prepare, manage and facilitate through racial microaggression, because, according to the prospects of our time, these will not fade away but may even increase.

### **Methodology**

Since the overall aim of this study was to explore and interpret counseling students' perspectives of the racial incident, the grounded theory method was most fitting. This method allowed for an inductive approach to exploring and interpreting students' responses, thereby generating theories about their underlying meanings of the racial incident (Glaser, 1992; Khan, 2014).

### **Sampling of Participants**

Main participants for this study included twelve graduate counseling students with ages ranging from 21 to 45 years. Participants were recruited through a convenience and criterion sampling strategy (Mayan, 2016). As such, participants who successfully met study criteria were (1) currently enrolled in ETSU's counseling program and (2) spoke at the open dialogue event held after the incident. Since data was collected through an anonymized online survey, the researchers had no influence on the race, ethnicity, or genders of participants.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through an online survey that contained one open-ended question: "Please write your current thoughts, comments, suggestions following the incident on September 28th in Borchuck Plaza and the university response." The survey was sent securely and confidentially via the university's email address to twenty counseling students who were enrolled at that time. Twelve participants responded.

**Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed through the thematic analysis method (Stuckey, 2015), involving two stages. In the first stage, data were searched for themes and coded independently by all four researchers. The second stage involved discussion by all four researchers about their process of analysis until they reached consensus on identified themes (see Table 1).

Table 1  
 Categories which emerged from students’ responses emerged

<i>Main Theme</i>	<i>Inter-related Theme</i>	<i>Sub-Category</i>
<b>Rational Response</b>	Appropriateness for student advocacy	Timeliness Hope Pride
	Appropriateness for faculty advocacy	Awareness Training Space to talk
<b>Emotional Response</b>	Contempt	

**Findings**

Two dominant themes emerged: (1) rational response, and (2) emotional response, from which two interrelated themes emerged: (1) appropriateness for student advocacy and (2) appropriateness for faculty advocacy. As shown in Table 1, six sub-categories emerged from within each interrelated theme. This section presents each interrelated theme along with their connected subcategories in relation to their main theme.

**Rational Response**

This main theme includes students’ responses that focused on the actions that campus security, faculty, and staff took. As shown in Table 1, we identified two interrelated themes within this main theme:

**Appropriateness for student advocacy.** This interrelated theme emerged from responses that indicated the action taken by faculty, peers, and university authorities following the incident promoted feelings of value, hope, and belonging, and was identified as an appropriate act of advocacy for students.

The subcategory of *timeliness* emerged from responses indicating that the amount of time that passed between the incident and the police showing up, as well as the open dialogue held after just a few hours, made students feel valued and safe. This seems to be in agreement with

Fortunato et al.'s (2017) argument that university leadership is best demonstrated by dealing with racial incidents quickly. The subcategory of *hope* also emerged from responses that stated that the ways in which the university's campus security, administration, and university council approached the situation and called for open dialogue to process as a "student community," made students feel respected and reassured that the university will effectively manage such racial incidents in the future. Lastly, the subcategory of *pride* emerged from responses that viewed the attribution of a "student community" as one that developed from the open dialogue process during this time of separation, as a catalyst for a sense of belonging and familiarity. Responses also expressed feelings of pride about how their peers chose to respond, as one participant pointed out:

*"I was extremely proud of the students for remaining calm and dealing with the situation in a rational manner"*

As such, students seemed to identify with their peers and with the ways in which they responded, seeming to promote an overall connection as though one individual represents the whole student-community.

In sum, the timeliness of a call for action, the ability to process as a "student-community" and the ways in which the university's students were able to keep a composed, respectful manner throughout this racial microaggression seemed to have encouraged students to feel safe, valued, connected, appreciated, and overall, to feel that the university advocated for them.

**Appropriateness for faculty advocacy.** This theme emerged from responses that indicated faculty and staff did seem unprepared for such a racial incident, and that the university may need to equip faculty and staff for similar forthcoming events. *Awareness* was one subcategory that emerged in this theme (see Table 1). Responses indicated that in such crisis incidents, students look to faculty and staff to bring awareness and provide leadership. However, in alignment with Davis and Harris's (2016) argument that most racial tensions go unreported, students' responses indicated that awareness about the racial climate on campus was undermined.

A second subcategory was identified as *training* provided by faculty and staff along with more intentional education for students to know how to advocate and support their peers of color respectfully. This theme seemed related to responses that indicated feelings of desperation and frustration about being unable to help and support their peers. Since this theme indicates willingness and importance of students' agency in being actively involved in leadership and being trained, it validates Harper's (2015) and Ring's (2008) findings.

Lastly, a third subcategory that emerged from this theme was *space to talk*. The majority of responses included appreciation for students and faculty to process together through open dialogue. The additional space for processing in classrooms and in online surveys following the incident was appreciated and recognized for fostering awareness, belonging, and hope.

Furthermore, after this incident, one student posted the note “I Heard You” all around campus as form of “silent reaction,” which later turned into a region-wide symbol of advocacy. The student stated:

*“I Heard You- will be a message of compassion, a silent and symbolic reaction to the BLM protest, and is not intended to cause any harm.”*

In sum, faculty and staff seem to play important roles when it comes to racial incidents in higher educational settings. Availability of training and education on how to manage such incidents effectively, as well as on how to support those affected, is seen as an important factor. Promotion of an open space to talk, and to process with students and faculty, also seems to have been recognized by students as a key element of university leadership.

### **Emotional Response**

This main theme includes students’ responses focusing on emotional repercussions of the racial incident. As shown in Table 1, we identified the inter-related theme of *contempt* with social and cultural issues within this main theme.

**Contempt.** Responses indicated frustration about the reality of increasing racial/ethnic microaggressions among US higher educational settings, which seems to persist across the US. This finding seems to contrast with Garza’s (2013) and Harper’s (2015) idea that ethnic student groups, along with engagement in university leadership and advocacy such as in the BLM movement, provides a “safe haven” for students of color. Furthermore, the prevalence of anger and frustration in responses indicated a need for an outlet through which students can process safely and without judgment. This aligns with the view of interim president Michael Middleton, who, after the racial incident in 2015 at the University of Missouri argued:

*One of the things impeding our ability to get beyond these issues [of microaggression] is our inability to talk about it. We have to understand our ugly history permeates everything we do at [relevant] institutions and in this country. Once we get this truth on the table, we’re poised to reconcile those differences* (Stuckey & Addo, 2015, p. 6).

In sum, the incident of racial microaggression seemed to trigger the need for discussion and care for students, and to provide a “reality check” that helped students and educators understand that racism still remains on their campus.

### **Discussion**

These findings highlight the importance of university’s quick, appropriate, and respectful response to such racial incidents (Kezar et al., 2019). Aligning with Fortunato et al. (2017), students’ responses indicated that the timely nature of the university’s response was critical to students feeling validated, supported, and respected on their campus. As such, this illuminates the fact that there is a sensitive window of time between the racial act and the call for action.

However, in contrast to literature that suggests students of color feel most secure and less targeted for hate crimes when they are engaged in university activities, roles, or ethnic groups (see Kiang, 2002, 2009; Museus et al., 2012), our findings indicated that training and education on how to effectively manage such racial incidents, and on how to best advocate for student victims, would have fostered feelings of security. While our findings also confirmed that the communication and prompt action of university leadership was helpful, the availability of space to process, in the form of open dialogue with students, staff, faculty, and higher university authorities such as the president, was more important for helping students feel validated and protected. Our findings suggested that, in the midst of frustration and perplexity, feelings of hope were present. One student stated:

*the student who appeared that day in a gorilla mask came to the BLM protest in an act of hate but was met by ETSU students and faculty with appropriate responses that embodied love.*

This also seems to agree with Ring (2008) who stressed that with preciseness and thoughtfulness, a university is offered an opportunity to create a corrective experience for students, and a sense of safety among those affected.

### **Limitations**

The researchers recognize several limitations to this study. This was a case-specific study, so it has limited generalizability. We also recognize that the sample was specific to counseling students at one university. There are numerous questions this research did not address. Although the questions were open-ended, our limiting the questions to one item may have missed key discussions about this incident. As with any qualitative study, there is also the inherent bias of the researchers. We hoped to minimize bias by using a team approach with national, international, and minority members, but this is still a limitation of our work.

### **Conclusion**

This study sought to inductively investigate counseling students' perspectives on how one university managed an act of racial microaggression on its campus to provide understanding about how to support student victims more effectively, and about how universities can prepare and manage such incidents more efficiently in the future. Our findings highlight the importance of open dialogue, multicultural leadership training, and empathic communication skills, along with space offered for processing and debriefing within educational institutions. These findings support the work highlighted in the report from the American Council on Education articulating three aspects of a recovery framework after a racial incident: active listening, speaking from the heart, and "acting with" (Kevar et al., 2018).

Several implications can be drawn from this study. Racism exists and manifests in overt and covert ways. The response is critical to combat perpetuation of such acts and can serve as a sign of inclusion and belongingness. Universities can be more prepared if we recognize that no place is immune and that building capacity and resilience can mitigate effects of racial acts

(Kezar et al., 2019). Professions such as counseling, family studies, human services, and other helping professions with strong ties to social justice and advocacy can lead the way by incorporating more nuanced multicultural and diversity training so students are equipped to provide adequate services to the student-community. Additionally, educating faculty members on how to address cultural diversity within classrooms may serve to reduce incidents and build capacity for how to respond should they occur (Niehuis & Thomas-Jackson, 2019). Another implication is for university authorities to consider more effective management of such racial incidents in their policies and to promote ongoing leadership training, especially in the form of open dialogue, for educators and staff members. Finally, this study provides evidence on which subsequent research can be built. Such research must include perspectives of other students, perhaps international students or students of color, to support generating a valid, more nuanced evidence base.

Conclusively, we hope this evidence will encourage researchers, educators, practitioners and other leaders in helping and service-oriented fields to reshape their management and curricula to reduce anxiety and fear of current, as well as prospective, international and national students, and to promote safe environments where these students can learn to appreciate diversity.

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