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Communicating Racism: A Study of Racial Microaggressions in a Southern University and the Local Community

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ABSTRACT

The current study was conducted with the goal of identifying specific communication behaviors – both verbal and nonverbal – that SOC at a PWI consciously and subconsciously identify as either an RMA or a contributing factor to the likelihood of one occurring. The experiences and voices of multiracial college students privileged over those of monoracial students in an effort to inspire institutional change and resist systemic oppression in its most basic form. The findings are consistent RMA research, while also introducing new categories and concepts that contribute to how scholars and SOC are "naming, detailing and classifying the actual manifestations of aversive racism". The students in this study experienced and reported on RMA they are experiencing both at the university and in the local community, which is consistent with previous research. Regardless of their race/ethnicity, these SOC experienced verbal and nonverbal RMA on a daily basis. These findings further demonstrate that communication is at the center of understanding RMA, as evidenced by the seven categories of communication responses and 30 corresponding concepts that are new to RMA scholarship.

KEYWORDS

Interracial communication; intersectionality; racial microaggressions; racism; white privilege

Introduction

Students of color (SOC) and Caucasian American students at predominately white institutions (PWIs) typically have qualitatively different college experiences. While Caucasian American students' have many educational, social, and relational opportunities to which they have access, they are not always extended to SOC. Research has shown that SOC experience social isolation, discrimination, and myriad emotions as they attempt to matriculate in these educational contexts. This may not be the case for all SOC, but it is an all too common phenomenon. One way to best understand the factors that contribute to these negative experiences is through the racial microaggressions (RMA) work of noted psychologist Derald Sue. In 2007, he and his colleagues published their groundbreaking work on the various types of mistreatment that SOC experience on a fairly regular basis. His research and that of other scholars is evidence that racism remains a critical social issue impacting the daily lives of people of color (POC) in very profound ways (King et al., 2011).

In the current study, our in-depth interviews with SOC at a PWI in the south support the general assumptions of RMA scholarship while also making important contributions to communication scholarship. We articulate the various ways that nonverbal and verbal communication are used to commit RMA that SOC are oftentimes able to identify. In addition, we identify types of RMAs that occur, responses to them, and how SOC cope with RMAs that extend beyond the work of Sue et al.

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(2007). Our research situates communication at the crux of this much needed area of research as we offer support for the validity of microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations as categories of racist behavior. It is through such research that we contribute to efforts in the social sciences to provide insight into the unique experiences of SOC during a tumultuous time in our country's racial history.

Overview of Racial Microaggressions Research

Psychiatrist Chester M. Pierce originated the term *racial microaggressions* in the 1970s (DeAngelis, 2009); however, it is Sue who is noted for "naming, detailing[,] and classifying the actual manifestations of aversive racism." Sue et al. (2007) define RMAs as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color" (p. 271). They remain pervasive because racism is an inherent part of U.S. culture and other societies throughout the world. POC are more attuned to RMAs, unlike the perpetrators, who are largely unaware of their racist and inappropriate behavior in interracial contexts. RMAs are either microassaults, microinsults, or microinvalidations. Microassaults occur when an individual has "conscious biased beliefs or attitudes" about a marginalized individual that are intentionally expressed (Sue, 2010, p. 6). Microinsults are different in that they are subconscious and subtle comments oftentimes "disguised as a compliment or positive statement directed toward the target person or group" (p. 7). Similarly, microinvalidations are also unconscious and, according to Sue, are "the most insidious, damaging, and harmful form [of RMA], because [they] directly attack or deny the experiential realities of socially devalued groups" (p. 7). Regardless of the type, "the power of microaggressions lies in their invisibility to perpetrators and oftentimes the recipients" (p. 6).

While RMA research overwhelmingly focuses on college students, unsurprisingly, there is considerable evidence that RMAs are impacting POC in many other social contexts. Social scientists have studied RMAs in interracial counseling relationships (Constantine, 2007), childhood and adolescence (Allen, 2013), college residence halls (Harwood, Huntt, Mendenhall, & Lewis, 2012), the workplace (Constantine & Sue, 2007), the customer service industry (Kern & Grandey, 2009), and corporate leadership (Holder, Jackson, & Ponterotto, 2015), and the findings are consistent with the primary assumptions of RMAs. POC have markedly different experiences than their Caucasian counterparts. As Pérez Huber and Solorzano (2015) explained, "everyday racist events are systemically mediated by institutionalized racism (i.e.[,] structures and processes) and guided by ideologies of white supremacy that justify the superiority of a dominant group (whites) over non-dominant groups (People of Color)" (p. 297).

RMAs are a daily occurrence (Ong, Burrow, Ja, Fuller-Rowell, & Sue, 2013) and cause stress (Torres-Harding, Andrade, & Romero Diaz, 2012), racial battle fatigue (Franklin, 2016), and psychological distress for victims (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008) who receive "denigrating messages" (e.g., "You do not belong," "You are intellectually inferior") from dominant group members. For SOC at PWIs, discomfort and racial tension were two outcomes of RMAs to which they were subjected on campus and in the local community (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Examples of RMA include, but are not limited to, racialized renaming (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012), undermining students' intelligence and competence (Stambaugh & Ford, 2015; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015), minimization of contributions to learning (Harwood, Choi, Orozco Villicaña, Huntt, & Mendenhall, 2015), and assumptions of criminality (Bennett, McIntosh, & Henson, 2017). The findings of the Harwood et al. (2012) study stress a common theme across RMA studies: SOC more frequently have a negative perception of the campus climate than do their white peers. This further underscores the need for colleges and universities to take a more aggressive role in addressing systemic racism on their campuses. Although Rogers, Cartwright, and Skinner (2016) found that "despite increased dialogue and numerous initiatives undertaken, both students and faculty from culturally diverse populations face discrimination in academic settings" (p. 1), there must be

commitment by the entire community to dismantling racism. Research on RMAs privileges the experiences of monoracial students over those of multiracial college students (Harris, 2017); thus, we encourage research that inspires institutional change.

It is abundantly clear that RMAs are organically negative experiences for POC. It is also understood that, on a very basic interpersonal level, they are inappropriate forms of communication that perpetuate systems of racism and a racial hierarchy that benefits some groups while marginalizing others. RMAs are used to educate people about the various forms that racism takes in society, and as Pérez Huber and Solorzano (2015) argue, they can be used for societal transformation or as "a powerful 'tool' for identifying, disrupting, and dismantling the racism that marginalizes, subordinates[,] and excludes People of Color in and outside of education" (p. 297). The current study was conducted in hopes of achieving this goal. Our findings demonstrate that institutional intervention is needed if institutions are truly committed to helping POC with community building, "developing critical navigation skills," and "claim[ing] empowerment from the margins" (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009, p. 659).

RMAs and communication

RMAs are inherently an interpersonal communication phenomenon. Verbal and nonverbal messages are hallmarks of what constitutes communication, specifically interpersonal communication; thus, RMAs are a type of negative interracial communication. The perpetrator is using denigrating communication behaviors within an interracial context for the sole purpose of alienating the victim, which is always a POC. Sue (2010) and other RMAs scholars stress the importance of "messages" and "communication" in understanding what RMAs are and how people respond to them; thus, it stands to reason that communication scholars would be at the core of research on RMAs across all social contexts. Moreover, such scholarship will offer further evidence to psychologists and other social scientists that *human communication* is at the core of who we are as human beings. This is particularly true regarding RMAs. The racist ideologies of perpetrators are expressed through communication, which subsequently has an adverse effect on interracial communication (Orbe & Harris, 2015), and they can only be deconstructed through research such as this.

The current study was conducted with the goal of identifying specific communication behaviors —both verbal and nonverbal—that SOC at a PWI consciously and subconsciously identify as either an RMAs or a contributing factor regarding the likelihood of one occurring. The experiences and voices of multiracial college students are privileged over those of monoracial students (Harris, 2017) in an effort to inspire institutional change and resist systemic oppression in its most basic form. <Please clarify "The experiences and voices of multiracial college students privileged over those of monoracial students"> Racism is perpetuated through actions that are committed on an interpersonal level, namely RMAs. As such, the following research questions were developed:

RQ1: What verbal messages do SOC receive that signify an experience with racism (e.g., RMAs)?

RQ2: What strategies or approaches do SOC use to (a) respond to and/or (b) cope with an RMAs?

Methods

A qualitative approach was used in order to better understand how SOC respond to RMAs and the extent to which these negative racial encounters impact the psychological, emotional, and spiritual well-being of SOC at a PWI. In-depth interviews were conducted so that participants could share their experiences in an intimate, private setting and to elicit honest responses to questions that they may have felt uncomfortable answering in a focus group setting (Patton, 2001).

In order to conduct this study and to be compliant with human subjects research, all six members of the research team completed the university's Collaborative Institutional Review Board (IRB) Training Initiative. All members were educated on the policies and procedures for conducting semi-structured interviews. Given the sensitive nature of the topic of race, the interview process was designed to be mindful of possible participant discomfort; thus, the interviews were conducted in a simulated living room in a research lab. The interviews were both audio- and video-taped in order to cross-check the accuracy of the transcribed interviews.

Participation criteria and recruitment

In order to participate, eligible participants (1) identified as a person of color (i.e., African American, Asian American, Latinx American), (2) were 18 years of age or older, and (3) had an interest in and comfort with talking about their experiences with race at the university and with the local community. Self-identified biracial students were eligible only if they strongly identified with their non-Caucasian American heritage. This criterion was created in order to capture racialized narratives and decenter whiteness and white privilege (see Harris, 2017).

Various recruitment strategies were used to identify eligible participants. The Communication Studies Department research pool was the primary recruitment site. Students enrolled in introductory-level interpersonal communication and public speaking courses could participate to complete a class research requirement credit. Some students in upper-level communication courses participated to earn extra credit, while others participated out of goodwill. Snowball sampling was used as well in order to increase the sample size due to the lack of racial/ethnic diversity within the available research pool. Both undergraduate and graduate students from various disciplines were recruited by word of mouth and Listservs, thus leading to a fairly diverse participant population. Eligible students signed up online through the departmental homepage and received an email reminder of the interview the night before. A total of 28 students participated who self-identified as an SOC. There was 1 Asian/Caucasian female, 13 African American females, 3 African American males, 1 Black male from Europe, 3 Hispanic females, 1 Hispanic male, 1 Asian and 2 Middle Eastern American females, and 2 Middle Eastern American males.

Interview protocol

A communication-centered guide was developed that prompted participants to identify specific racial incidents they experienced either at the university or in the local community that qualify as RMAs. Participants were asked various questions prompting descriptions of the verbal and nonverbal messages they received and used in response to negative racial experiences. In addition, questions were developed that prompted participants to describe the effects of RMA on their overall well-being and the social support networks that aid in coping with RMAs.

The interview guide was comprised of 36 questions, including 6 questions about basic demographics (i.e., name, gender, racial identity, year in college), 8 questions about general experiences with race at the university, 13 questions about covert and overt racial incidents, 4 questions about responses to RMAs, and 4 questions about coping strategies in response to RMAs. The questions were designed to ensure participant understanding of what constituted an RMA and to encourage thoughtful reflection on their reported experiences.

Twenty-six of the twenty-eight interviews were conducted by the lead researcher, who is a self-identified African American woman. Two interviews were conducted by Caucasian American women. All others were subsequently conducted by the lead researcher due to her extensive experience with qualitative data collection and ability to elicit in-depth participant responses. As a POC or ingroup member, she could potentially have easier access to participants and might be "better equipped to create an environment in which people feel comfortable and are willing to talk freely" (Sands, Bourjolly, & Roer-Strier, 2007, p. 354). There were no same-gender interviews for

self-identified male participants due to the unavailability of any male graduate SOC. Research team members managed the audio- and video-recording, interview registration, and coding of interview transcripts.

Interview process

Participants were guided to the lab with a simulated living room and were immediately given two copies of the IRB-approved consent form, one for them to keep and one for our records. They were informed that the pre-interviews (i.e., discussion of the consent form, participation criteria, etc.) were audio- and video-recorded for record-keeping purposes and confirmation of consent. Interviews began with the researchers thanking participants for their participation, followed by an explanation of the study's purpose. Participants were then informed that the interview was being audio- and video-recorded and that their participation could be terminated at any time without penalty. The interviews ranged in length from 35 to 120 minutes. Two interviews were eliminated from analysis due to one biracial participant's stronger identification with their Caucasian identity and another's identity as an international student. One participant lacked race-related experiences and was thereby eliminated from the analysis. Participants either chose or were assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity. Their majors or graduate programs were redacted from analysis.

The series of interview questions in the guide were followed unless questions needed to be clarified for participants or were skipped if the participant answered it in an earlier question. Participants were probed when they offered an important or unique perspective on their racial experience(s). A couple of interviews were paused when the participants appeared upset or had an emotional response (i.e., crying, reliving anger) when recalling a racial experience. Participants were also asked to evaluate their (dis)satisfaction with their response to an RMA, which may lead to future research advising POC about how to most effectively address RMAs. At the end of the interview, participants were thanked for their participation and extra credit or completion of the research requirement were confirmed by the researchers. The interview audio-files were sent off to a professional transcribing company, which ensured transcribing accuracy (i.e., verbatim) and maintained the integrity of the data. The transcriptions yielded 519 pages of double-spaced data.

Data analysis

The data analysis aimed to establish trustworthiness in the blended manifest and latent content analysis (Berg, 1998). A qualitative latent analysis was used, with six coders independently reading the transcripts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and using participant talk turns related to the RMA questions as the units of analysis, to highlight participants' racialized experiences (i.e., racism), responses to them, and their effect on participant mental, physical, and emotional well-being. The research team comprised two African American women, two Caucasian American women, one Caucasian American male, and one Indian American female. One African American woman was the professor and lead researcher, and the other was a graduate student in a psychology doctoral program. The Caucasian American co-researchers were doctoral students in the same department as the professor. The Indian American female was a second-year student completing a requirement for the university's honors program. All four graduate students were volunteering their time on this project for the experience of doing qualitative research.

A cross-checking system was used to safeguard against any researcher biases in data analysis and ensure intercoder reliability and an objective approach to the data. Specifically, the intersectionality and positionalities of the research team decreased the likelihood of any individual biases. As Sue Capodilupo, Nadal, & Torino (2008) explain, researchers are at the center of the data collection process; thus, "identification of personal values, assumptions, and biases are required at the initial onset of the study" (p. 184). Toward that end, researchers were involved with the entire data analysis process. Inter-rater reliability ensured coding accuracy and was an "effective safeguard in controlling

potential biases in the research setting, methodology, analysis, and interpretation process" (Sue et al., 2008, p. 184). Ten interviews were independently open-coded by the team, resulting in emerging themes that were labeled and defined during the weekly meetings. Meetings were held as the remaining 17 interviews were coded and refined. Final analysis resulted in 30 concepts later assigned to one of seven dominant categories that emerged from the data and best reflected the meanings of the participant-identified concepts central to their RMA experiences. The analysis "ensure[d] the trustworthiness of the participants' voices and experiences through triangulation" (Utsey, Gernat, & Hammar, 2005, p. 460), hence the weekly meetings that facilitated "open and honest self-reflection on the part of all team members" (Utsey et al., 2005, p. 460). Team debriefing occurred after every interview and weekly meetings, which included self-reflections from the interviewer and observations from the observer/co-researchers. This allowed the team to gain "clarification on observations made by the facilitator and observer, and identify and challenge preexisting assumptions held by members of the research team" (p. 461).

Results

The analysis yielded seven categories, with each containing between two and eight concepts (see Table 1). The categories are overall descriptors of the RMA response types participants believed were important. The seven categories were (1) racial distancing, (2) denial, (3) interracial paradigm shift, (4) forced racial consciousness, (5) coping, (6) racial enlightenment, and (7) confrontation. Thirty concepts emerged from the data, which will be discussed in the analysis. *Racial distancing* was the perception that an RMA caused rejection and/or ostracization. *Denial* was a conscious or subconscious resistance to believe an RMA was committed. *Interracial paradigm shift* referred to a perceived need to reevaluate the racial diversity of one's interpersonal network after an RMA. *Forced racial consciousness* described a struggle between two extreme pressures to either distance oneself from the dominant culture or to draw closer to one's ingroup. *Coping* was a defense against the psychological, emotional, and/or spiritual effects of racism. *Racial enlightenment* referred to a newfound awareness of racism as a result of being at a PWI. *Confrontation* was the explicit use of a verbal message to address a perpetrator's RMA. (Due to space limitations, one example will be provided of novel concepts within each category).

Table 1. Categories of Communication Responses to RMAs

Racial distancing	Denial	Interracial paradigm shift	Racial consciousness: being made aware of otherness
Alienation	Apologism	Un/healthy racial curiosity	Assimilation vs. acculturation
Racial affiliation	Minimizing	Interracial connectedness	Hypervisibility
Intersectional racism	Normalizing racism	Interracial avoidance	Racial/ethnic affirmation
Racial isolation		Cross-cultural comingling	Racial spokesperson
			Racial ambiguity
			Cultural assimilation
			Racial identity management
			Stereotype resistance
Coping	**Environmental observations**	**Confrontation**	
Compartmentalization	Heightened racial awareness	Direct confrontation	
Social-emotional support	Lack of racial/ethnic diversity	Normative resistance	
Familial connection and support	Latent racism		
Spiritual identity management	Systemic oppression		
	Culture shock		

Verbal messages as RMAs

RQ1 aimed to identify verbal messages SOC receive signifying an RMA. There was significant confirmatory evidence that SOC are regularly subjected to racism. This was the case for both female and male students across all racial/ethnic groups in numerous contexts at this southern university (e.g., classrooms, dorms, white Greek rush, study abroad programs) and in the local community (i.e., local bars, driving). The perpetrators' verbal messages were oftentimes accompanied by nonverbal behaviors that clearly communicated to the RMA victim that they are unwelcome. Many women and a few men reported that both overt and covert discrimination were rampant in many downtown bars. This was most evident in the unwritten rule that SOC were unwelcome there; thus, they were susceptible to racial and gender discrimination.

Ashley (African American) explained that many bars use biased dress codes to racially discriminate, primarily against African Americans. Signage in the bar or verbal messages of impermissible attire make it clear that stereotypically African American clothing (e.g., ripped jeans, sports shoes, chains) is cause for bouncers to deny entry to most African Americans. Ashley recalled a time when a racist bouncer refused to let in her male friend even though he was dress code–compliant. A female friend became increasingly upset as she observed one and then several Caucasian American males who were dress code–noncompliant be let in a bar. When she confronted the bouncer, he replied, "Oh. Well, like, I can't catch everybody." She then asked to speak to the manager, who Ashley said stopped short of admitting to racial discrimination.

> We were like, "Please say it. Like, because it's the truth. You're not letting him in because he's black. If he wasn't here, then we would've got in." And he let us in, but my friend was behind us, and he didn't let him in. So, he was like. "We're not letting him in not because he's …" She was just like, "Say it, please. I mean, it's the truth …"

This RMA represented many of the participants' negative racialized experiences in downtown bars. SOC perceived this is a serious problem, as they are prohibited from having what some participants described as the "real college experience" oftentimes reserved for their Caucasian American peers. Instead, SOC are repeatedly subjected to racial discrimination and prejudice when attempting to follow college cultural norms. Other forms of overt racism SOC experienced include "cultural markers" such as confederate flags, bars named after Civil War generals, and racially offensive drinks (e.g., margarita named the "N-word-rita") that let them know that they are unwelcome downtown. Thus, many SOC avoided downtown altogether and found other ways to socialize with their peers.

Before enrolling at the university, Sabrina (African American female) anticipated racial segregation and a negative racial climate, which she believed would potentially lead to an increased likelihood of negative racial experiences. She shared that, after enrolling, she was heavily involved in a number of key positions on campus, and because of her race, many of her Caucasian American peers would dismiss her. They committed multiple RMAs against her until they realized she was a powerful student leader. For Sabrina, these experiences were very difficult "if you don't know if someone is giving you that look because you're black, or you get into your own head, because you're like, okay, are you saying this to me because I'm black, or because I'm a woman or like, what? What's your deal, what's your deal, what's your problem now? [Y]ou know, so there's different ways to make people feel unwelcome."

RMA responses and coping strategies

RQ2 was interested in identifying specific strategies SOC use when responding to an RMA. We also sought to understand the coping strategies SOC use related to stress associated with a racial interpersonal assault. There are four categories that are particularly unique in that they capture significant adjustments SOC are forced to make after being offended by someone in the university community. Racial distancing, interracial paradigm shift, denial, and coping will be discussed in depth.

Racial distancing

Students who were subjected to some RMAs experienced a sense of rejection and/or ostracization from the university community. As a result, they felt a need to create distance between themselves and Caucasian students, hence racial distancing. The specific concepts associated with this category were (a) alienation; (b) racial affiliation; (c) intersectional racism; and (d) racial isolation (self-preservation and suppression).

Alienation is a perception of being excluded from the macrocultural group, which many attributed to their race. The students who shared this perception were all female, including several African American and one Mexican American participant. Nina attributed this perception to the obliviousness of Caucasian American racial issues of race and the university's lack of racial/ethnic diversity. She noted:

> Like, I understand a lot of people are just ignorant. They're ignorant and they come from these bubbles where they'[ve] not been forced to interact with other people. They're not forced to get along with different groups or to be in inclusive environments. But minorities are constantly forced to do that, so we know how to interact with other people. It's not a lot of incidents where a white person's put in the situation where they're the only white person in the room, but that's situations that we put ourselves in all the time. So, my parents taught me that you just don't have time to think about, "Oh, I'm the only black person doing this, I'm the only female doing that." Like, you have to just prove people wrong and show them that, yeah, I may be the only black person, but I'm still going to do the job the same as you are, if not better, so.

Nina alluded to her status as being "the only one" as a type of RMA that contributes to SOC being alienated in what many believe to be an inclusive environment. Jessica, a biracial Honduran-Caucasian woman who identifies more with her Hispanic ethnicity, also commented on the lack of racial/ethnic diversity as a barrier to a sense of belonging for SOC. This subtle RMA was less impactful due to her self-reported stereotypical Caucasian features and "privilege" to "kind of pass for white." Nevertheless, she stressed the importance of racial/ethnic representation for Latinx students and other minorities.

After experiencing an RMA, some students attempted to establish *racial affiliation*, which is the recognition of a need to connect with other SOC through informal (e.g., study groups, mentoring) and formal (e.g., university-sponsored organizations) educational support systems. Doctoral student Malcolm stressed the importance of connecting with other graduate SOC with similar experiences and interests in addressing diversity issues personally and through scholarship. He stressed the importance of "shar[ing] our stories" and how relationships with other SOC offer a type of "academic enrichment" lacking in most graduate programs. In general, however, Malcolm expressed appreciation for his school and college doing "a really good job" of coordinating events promoting racial/ethnic inclusivity. In his words, these efforts have created "better … and safe spaces" for important discussions about diversity that are increasingly important given the current political and racial climate of the country.

Intersectional racism refers to the perception that a negative experience is racist and/or ethnocentric, sexist, and/or classist. Jessica described a frequent RMA that resonated with a few other participants. She was oftentimes stereotyped because of her race, ethnicity, and gender, which she described as very hurtful.

> People always think I'm Mexican (laughs). Or like, usually when I tell them like—they're like, "Oh, so you're Spanish or something?" and Spanish means from Spain, and so it's like—it's like, small things like that, where people assume that, like, we're all from, like, one area. Like, I feel like no one ever really acknowledges Central—I'm from Honduras in Central America, and sometimes I feel like people are like, "What's that?" And then—or when people joke about, like, how Hispanic women get pregnant when they're young, it hurts because, like, that kind of is a reality for some people in my family, and it's because—my dad's side of the family is from a pretty poor background, and so my family that's still in Honduras, like, they—they—sometimes they're only option is to get married and start a family, because the children help them support them. So that hurts, when people say stuff like that.

Jessica had significant experience with classmates questioning her racial/ethnic identity and ascribing to her negative gender stereotypes. As a result, she developed skills for recognizing the multilayered nature of the RMA. She also became increasingly aware of the need to more closely identify with other Latino students, which was helpful to her overall well-being and would provide a space for open and honest discussions about racism. Despite passing for white, Jessica chose to maintain a healthy distance from Caucasian students who stigmatized her.

Racial isolation is a response to overt and covert RMAs that cause feelings and perceptions of being alone. For Natalie (Asian American), her classmates engaged in behaviors that made her feel as though she did not belong and was an outgroup member.

> I had something to say, and I just kept getting, like, talked over, and that wasn't nice. But maybe it was because I wasn't part of their friend group, because it was like three of friends, and they were girls, and they were also, like, white. And they were part of the same sorority, I think, so they kind of clicked together, and I had to be in a group with them. And I don't know if it's because of race or because I just didn't run with that crowd that, like, I was being talked over.

Natalie was frustrated with her classmates who were overlooking her in their small group. She believed race was the primary reason, thus causing feelings of racial isolation and a great affiliation with other SOC.

Other participants used racial isolation as a form of self-preservation or -segregation where they avoided specific locations, events, groups, and individuals in order to protect themselves from potential future racist acts. Emily (South Asian) stated that:

> [T]he best thing to do sometimes is just walk away, because, like I said, like, I shouldn't have to deal with this. This isn't my problem. I'm not going to take the time out of my day to deal with something that I shouldn't have to deal with. Like, this is unfair to me, you know? Like, I don't deserve this. I deserve better than this. So, I'm going to take my time and spend it somewhere else [rather] than trying to make up for someone else's ignorance.

As her account demonstrates, Emily oftentimes felt the best response to an RMA was to not put forth the effort to deal with that person. The end goal was to preserve her mental and emotional health by avoiding situations where she was subject to the potentially racist behaviors of others.

Denial

Several participants consciously or subconsciously resisted believing that someone committed an RMA and engaged in either (a) *apologism*, (b) *minimization*, or (c) *normalizing racism. Apologism* was a willingness to excuse active and/or passive acts of RMA and view them as harmless. *Minimization* involved reducing the seriousness of a racist, prejudiced, or discriminatory RMA, whereas *normalizing racism* was acceptance of racism as the societal norm. Ben, an African American male, engaged in apologism when describing his typical response to Caucasian American peers in high school and college who commit RMAs. He recalled being referred to as "the black guy" and being told he was chosen for sports teams because "you got the extra leg muscle, or you're faster because you're black or whatnot stuff like that." He excused the behavior by saying it was not "really, really like, super, super offensive. I don't even really consider that offensive, to be honest … I'm okay with that, to be honest. I'm not like—I'm not—if that's the worst thing I'm going to hear, then, you know, that's not really going to bother me, it's just going to go over my head, and I don't really consider that blatantly—that's just a stereotype that's been going on forever, or for a while, at least."

Donald is Lebanese and Caucasian, but primarily identifies as Lebanese. He reported using various strategies that minimize RMAs. His responses were to avoid acknowledging interpersonal assaults as being racist. For example:

So, you know, I don't—people who have made comments, little comments, but that's—like I said, I address that as silliness. As far as other comments people have made, I realize people have different experiences. Some are ignorant, some—it doesn't mean they're right. If other students are hearing them and feeling poorly—feeling poorly, that's not right, because UGA (A Southern University[1]) doesn't support that or stand for that. But if they want to keep that to themselves, it doesn't bother me at all.

Instead of seeing language and behaviors as racist, Donald dismissed them as being "silliness." Such an approach makes the RMA less serious, thus resulting in inaction or a refusal to confront such behavior.

Normalizing racism is best captured in Ashley's description of seeing Caucasian American men who fit the southern "good ole boy" stereotype. People ask how she deals with this part of the local culture and whether she feels "uncomfortable about [Confederate flags]." Ashley explained that, "I assume that they're from the country and they're like a little racist, but it's not like a mind-blowing thing to me. Like, I have friends who are, like, from New York and stuff, and so they don't see Confederate flags on the back of pickup trucks. Like, how UGA students and just driving around Athens, they do. So, like, for them that's like mind-blowing. It's crazy. And for me it's kind of like not a daily thing, but it's not like an unexpected sight to see." Her experiences have led Ashley to accept certain behaviors as racist, and although she was not directly confronted by a specific perpetrator, the racist symbols of the local southern culture have become "normal" and the status quo.

Interracial paradigm shift

Participants with an interracial paradigm shift responded to RMAs by reevaluating the racial diversity of their interpersonal relationships. Three concepts in this category were (a) *healthy racial curiosity*, (b) *interracial connectedness*, and (c) *interracial avoidance*. A "healthy curiosity" occurred when a Caucasian American person expressed appropriate and respectful interest in an SOC's racial identity and/or race-related experiences. Questionable behavior was considered unhealthy curiosity. *Interracial connectedness* involved an SOC reflecting on the perceived difficulties associated with interracial relationships with a Caucasian person and whether they were worth investing in. *Interracial avoidance* was the decision to avoid interactions with and spaces where Caucasians pose a potential or actual threat of social discomfort or verbal, psychological, or physical harm.

Brittney's (African American) healthy racial curiosity involved a female dorm resident. Brittney was her resident advisor and the first African American person the Caucasian American female had ever met "in real life" despite knowing that black people existed. Brittney said, "She would ask me weird questions all the time, which I would rather her ask me than go ask someone else. So, I wasn't, like, offended, because you can tell when someone is asking the question genuinely out of curiosity, or if someone is just asking it to kind of be like, a—I won't say a bad word, but … a butt." This same woman's father directed an *unhealthy curiosity* RMA at Brittney when he met her, touched her natural hair, and expressed excitement about how beautiful her hair was. He stated that his daughter was "going to learn a lot here," all while patting her on the head. There was also a hint of apologism when Brittney concluded that "he genuinely didn't see that what he was doing was offensive."

Ingrid (African American) did not have any RMAs with her Caucasian American friends, whom she explained were instrumental in helping her appreciate her *interracial connectedness*. These very "open minded and very down to earth" friends were instrumental in what "keeps [Ingrid] grounded, also." She explained that those relationships are a "reminder [that] it's, like … no matter what, this is not … everyone does not believe this. Because sometimes I feel like the media can make you feel like, 'Ah, racism is everywhere.' It's like it is, but you can't take it in your personal—you can't let it affect your person-to-person encounters. So that reminder is nice."

Interracial avoidance was evident in Olivia's (African American) repeated RMAs from a Caucasian American woman on her cheer squad. The comments Olivia chose to highlight were always criticisms of her hair. Olivia shared that, when the woman would ask "Are you going to wear your hair like that?" she would respond with "Yeah. If I want to wear my hair like this, I'm going to wear it like this." Her general approach to this woman and any others engaging in similar behavior was to "refrain from having any kind of conversation with her," as Olivia believed they "would lead to her saying something that would tick me off."

Coping

Coping is a defense against the psychological, emotional, and/or spiritual effects of racism. Participants used (1) *suppression*, (2) *social-emotional support*, and/or (3) *spiritual identity management* to deal with RMAs. Suppression involved ignoring RMAs. Social-emotional support was a dependence on a social support network for guidance, emotional support, and empathy while processing, understanding, and coping with racism. Spiritual identity management referred to the use of religious beliefs and values in order to process RMAs. Danielle's (African American) decision to suppress RMAs was borne out of fear, given the current racial climate in the United States; therefore, she chose to ignore them. She stated that "you've just got to try to ignore it because you don't want to go off and be the crazy black girl or [perpetuate] typical black behavior." Social-emotional support reflected a need to seek out family and same-race friends for strength. Spiritual identity management occurred for Olivia, and that involved her using her value system as a Christian to deal with RMAs. She explained that, "investing in my faith just helped me clean up the mess on the inside. It's starting to pour over into my outside. But yeah. [It] just helped me fix mental concepts that aren't true and like that. I tell people all the time, He broke down the false concepts of myself and then He showed me who I really am."

Discussion

The findings from this exploratory study are consistent with RMA research, while also introducing new categories and concepts that contribute to how scholars and SOC are "naming, detailing[,] and classifying the actual manifestations of aversive racism" (DeAngelis, 2009). The students in this study experienced and reported on RMAs they are experiencing both at the university and in the local community, which is consistent with previous research (Solorzano et al., 2000). Regardless of their race/ethnicity, these SOC experienced verbal and nonverbal RMA on a daily basis (Sue et al., 2007). These findings further demonstrate that communication is at the center of understanding RMA, as evidenced by the seven categories of communication responses and 30 corresponding concepts that are new to RMA scholarship. The narratives of the SOC further substantiate the overwhelming data that day-to-day microaggressions are a commonality (Ong et al., 2013) and cause them significant stress (Torres-Harding et al., 2012), racial battle fatigue (Franklin (2016), and psychological distress (Sue et al., 2008). The RMA responses also demonstrate how both verbal and nonverbal communication are central to identifying the ways in which systemic oppression is perpetuated through human behavior.

Although not the focus of the study, overwhelming evidence was provided regarding the impact of the current racial and political climate on negative racial experiences and interracial communication of SOC. The interviews were conducted during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and when asked how they believed the then-current state of race relations were affected by the election, an overwhelming number of students stated that the racial climate was much more intense for SOC. They experienced and witnessed both overt and covert RMAs that mirrored the racist, sexist, classist, and misogynistic rhetoric of Republican nominee Donald Trump, which is very disturbing. These behaviors undoubtedly disrupted their learning, as they dealt with macro-level racial tensions that trickled into their daily lives. Future research should focus on RMAs that POC are experiencing in the aftermath of the historic presidential election of 2016.

Another noteworthy contribution that the current study makes is giving voice to the RMA experiences of SOC, which are oftentimes marginalized in social science research, including the communication studies discipline. As Constantine (2007) noted, research has overwhelmingly focused on the experiences of college students who are not racial minorities; thus, our study provides further support for the need for research on how RMAs are impacting POC in various social contexts. The findings are consistent with other research on RMA in other contexts, such as in interracial counseling relationships (Constantine, 2007; Goodstein, 2008), during their childhood and adolescence (Allen, 2013), in university residence halls (Harwood et al., 2012), in the workplace (Constantine & Sue, 2007), and in corporate leadership (Holder et al., 2015). POC continue to have markedly different experiences than their Caucasian cohorts. Research on this very relevant social issue is critical given that "everyday racist events are systemically mediated by institutionalized racism (i.e., structures and processes) and guided by ideologies of white supremacy that justify the superiority of a dominant group (whites) over non-dominant groups (People of Color)" (Pérez Huber & Solorzano, 2015, p. 297). Such research can be used to dismantle systemic oppression that is adversely affecting large segments of the population.

Conclusions

Due to space limitations, we were unable to report all of the findings from our qualitative study. Nevertheless, the RMA accounts of SOC demonstrate how complex these troubling interracial interactions with their peers can be. Our future research will provide further depth into other responses students had to RMAs that they experience at a PWI. While Hotchkins and Dancy (2015) found that African American males experience reactive invisibility (i.e., embracing Black male stereotypes), our study found that SOC experience *hypervisibility*, or an RMA where they have heightened and unwanted visibility because of their race. Such attention was found to have a negative effect on the participants' experience with the university, particularly in places such as the classroom or among their peers.

Our future research will also explore the important role social support networks play in helping SOC cope with their marginalized status and subsequent RMAs. SOC reported a heavy reliance on family members and friends as they attempted to understand and process an RMA by a fellow student, professor, or member of the local community. The findings could ultimately assist institutions in developing interventions that not only offer SOC coping resources specific to RMA but also empower them to survive the interpersonal assaults they will undoubtedly face. Furthermore, our future research will identify ways to actively engage perpetrators in efforts to dismantle racism through interracial communication on university campuses and beyond.

Notes

1 The name of the school has been concealed for the purpose of participant anonymity.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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