

Racial Microaggressions Experienced by DACA/Undocumented Students

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Introduction

Microaggressions (overt racism, subtle racial insults, and the invalidation of such experiences) affect the academic success of racial minority students at Predominantly White Institutions (Levy, Heissel, Richeson & Adam, 2016). Out of the 65,000 undocumented students who graduate from high school each year, only 5% - 10% enroll in college (The Best Colleges, 2019). DACA/Undocumented students continue to experience an unhealthy campus environment due to racism and anti-immigrant ideologies. Institutions do not cater to the unique needs of this student population: making it hard for them to fully integrate into campus life (Muñoz & Vigil, 2018).

Purpose

(a) Document the nature of microaggressions experienced by DACA/Undocumented college students. (b) Identify the impact of microaggressions on their academic and psychological well-being. (c) Analyze the coping mechanisms they use to deal with microaggressions. (d) Provide recommendations to enhance their classroom experience, academic success, and well-being.

Method

Participants: Three DACA undergraduate students, ages 19 - 22, born in Mexico. Age of immigration (9 months, 1.6, and 7 years). Held 1 - 2 jobs (18 - 40 hours per week), were First Generation College students, maintained high GPAs (3.1, 3.6, 3.8), and were bilingual (English/Spanish).
Procedure: Conducted, transcribed, and coded two 3-hour in-depth interviews using qualitative methodology.

Results

I. Intersectionality of identities poses challenges:

- Type of immigration status (DACA, Status In-Progress, Undocumented)
- Low Socio-Economic status
- Bilingual proficiency
- First Generation college student
- Race/Ethnicity
- Skin color
- Gender

II. Coming out process

1. Not knowing
2. Exploring
3. Confronting legal status and realities
4. Accepting their status
5. Pride in identity
6. Taking action and control, finding resources, and advocating for self or others

III. Microaggressions

- **Type** - microassaults (overt racism), invalidations, bystander/witness, environmental

- *"I talked to the professor and he said...it was just a discussion...it wasn't nothing to take personal."*
- *"We were playing Selena [Latino music] because we were cleaning our dorm and a White boy came to tell us to "shut up little Mexico."*
- *"...some girl mentioned, oh, yeah, I think they should just go back to their country and not take the opportunities from American citizens. And she had no idea I was undocumented."*
- *"...there was just a bunch of White people... my roommates and I were all Brown girls. ... we would walk...and they would just stare at us."*
- *"...we [White friend] were working on homework...[papers] were very similar. And I would get points deducted... she would get the full score."*
- *"[A student said] she doesn't think that immigrants should be in this country... specifically DACA students should not be given those opportunities..."*

• Impact

- Cognitive - overthinking, doubting intentionality, disbelief
- Emotional - anger, fear, loneliness, anxiety, hopelessness, alienation, lack of support, sadness, isolation, discomfort, awkwardness, disgust, depression, shock
- Physical - physiological reaction, hypervigilance
- Meta-communication - implicit negative messages
"...I'm uncomfortable [with microaggressions]. I feel like my mouth or muscles really do get tensed up and I clench a lot."

- **Coping** - walking away, ignoring, distancing, confronting, reframing, moving on

- **Pre-college experiences** - microaggressions occur and accumulate from elementary school and continue through high school and college

IV. Positive Outlook as a DACA Student

• Obtaining Support

- Programs (EOP, DREAM Center, Diversity Psychology Club, McNair Scholars)
- University staff, professors, administrators, & advisors
- Family & friends

• Becoming Resilient

- Academics - maintain high GPA, goal-oriented, persistence toward graduation
- Career - hold long-term personal and academic goals (e.g. attending graduate school)
- Positive attributes - are role models, possess determination, self-compassion, and gratitude for what they have
- Feel good and proud to be a college student
- Feel safer in an online environment versus in person
- Develop a sense of agency and self-efficacy
- Take on leadership positions

V. Political Climate/Media

- Stressful past administration policies - DACA uncertainty, fear of deportation, inconsistent changes in DACA stability
- Media fatigue - not creating false hopes, instilling fear and unsafety
- Media frenzy - anxiety, fearful about DACA termination

VI. Recommendations

- Implement a communications campaign to educate the campus community about DREAM Center services, significance and implications of DACA status, increase positive visibility
- Suggested Programming: "Immigration Monologue Event"
- DREAM Center Trainings
 - For Faculty/Staff: "UNDOCU Ally"
 - For Peers: "UNDOCU Peer-to-Peer Ally"
 - For Classes/Clubs: "DREAMS on Wheels" (5-minute presentation)
- Professor/Staff Self-Awareness and Responsibility
 - Demeanors of professors/staff (come across as approachable, not superior)
 - Increase self awareness regarding unconscious biases, color blind ideologies, and coming out processes
 - Inclusive, safe, respectful, and equitable curriculum & pedagogy

Discussion

- Despite the many challenges undocumented students face, they thrive academically and personally: hold high GPA's, work two jobs, show resilience, highly value their education, have a grateful outlook of life, and persist in attaining their long-term goals.
- Administrators, professors, students, and allies must commit to implement intervention strategies to reduce microaggressions in the classroom to create a safe and inclusive learning/living environment and campus climate.
- The institutional strategic plan should effectively address the goal to increase the recruitment, retention, and graduation of underrepresented students. In particular, they must ensure the success of DACA/undocumented students.
- Institutions claiming a commitment to promote student success (faculty included) must be strategic and wise in aligning their diversity, equity, and inclusion goals with budget. Silence and inaction are no longer acceptable.

References

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