

Racial Microaggressions as Experienced by Asian American Females

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to explore racial microaggressions as experienced by Asian American females on a college campus. While overt acts of racism may be less obvious in our culture, indirect and subtle racism is also reported by people of color. This research allows a specific group, Asian American females, to share their experiences through focus-group and one-on-one interviews. The literature focuses on race, ethnocentrism and microexpressions as a guide to understanding racial microaggressions. A qualitative method is utilized to give voice to the participants and the results are compared to microaggressions and other forms of indirect racism to contribute to ongoing work with racial expressions on campuses and in communities. Themes that emerged about race-related ethnocentric communication were 1) questionable communication, 2) credibility communication and 3) a question of difference for the messages that were received. The themes that emerged regarding the impact on Asian American females centered on 1) external responses, 2) internal responses, and 3) interaction responses. The findings of this study suggest that while racial microaggressions are hard to detect, they do exist and affect Asian American females in unique ways.

INTRODUCTION

Human communication is relayed in many ways, but some forms may be more subtle than others. Message types are typically recognized as verbal and nonverbal communication. Miller (1988) found that verbal messages account for only a small majority of the way people communicate, whereas nonverbal messages can make up to 90% of the way people communicate (as cited in Johnson, 1999). According to Richmond and McCroskey (2000), nonverbal communication is enacted in many forms such as body language, facial behavior and vocal characteristics. In some cases, actions speak louder than words, with those actions being nonverbal behaviors that may be subtle, indirect and even expressed in a negative manner. Certain topics may cause tension between communicators due to sensitivity or disagreement. For example, sexual orientation, religion and race are topics that may ignite powerful discussion due to differing viewpoints. Looking at race specifically, Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, and Rivera (2009b) state that "difficult dialogues surrounding race can potentially be threatening conversations or interactions between members of different racial groups" (p. 184). Unfortunately, persons of color may experience negativity that is racist both in words and in action. Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino (2009a) reinforce the ongoing experience of others by stating, "Racism has been a constant, continuing, and embedded issue in American history and society" (p. 88).

As noted by Sue (2003) and the President's Initiative on Race (1998), the Civil Rights Movement had a significant impact on changing racial attitudes; however, research shows that political change from this movement has led to racism evolving into more subtle behaviors (as cited in Sue et al., 2009a). To understand how racism is communicated in today's society, an examination of groups of persons who are at the receiving end of negative words and actions is essential. One group that has a limited voice in the discussion of race and racism is Asian American women. Sue et al. (2009a) suggest that "the psychological needs of Asian Americans arising from racism are repeatedly overshadowed by the experiences of Whites and Blacks" (p. 89). Typically, the discourse around racism has often times been dichotomized into a White and Black issue. This creates a misunderstanding of other racial groups, assuming their experiences are similar, or even the same, to all racial groups. The misconstrued perception suggests a need to gain a better understanding of the diverse experiences that exist.

Colleges and universities provide a good setting to gain a better understanding of cultural experiences. The Office of Institutional Research at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse ("Fact Sheet," 2013) reported a

population of around 1,000 multicultural students, reflecting a steady growth each year. The Office of Campus Climate reported that in 2008, of the 228 student and faculty of color who participated in relevant surveys, 50% of them experienced offensive, hostile, or intimidating conduct due to their race. The report also reveals that the majority of respondents of color reported feeling uncomfortable with the overall climate of the campus, with 61% of employees of color and 47% of students of color having serious thoughts about leaving the university ("Wisconsin System Climate," 2013). Although, there is little to no specific information about Asian American females at the university, the results are motivating to conduct further research.

Many multicultural students report negative experience because of race, so a closer examination of these experiences is warranted. Furthermore, it is vital to come to a better understanding of how race and microexpressions aid in perpetuating racism. There are several ways that messages are received and many are micro in nature, yet hurtful on a macro level. Recently, the phenomenon of racial microaggressions has surfaced into the eye of scholars across the nation, challenging the way people perceive race. More specifically, Asian Americans are often misrepresented and misunderstood in regard to racial experiences, so this research will allow voices that have been overshadowed a chance to be heard. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to explore racial microaggressions as experienced by Asian American females.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication and Racism

An individual's racial identity can be made up of a breadth of characteristics that range from his or her historical background to the color of his or her skin. The way others view an individual based on race is a factor that makes up one's racial identity and is central to understanding one's self through communication (De La Mare, 2013). Communication scholars often focus on the dynamic topic of race as it contributes to effective or ineffective messaging, such as misconceptions or stereotypes toward different races. As explained by Munshi and Edwards (2011), "Race cannot exist without a social context; race as a process comes into existence through the social and depends on the social to evolve and survive" (p. 351). Historically, race issues have been a source of study and it is vital that race continue to be understood in current society. The 2010 US Census data indicates that minorities make up almost 40 percent of the population (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). While strides have been made in our culture regarding racist attitudes, individuals still experience various forms of racism as part of their daily lives.

Overt and Subtle Racism. The more well-known, but less common form of racism is overt racism. Prior to the Civil Rights Movement, people would use techniques that were obvious to how they felt about an ethnic race, such as prohibiting the migration of people from Asia (Jun, 2012). Another vastly common way of showing racist opinions, which still exists today, is racial slurs. Racial slurs are categorized as hate speech that is usually directed towards a group of people based on a characteristic that is shared among the group (Croom, 2014). Some examples of racial slurs Asian Americans encounter include "chink" or "jap" which communicate name-calling, hate and discrimination.

Over time, overt racism became less prevalent when displaying discriminatory opinions, yet it did not go away. Hate speech, name-calling and uninformed perceptions continue, yet may be shared less "publically," evolving into a wide variety of subtle and strategic techniques (Sue et al., 2007). In today's society, overt racism is shunned upon and typically considered a hate crime. Other examples are found in naïve understanding of other cultures that come across as racist. For example, students or other individuals may travel outside of the United States with hopes to see the world from a different perspective. Yet the experience may stop short of embracing difference, and both home and away, individuals may talk about cultural ceremonies and difference as bizarre, weird, or wrong, simply because it is not like their own culture. While the travel example is less obvious in intent, it demonstrates how overt talk of race and culture may be different, but prevalent.

Public rhetoric shunning hate crimes and overt racist behaviors provide support, along with laws, resources, and climate offices at school, in jobs, and in communities. However, these resources do not change racist opinions and individuals who hold these opinions are forced to develop new techniques to express their feelings of racism and or hate. More subtle forms of expression have been likened to modern, symbolic, or aversive racism (Sue, et al., 2007). According to Sue et al. (2007), subtle racism is "a) more likely to be disguised and covert and b) has evolved from overt racism to be a more ambiguous form that is hard to identify" (p. 272). Simply avoiding someone because of their race is an example of subtle racism. Clearly it is more difficult to detect,

and is comparable to microscopic or subtle non-verbal expressions. Using the language of nonverbal communication, *microexpressions* are the basic understanding of microaggressions, a contemporary term used to describe the nuances of subtle racist behavior.

Microexpressions and Microaggressions

Sometimes nonverbal communication conveys more meaning than verbal communication; yet unlike verbal communication, some nonverbal messages may be overlooked and are not as easy to detect. There are six main universal expressions that are displayed voluntarily or involuntarily through face and movement: happiness, sadness, surprise, fear, anger, and disgust (Black, Porter, Baker, & Korva, 2012). When displayed in the face, these universal expressions may range from a few seconds to only a fraction of a second, and when this subtle, they are known as microexpressions. According to Porter and Brinke (2008), "when an emotion is concealed, the true emotion may manifest as a *microexpression*, a fleeting but complete facial expression discordant with the expressed emotion and usually suppressed within 1/5 to 1/25 of a second, so that it is difficult to detect with the human eye" (p. 509). While difficult to detect, microexpressions may be sending messages that are powerful in regard to emotion and attitude. Even if a person is saying something positive, their microexpressions may be translating differently. For example, when people lie, they may try to cover up or mask their emotions, yet the receiver may sense and overlook the expression because it is so subtle. Specific interactions that are complicated in terms of mixed messages and misunderstandings are those involving race.

Past research has focused on how nonverbal communication plays a role in overt racism, but there is little research on the more subtle nonverbal communication that involves race biases (Meadors & Murray, 2014). Psychologists refer to subtle and minute expressions of racial attitudes as microaggressions, which are similar in form to nonverbal microexpressions. More specifically, *racial microaggressions* are defined as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group" (Sue et al., 2009b, p. 183). Much of the time, people who are privileged in society may not realize that they enact racial microaggressions, and without meaning to, they marginalize other racial groups (Ha & McEwen, 2011). Subtle messages are a form of oppression that may restrict groups of people without the sender being aware of their actions or words (Camara & Orbe, 2010, p. 1). The target may in turn feel self-doubt, frustration and even isolation as a result of microaggressions (Sue et al., 2009a). Sue et al. (2009a) believes that this contemporary form of racism is even more problematic, damaging, and injurious to persons of color compared to overt racism. Microaggressions and race are understood together through the lens of theory, and understanding the unique experience of race and culture is popular among critical race theorists.

Theory, Race and Ethnocentrism

The critical race theory (CRT) has been used to challenge Eurocentric epistemologies and dominant ideologies from society (Sue et al., 2009a). Critical race theorists are "interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power" in multiple contexts, such as economics, history, feelings, and the unconsciousness (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 3). CRT theorists realized that there was a need for "new theories and strategies to combat the subtler forms of racism that were gaining ground" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 4). CRT has several basic tenets to help set parameters when studying race and the one most relevant to this research is the unique voice of color. This tenet suggests that each racial group has their own unique experiences and different histories that influence each and every individual. Persons of color may be able to communicate to White Americans the issues that Whites are not likely to know (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). For example, many Asian Americans were discriminated against during the World War II and many were imprisoned (Jun, 2012). Only those Asian Americans can attest to the experiences because Whites did not have to endure any discrimination during that historical event. Many CRT theorists try to further understand how a person's race affects his or her own identity and how race is communicated to one another in society. In this research, it reflects the ideas of critical race theorists believe in and challenges society further on how people perceive race. Although this research takes a qualitative/interview approach, the results can be understood and discussed with the frame of CRT.

Race theorists and researchers include terminology such as power, White privilege and ethnocentrism as ways to understand race and culture. The concept of White privilege is a subject that brings awareness to the power structures that exist in our society. White privilege is the "unearned advantages (whether desired or resisted) that benefit white people in this country in expense of persons of color" (Reed-Bouley & Kyle, 2015, p. 24). Embedded

in white privilege is the presumption of dominance and may include ethnocentrism (Reed-Bouley & Kyle, 2015). *Ethnocentrism* is hostility towards out-groups which strengthen the sense of belonging to an in-group because the familiar is preferred (Brewer, 2002). The discourse surrounding race triggers intense emotional responses and threatening conversations may arise between members of different racial groups (Sue et al., 2009b). Emotional responses may result negatively in forms of ethnocentrism or even racism. The post-civil rights era led many to believe that racism no longer existed, but as evidenced in media and experience today, racism continues to plague the United States (Sue et al., 2007). According to Neulip and Speten-Hansen (2013), highly ethnocentric persons see themselves as superior to nonnative speakers, they may sense no motivation to communicate with them and then hold negative perceptions of them. Instead, overt racism has evolved in form to be more subtle, making it more difficult to detect. While subtle racism exists for all cultural groups, the focus of this research is specific to Asian Americans, warranting a closer examination of their historical and personal experiences with modern white society.

Race and Asian Americans

Among the 40 percent of people of color, Asian Americans make up roughly five percent of the population, with prediction to increase to ten percent by 2050 (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013). Jun (2012) notes that "Asian Americans are the fastest growing racial group in the United States, and from 2000 to 2010, the population increased by 44.2 percent" (p. 329). Jun (2012) also noted that there are very few studies that focus exclusively on the Asian American experience. Rapid growth of the Asian population in our society may induce negative views, causing people to develop a negative and ethnocentric perception of Asian Americans. Among these views are stereotypes specific to Asian Americans.

Members of majority groups may perceive Asian Americans as a model minority. As explained by Kim and Lee (2014), "The model minority myth is the idea that Asian Americans are often perceived as an exemplary racial group in the United States, mainly because of their educational and financial success" (p. 1). One assumption is that Asians have experienced much more success compared to other racial groups (Kim & Lee, 2014). In contrast, Asians experience the feeling of being a foreigner in their own country (Sue, 2010).

Sue et al. (2009a) conducted research that revealed the perception of non-Asians that Asians, and that they do not experience as much racism as other people of color. This misunderstanding is partially explained by the experience of other minority groups overshadowing the Asian experience. This dichotomous view of race also suggests that other racial groups are assumed to speak for the experiences of Asian Americans. This cycle continues to delay the awareness of the experiences had by Asian Americans (Sue et al., 2009a). Jun (2012) explains that although there is clear evidence of discrimination toward Asian Americans, "they are often not considered a disadvantaged group by other racial groups because of their image as model minority and their successful achievements in society" (p. 330). This work demonstrates a false perception, assuming Asian Americans have somehow overcome racism, masking the issue behind other racial groups.

In sum, the literature above sheds light on persistent and ongoing concerns with race, culture and communication. Some may believe that historical events like the Civil Rights Movement and Barak Obama becoming president means we now live in a society where racism no longer exists (Ikuenobe, 2013). This false perception leads many people to focus on culture more generally rather than facing how race still impacts our everyday lives (Ikuenobe, 2013). Racism includes different types of overt and subtle messages, showing it is a multidimensional and complicated phenomenon. Past and current research demonstrates how culture and identity is not only a part of someone's personal experience, but it is also influenced by a systematic power function in modern society.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

With racial microaggressions being a contemporary form of racism, it is vital to explore further the experiences racial groups have in regard to this form of communication. Many researchers have omitted racial microaggressions due to the subtle nature of the features (Sue et al., 2007). One racial group that has been overlooked is Asian Americans. Research question one will shed light on the unique experiences of individuals from this group while providing insight into racial microaggressions.

RQ1: What type of race-related ethnocentric communication is reported by Asian American females in a college community?

Upon learning what the reported experiences are, the next important step is to critically analyze and understand how racial microaggressions impacted the participants. In this case, the intention is to examine experiences relative to a particular context, or those living in a campus community.

RQ2: How do race-related ethnocentric messages in a campus community impact Asian American females?

Although the research questions do not explicitly use the term racial microaggressions, this study is an attempt to learn more about the experience of race through the voices of Asian Americans. The research is interpretive in nature so the results will be analyzed and translated through the lens of racial microaggressions.

RESEARCH METHODS

Methods Description

In order to solicit the important and unique experiences of the participants, a qualitative method is appropriate. Rather than focusing on statistical testing and measurable behaviors, qualitative researchers reveal real-life experiences as told by participants. As noted by Keyton (2011), qualitative research uses discourse, or naturally-occurring talk, in a real-life setting. Keyton also notes that qualitative research is particularly useful with personal or sensitive topics, as is the case in the current research. The data collection method is most effective because it can create a safe and comfortable atmosphere for participants to share their race-related experiences without feeling threatened.

Participants/Sample

Twelve females participated in this study. In order to fit the parameters of the study, they self-identified as Asian American females 18 years or older. Each participant also had to speak fluent English in order to participate and communicate effectively with the researcher. The specific focus on Asian Americans was an explicit attempt to hear from an underrepresented group in an attempt to understand their unique experiences with race-related messages. Recruitment included the incentive of receiving a \$10 gift card from a local store.

Originally the research sought participants for focus group interviews, thinking participants would more freely share their experiences with others who volunteered for the study. However, interest generated in the study suggested participants would be more comfortable in one-on-one interviews with the researcher. Upon IRB approval to widen the data collection method to independent interviews, eight more participants were secured.

Measurement

As noted above, data was collected through qualitative interviews in either a focus group or individual setting. Focus group interviewing is defined as a "facilitator-led group discussion used for collecting data from a group of participants about a particular topic in a limited amount of time" (Keyton, 2011, p. 292). A smaller sized focus group, according to Krueger and Casey (2010), is recommended for sensitive topics that might be seen as personal or when the participants have considerable experience with the topic. This same logic worked when participants preferred an independent, face-to-face interview instead. The interview protocol was semi-structured and included open-ended questions that allowed for personal reflection, experience and examples (see Appendix A).

Procedure

Upon IRB approval, participants were solicited on a volunteer basis through the researcher's personal network and connections with relevant on-campus offices at UW-L. After recruiting and securing participants, interviews were scheduled at locations convenient for participants, most frequently in a quiet room on campus. Prior to each interview, consent was given via an IRB-approved form and signature. Interviews were recorded to ensure no messages were lost by the researcher. Upon completion of each interview, participants were given a gift card as incentive and appreciation for participating.

All interviews were carefully transcribed by the researcher. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect to protect their identity. When transcription was complete, the researcher analyzed the interview text for themes in relation to microaggressions and relevant literature related to race, culture and communication.

Analysis

The transcriptions were analyzed using a thematic method, looking for themes of racially-related communication. A theme, "is a pattern found in information that at the minimum describes and organizes possible

observations or at the maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon” (Boyatzis, 1998, p. vii). This form of analysis supports the interpretive paradigm as it allows the content to be analyzed thoroughly and thematically; therefore, it aids in the translation of the results that will justify the different racial microaggressions that are directly acted upon towards Asian American females. Although the intent of this research is not to generalize unique experiences, the results may resonate and validate other persons of color.

RESULTS

The unique experiences of each individual were carefully considered when analyzing the results. The focus group transcript text was included along with the one-on-one interviews for an overall picture of results and experiences. The results represent themes that emerged more generally from each interview. The thematic titles and explanations may not have been overtly expressed; however, patterned and repetitive responses from the participants support each theme.

RQ 1: What type of race-related ethnocentric communication is reported by the Asian American females?

Research question one was posed as a way to discuss and bring forth the different experiences that the participants have. There are many ways that people communicate race to one another and this question provided the opportunity for participants to express both positive and negative experiences. Most experiences expressed by the participants were negative in nature and clearly suggested three primary themes.

Theme 1: Questionable Communication. This theme represents those experiences that made participants uncomfortable when communicating or interacting with others due to the uncertain or problematic ways that they were treated or spoken to. To more clearly illustrate this theme, three different types of questionable communication emerged: 1) communication that is offensive 2) communication that is not funny and 3) communication that discredits.

Most participants expressed a time where they encountered people asking questions, making statements or acting a certain way that offended them. For example, all the participants reported that they had been asked the question, “Where are you from?” in some form. As explained by them, this question assumes that Asians are not American and that others have a right to ask or pry. This seemingly innocent question tends to follow with, “No, where are you really from?”

Also common is having others make racial jokes. This particular example is one of the most obvious, or overt, form of questionable communication that occurred. A common example that Asian American females encounter is people imitating Asian dialects. One research participant shared an experience where she was standing in line to get some food and a group of white males took notice of her and started shouting “CHING CHONG LING LONG.” Unfortunately, this was expressed as a typical experience among all participants.

When participants encountered race-related experiences and wanted to discuss the situation, they were usually accused of “thinking too much” or “pulling the race card.” Clearly, this theme extends to their attempted responses, with often are invalidated or discredited.

Theme 2: Credibility Communication. This theme represents those messages that more specifically discredit or invalidate experiences. In this case, credibility means that someone’s abilities are questioned, tested, or challenged. Two distinct experiences that were shared were: 1) abilities were questioned or denied and 2) achievements were unseen or unacknowledged. As shared by one participant:

“I feel like people don’t—like, what I say is not valid. Like for example, I was in the cheer team, uh, the last year and then for half of this year. I quit this year because I—I—didn’t feel valued. I didn’t feel safe there. Physically and um, ... because every time I said something, people acted as if they did not understand me at all.”

Another female who participated in sports at the university finally felt pressured to quit because she was being excluded. Even though she had proven to be a valued asset to the team with her skills, she was unacknowledged by her teammates.

Other participants expressed that their co-workers and organizational members would treat them differently than others, even if they are the best employee or highly involved with organizations. This example was particularly common when assigned to groups in school. It was not unusual to be overlooked or not called upon in class or to be ignored or not spoken to by group members.

Theme 3: A Question of Difference. This theme represents those experiences that highlight difference rather than similarities when in a public or group situation. Every participant had multiple ways of expressing this difference, and three sub-categories emerged: 1) foreigner versus American, 2) avoidance and exclusion, and 3) different but the same. Most of the time, regardless of the setting, the participants would experience people treating them as if they are a foreigner. Half of the participants noted that when identifying themselves, they would respond like one participant who explained, *"I'm [Asian ethnicity] but I don't include the tagline of American. But for formal purposes yes, I am Asian American. I just don't feel American enough to identify personally with that label."*

Similar to the credibility theme above, the identification of difference was often marked by others' behavior toward the participations. Avoidance and exclusion are the most frequently cited examples of how nonverbally the participants were ignored or not asked about opinions. In most cases, the participants experienced classmates avoiding them when pairing up for group projects or simple discussions, sometimes even tagged with stares or eye glares. This response relates to the sub-theme of "different but the same." While participants felt they were at the same level of education, competing for the same jobs and careers, and being American born, they struggled with the fact that they were still not recognized or treated in the same way. This example reinforced difference and feelings of exclusion.

RQ2: How do race-related ethnocentric messages impact Asian American females?

Research questions two was used as a follow-up analysis to explore how the messages that the female Asian Americans were receiving impacted them. During the interview process, the follow-up questions included, "how did that make you feel?" or "what did you do?" These questions were to probe the participants to dig deeper and reflect on their experiences. Messages convey strong meanings even when spoken verbally and even more strongly when spoken nonverbally since it many times relays a person's true feelings. There were three themes that surfaced in the analysis.

Theme 1: External Responses. External responses are the reactions to the ethnocentric and racist messages that participants revealed or showed to targets. In some cases, the participants expressed that they would anticipate discriminating acts since it was a 'normal' occurrence. Yet, when the situation arose they were still caught off guard and sometimes reacted in a way that was not satisfying. One participant explained, *"When it does happen, I don't jump on it right away."* One participant in the focus group shared her recent encounter with a white male:

"It was really kind of stupid, I was just really like rolling my eyes and in shock that he was asking me these questions. He had asked me, 'Do you know so and so? He's in La Crosse and he's Hmong.' And I was like, 'No, I have no idea who you're talking about.'"

Often, the participants would remain silent or decide not to do or say anything. Sometimes they would even quit activities that they were involved in. As shared above, one participant felt her opinions were not heard and were disregarded until she felt pressured to quit her dance team in hopes that she can be accepted elsewhere. Another athlete had dedicated her love and time to soccer, yet in the end, she felt forced to quit her favorite interest because of the exclusion she experienced.

Theme 2: Internal Responses. This theme represents the reactions that go unstated and may even affect the respondents emotionally. Of interest was the fact that when pressed on how questionable behavior or comments from others made them feel, it became clear they had not been asked that before. Some would pause in thought and usually respond with, "I've never thought about that before" or "I can't explain it but it's just something I know and feel." When encouraged to process more, they tended to put blame on themselves. For example, some decided they must have been overly sensitive about the situation because the other person, usually white, must have good intentions.

Another internal response that participants expressed was emotion. When participants realized they had a race-related interaction, their immediate response may be external, such as showing anger or appearing flustered. However, since these encounters happened repeatedly and often in different forms, participants also reported they felt emotional stress and depression. What was even more confusing for the participants was the fact that they found themselves validating Asian stereotypes through their silence while they wanted to fight the

stereotype. When stereotypes are confirmed, the participants felt as though they are being categorized without consent into societal standards, which are restrictive to their identity. One participant from the focus group interview shared that she felt excluded from classmates from day one.

“When I sit next to a white person, usually because of how the seating arrangements are set up, I’m usually sitting right next to another person. So the teacher says to pair up with whoever you want and most likely you would pair up with the person you’re sitting next to. But then, most of the time I realized that the person I’m sitting next [who was white] would actually turn around to talk to someone else who already has his or her own partner and they just kind of exclude me.”

Her awareness of exclusion invalidates her own identity and her identity as being American as well. Again, this adds to emotional stress and depression.

Theme 3: Interaction Responses. Interaction responses represent those messages that attempt to address ethnocentric messages and the personal effort this takes. In all cases, participants could recall times where they tried to directly or indirectly attempted to correct or educate others about how they felt. However, the futility or lack of hope far outweighed the actual attempts themselves.

As explained by a participant, “It gets exhausting to have to try and explain to people who I am. Like, why should I have to?” Another stated, “I can only educate people so much but sometimes I’m just like whatever, it’s not worth my time.” When a response from a target was noted, it was usually described as defensive or denial. The sense of futility not only contributed to stress or emotional interactions (as described above in theme 2), but it also led to justifying why participants reduce or avoid interactions with fellow students, colleagues, and White people in general.

At the end of each interview session, the researcher noted that participants were exhausted from the interview itself. Overall, the strong sense of futility or giving up was noted both through their words and actions, but also nonverbally as they interviewed. It was noteworthy that those participants who seemed more like advocates for themselves seemed more positive in their cultural awareness and identity and more likely to speak up or try to educate others. Those who explicitly talked of futility also expressed concern with safety, acceptance, and fear.

DISCUSSION

The participants in this research shared their experiences with racial messages they have received and revealed that their experiences ranged from overt and blatant to more obscure. While they differed in how they responded outwardly, all expressed emotions of hurt or frustration during the course of the interviews. The messages that emerged from the participants make connections to the existing literature on this topic.

While the word “microaggression” was not specifically used by the researcher during interviewing, evidence of this message type was apparent. As noted by Sue (2010), racial microaggressions can be intentional or unintentional and verbal or nonverbal in form. Senders may even be unaware that they are engaging in an offensive communication. Racial microaggressions are apparent but very hard to detect as shown through the experiences of these participants. The participants in this study described feelings of hopeless or defeat, thinking that their personal attempts to call it out would not be worth the time or backlash. The response that emerged here simply perpetuates the problem, and although the messages are not as overt as racial slurs, the subtle nature allows racist and ethnocentric messages to continue.

Although acts of ethnocentrism or racism are seemingly micro in nature, they are hurtful on a macro level. Sue et al. (2009a) state that those who unknowingly send racial microaggressions are perhaps the most damaging as senders may think they are being kind or helpful, when in reality their interactions perpetuate racism in subtle, naïve ways. The senders who “mean well” create feelings of discomfort and confusion, and may create a larger divide of white versus non-white by accepting it as well-meaning or unintentional. Individuals who express a genuine interest but engage in racial microaggressions may go unseen or even be rewarded. The rewards come in many forms such as acceptance or no reaction from the receiver and possibly from others who acknowledge them for being inclusive.

The research presented here is important in that it gives Asian Americans a voice. Jun (2012) noted that few studies focus exclusively on the Asian American experience although their growth in the population is clear. Rapid growth of the Asian population in our society may induce negative views, causing people to develop a negative and

ethnocentric perception of Asian Americans. Among these views are stereotypes specific to Asian Americans. This cultural group has been described as the model minority due to perceptions of educational and financial stereotypes. In this research, a contradiction was revealed between wanting to be successful but not wanting to create waves or cause controversy when faced with cultural stereotypes and messaging. The model minority myth described in the literature is highlighted here, as the silence may be perceived as good or not causing trouble, which in turn, perpetuates the myth.

The experiences shared in this study suggest that Asian American females do experience racism, but in ways indicative of both Asian and female. This model minority myth has appears to influence the participants here as they struggled with not fulfilling the Asian stereotypes of being an overachiever with appearing to be the “dumb foreigner.” Passivity and reluctance to speak up are examples, especially when describing experiences in classes. To add to this, the students in this study reported being overlooked or not called on by teachers, allowing both the classmates and the individual to fall victim to a model myth way of thinking.

Also noteworthy is the dichotomization of race issues, which was explained by Sue, et al (2009). The discourse around racism has often been dichotomized into a White and Black issue, creating a lack of awareness when it comes to the experience of other cultural groups. When interpreting the experiences of the participants in this research, it suggests that they experience their race and identity as different from those who regularly face overt acts. American culture is currently facing a dichotomy between Blacks and police officers, which also highlights the “black and white” way of understanding race and race-related messaging. In turn, Asians are not the focus, although their experiences with race are just as valid. One group may not experience racism “worse” than another, but the attention received and the dichotomous nature in our current society affects how Asian females may make sense of their experience and cultural differences.

The stories and examples shared by the participants revealed an overarching response of negativity, which was expressed as defeat or sadness. The effects in some cases led participants to “give up.” Every participant expressed that they have experienced at least one incident where they felt pressured or forced to quit an activity (jobs, sports, and clubs) or unwelcomed and rejected from joining activities. These feelings of exclusion and the struggle of being accepted within a predominantly White community is real and exhausting, and may even affect well-being. A sort of identity crisis occurs, with a constant struggle to be open about who they are and simultaneously be accepted, recognized and validated in class, in the community, and in society. As noted by participants in this study, ethnocentric and racist messages occur, and most often these messages are subtle. Like Sue et al. (2009a) suggest, the task of making the invisible visible is what will change how race is communicated in our culture.

Limitations

Although great care was taken to ensure the research was valid, there are a few limitations to note. Twelve participants were interviewed, and four of them were in a focus group setting. While all participants’ voices were represented here, there may have been inconsistencies in how the focus group vs one-one interviews affected participation and question probes. Also, more participants were preferred and the convenience sampling led to Asian-Americans who were primarily college-aged and speaking in relation to that setting. The researcher originally intended for the “college community” context to include more reference to the size of the city and interactions with various people and situations. This setting likely affected the nature of the microaggressions and other messages received. Finally, while the target participant was Asian American females, nine interviewees were primarily from one particular ethnicity. While it is tempting to note in the RQs and method the ethnicity, it was not the intention to focus on one group only. The researcher recognizes that the messages and microaggressions received were likely reflective of those acting with little to no knowledge of differing Asian populations, yet wishes to preserve the unique identity of the participants so willing to share their stories here.

Future Research

The research presented here is an attempt to reveal the very real experiences of race, identity, and microaggressions as experienced by persons of color, and in this case, Asian Americans. It is vital to continue to research how communication from others affects different racial groups. Future research should continue to study how Asians experience racism and identify continuing struggles with the model minority myth. In our ongoing rhetoric of race and culture, it is clear that a dichotomous view of “race” exists, and that phenomena could be further explored. Additional research should continue with those who have no voice or opportunity to share in

such an open way, and further exploration could include those groups that fit into two such minority groups, such as sex and ethnicity. It would also be interesting to compare experiences of groups, and certainly include male Asian American experiences specifically. Gender affects race, especially in consideration of cultural expectations and norms, so it is vital to explore how one's experience and reaction to microaggression is further influenced by culture, community and family.

Racial microaggressions are a fascinating yet troubling phenomenon that affects individuals on both a macro and a micro level. The participants in this study shared their real experiences living in a predominately White community, and the themes of message type and responses emerged. With little research on both the Asian race and on racial microaggressions themselves, scholars should continue to explore how the Asian race has been impacted in history and today. Racial microaggressions have influenced different groups of people uniquely to their own identities whether it be based on race, gender, sexuality or religion. The subtle and naïve nature of microaggressions is cause to continue to explore, teach and advocate for communities that are safe, informed and welcoming of difference.

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APPENDIX*Interview Protocol*

1. Briefly introduce yourself to the group/researcher.
 - a. (Examples--name, age, year in school, info on family/background)
2. Tell us/me in general about your experiences in La Crosse.
 - a. Where do you like to hang out with your friends?
 - b. Where do you work?
 - c. Where did you go to high school?
3. Tell us/me about your experiences as a high school and/or college student more specific to being an Asian American woman.
 - a. What are the demographics of your classes?
 - b. How "aware" are you of your race while in class?
 - c. How about around campus, in activities, or in the La Crosse community?
4. How would you describe your different social groups/friends from campus, school, and the community?
5. Describe how you or your friends address race amongst yourselves.
 - a. As part of awareness of self.
 - b. Others and identity.
6. Before providing specific examples you may have had, how would you define "racism?"
 - a. What are some differences in verbal vs nonverbal acts of racism/racist encounters?
 - b. What are some differences between obvious/overt and not-so-obvious/covert acts
7. Let's talk about negative experiences you may have had on campus or here in La Crosse specific to race. Please share some obvious, overt examples of encounters you have had that you would define as "racist" or motivated by race/culture.
 - a. Probes will ask for clarity/detail of the examples
 - b. Some examples you've encountered with faculty.
 - c. Some examples you've encountered with other students.
 - d. Some examples you've encountered with other people around La Crosse.
 - e. "Who" did/said it; where were you, etc.
8. Please share some less obvious examples or encounters you have had that you feel were motivated by your race/culture.
 - a. Probes will seek clarity/detail
 - b. If less obvious, why does it still seem like racist/race-related behavior?
9. Please share how your examples and the examples from others, made you feel?
10. Please tell us about your reactions to the overt and covert examples of racism.
 - a. What did you do in the moment, after, etc?
 - b. Did you report it to anyone?
 - c. Did other people hear/see what happened and what did they do?
11. Can you explain an experience where you weren't sure if it was racist but you felt as though they were targeting you because of your race?
 - a. Explain why you thought it was race related.
 - b. How did it make you feel?
 - c. How did you react verbally and nonverbally?
 - d. How did others react?
12. How do you think being a college student influences the way you experience race, diversity, and/or race-related encounters?
13. How do you think being a female influences the way you experience race, diversity, and/or race-related encounters?
14. How do you think being Asian American influences the way your experience race, diversity, and/or race-related encounters?
15. Please spend some time talking about how your experiences might be similar or different outside the college environment; in a community larger or smaller than La Crosse; other environments you want to address.
16. Is there anything else you would like to share with me/the focus group members?

