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**UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES  
OF RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS  
AMONG HIGHER EDUCATION STAFF**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences and impact of microaggressions in the workplace. By drawing upon the lived experiences of higher education staff who had participated in diversity and inclusion trainings, the hope was to reveal the nature and impact of microaggressions in the workplace among individuals with preparation. In-depth interviews were conducted with ten staff members drawn from institutions in the Northeast to document their lived experiences with microaggressions in the workplace. Results focused on the racial microaggressions detailed by five staff of color, each perpetrated by a White coworker or administrator, and the four witness accounts described by White staff involving a racial microaggression against a coworker of color. The additional White staff member detailed a disability-based microaggression she personally experienced. Thematic analysis of the impact of racial microaggressions included isolation, disempowerment, frustration, anger, and low job morale. Participants employed a number of strategies to manage and cope with experiences including reflection, confronting, and interrupting. Implications for workplace education and future research were discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

A healthy workplace can be described as a place where employees grow and thrive. Decades ago, a healthy workplace was marked by physical health, attendance, and a lack of turnover (Grawitch, Gottschalk & Munz, 2006). Improving overall quality of life that employees experience can result from investing in “holistic workplace health,” which includes the physical, psychological, social, personal aspects (Health Canada, 2004). In recent years, the psychological health of workplaces, in particular, has become increasingly important as the links between psychological and physical health have been underscored.

Organizational climate is a major indicator of a healthy workplace environment, and can be defined as the culture of the workplace that influences employee behavior, attitudes, feelings, and norms. Costs occur as a result of poor organizational climate; nearly one million employees miss work each day because of workplace stress and \$300 billion-- or \$7,500 per worker-- is the annual cost to employers for lost hours due to absenteeism, reduced productivity, turnover, medical/legal issues, and insurance costs (Caminiti, 2005, p. 3). This is an enormous cost to workplaces and to the employees themselves.

According to the American Psychological Association's (1999) definition of a psychologically healthy workplace, organizations can become healthy by incorporating some key initiatives such as employee assistance programs, flexible work conditions, health promotion programs, treating employees fairly, and the



prevention of work stress (see also Kelloway, 2005, p. 223). However, workplaces have to take it a step further if they want to address the climate of the workplace, especially given the increasing diversity of the workforce. Employee diversity and organizational justice are both recognized as key priorities in determining the effectiveness of the organization in the long run (Lowry, 2008). A strong workforce, comprised of both healthy organizations and resilient individuals, is vital, and depends on the utilization of the talents, abilities, and perspectives of diverse workers (Barak, 2005). Contemporary U.S. workplaces are undergoing rapid and dramatic change. The effects of increased globalization, substantial influxes of women and people of color and widespread use of work groups and teams have created an unprecedented need to attend to worker diversity—both in access (bringing people “in the door”) and inclusion (bringing people “to the table”) (see for example, Fassinger, 2008).

Diversity can be highly effective in promoting workplace tasks requiring innovation and exploration of new opportunities and ideas (Mannix & Neale, 2005). There are considerable performance benefits in the workplace when work groups can learn from colleagues’ various experiences with respect to race, class or gender, just to name a few (Lagace, 2004). In fact, an organization’s argument for diversity rests on the development in innovation and productivity that results from a more extensive talent pool of individuals with differing perspectives, and worker recruitment and retention often are cited as positive outcomes of diversity policies (Salomon & Schork, 2003).

A diverse workforce that includes diverse staff of color as well as white staff is critical if predominantly White institutions (PWIs) are to evolve and reflect the diversity of the United States. Hence, one way to recruit and retain a diverse staff is to pay particular attention to their experiences on campus and in the workplace. It is imperative to examine and understand the everyday experiences of staff of color and White staff to better support employees in the workplace as well as helping PWIs meet their goals that promote missions of multiculturalism, equity and social justice. A helpful definition of a PWI from Brown and Dancy (2010) gives context:

“... the majority of these institutions may also be understood as historically White institutions in recognition of the binarism and exclusion supported by the United States prior to 1964. It is in a historical context of segregated education that predominantly White colleges and universities are defined and contrasted from other colleges and universities that serve students with different racial, ethnic, and/or cultural backgrounds” (p. 524).

Thus, the context of a PWI is important to understand lived experiences in the workplace especially among staff of color as well as White staff.

Racial microaggression theory provides an extensive model that contextualizes present-day discrimination in the United States (Sue, 2010). Racial microaggression was a term first coined by Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, and Willis (1978) to “describe common, subtle, seemingly innocuous, unconscious or

automatic slights” that serve to underestimate, belittle and cause psychological trauma for people of color. Early racial microaggression theorists established how racial microaggressions could be hidden within the context of seemingly harmless communication (e.g. television commercials; Pierce et al., 1978). Thus, researchers revealed the covert, seemingly trivial and insidious quality of racial microaggressions ingrained throughout America's “cultural subconsciousness” (Sue, 2010). The abundance of literature focused on microaggressions in recent years has documented that the experiences of such slights and put downs at work occur on a regular, everyday basis (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007).

In higher education workplaces, there has been a concerted effort to engage in social justice and diversity initiatives to ameliorate possible challenges, and there are many different approaches. For example, Intergroup Dialogue has garnered increasing interest from faculty, student affairs professionals, students, and administrators over the last decade because dialogic spaces provide a forum for addressing issues that many feel are too controversial to examine effectively in other settings (Zuniga, Nagda, Chesler, & Cytron-Walker, 2011). Active Bystander Awareness training has proven to be beneficial in helping employees in various positions and levels to react, and then take appropriate action when they see unsafe, unprofessional, offensive, discriminatory, or uncivil behavior in their workplaces (Scully & Rowe, 2009). Mindfulness Education has also been known to assist staff in dealing with and reducing stress in order to have a healthier work

climate. Despite the perceived effectiveness of trainings in workshop settings, it is unclear if in fact staff perceive they can access the learning they gained from diversity and inclusive initiatives when they are confronted with the actual situation at work. Furthermore, much of the research focused on microaggressions has focused on students and faculty of color, with less attention to staff working in higher education institutions (Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009; Solorzano, Ceja, Yosso, 2000; Winter; McCabe, 2009).

The purpose of this narrative study is to explore the experiences and impact of microaggressions on staff members from higher education institutions with a focus on staff who have already participated in various preparedness trainings. By exploring the strategies participants utilize to manage microaggressions, if any, specifically from the plethora of trainings offered in the workplace, we may gain additional insight into their lived experiences as well as reflect on additional opportunities to support staff so they can find effective and constructive ways to manage in these difficult workplace situations.

First, I review literature on how relationships and trust contribute to the work climate. Next, I discuss racial microaggressions as a form of second generation discrimination and the catalyst for needing social justice and diversity trainings. Then, I describe social justice and diversity interventions in the workplace, and the kinds of strategies these preparations can provide participants about difficult situations such as microaggressions.

## **Literature Review**

### **Microaggressions: Discrimination in Higher Education Institutions**

The “old fashioned” type of discrimination where intentional and “in your face” acts of racism once occurred, has progressed into a present-day form that is certainly much more subversive and indirect, and often masked. “Studies on the existence of implicit stereotyping suggest that the new form of racism is most likely to be evident in well-intentioned White Americans who are unaware they hold beliefs and attitudes that are detrimental to people of color” (Banaji, 2001; Banaji, Hardin, & Rothman, 1993; DeVos & Banaji, 2005; Sue et al., 2007, p. 72). As previously noted (Tinsley-Jones, 2001),

“Racism is defined as a system of cultural, institutional, and personal values, beliefs, and actions in which individuals or groups are put at a disadvantage based on ethnic or racial characteristics” (p. 573).

The “new” manifestation of discrimination and racial hatred is much more hidden and has been likened to “carbon monoxide, invisible, but potentially lethal” (Sue & Sue, 2012; Tinsley-Jones, 2003). In reviewing the literature on subtle and contemporary forms of discrimination, the literature focused on “microaggressions” best describes this phenomenon. Overt discrimination and public displays of racism, such as “cross burning, displaying a Confederate flag, or Nazi swastika tattoo” have diminished and is less often cited than in previous decades (Pearson, Dovidio, & Gaertner, 2009). Instead, “second-generation”

discrimination is more subtle and often within interpersonal interactions, and include social exclusion, unflattering looks or stares, inappropriate jokes or prejudicial comments in conversation that accumulate into a toxic work environment for underrepresented groups (Sturm, 2001).

“Microaggressions are brief everyday verbal or behavioral responses, perpetrated intentionally or unintentionally, that create bias for members of disadvantaged groups; they are subtle, verbal or nonverbal, appearing in short, daily encounters that send degrading or devaluing messages to marginalized groups” (Sue et al., 2007). Microaggressions manifest in different forms; Microassaults are explicitly discriminatory actions such as name-calling or avoidant behavior by the perpetrator (e.g., “African-American people are always so loud.”). Microinsults entail rude communication that degrades the target’s personal or social identity, such as if a co-worker asked an employee of color if they were an affirmative action hire. Microinvalidations are a third form of microaggressions, and are characterized as communication that denies or negates the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of the target. For example, this article describes the situation in which Caucasians maintain that they are “color blind.” This form of microaggression denies the existence of racial difference by ignoring the unique heritage of the target. All three of these forms of microaggressions certainly happen frequently in the workplace, and can have negative effects, such as disengagement, for the targeted minority (Sue et al., 2007).

Indeed, these subtle, implicit forms of racism have been labeled by researchers as modern racism, symbolic racism, and aversive racism and are all covert and developed from explicit racism (Sue et al., 2007). The President's Race Advisory Board concluded that racial inequities are so deeply ingrained in American society that they are nearly invisible (Advisory Board to the President's Initiative on Race, 1998). Indeed, "the power of racial microaggressions, in fact, lies in their invisibility to the perpetrator and, in some cases, the recipient" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 275). Studies indicate that racial microaggressions are negatively related to psychological well-being as well as correlated to multiple negative work outcomes such as job burnout, job withdrawal, and a decrease in job commitment. Racial microaggressions, while not sounding as harmful as overt racial attacks, are insidious and have an accumulated impact that may not be immediate and conspicuous, but can impact one's physical and mental health (Sue, 2010).

Due to the hierarchical status of higher educational institutions, staff can be disproportionately affected by racial microaggressions given their position in the status hierarchy. In addition, people from historically marginalized groups adopt a more critical view of issues related to diversity than people from more traditional social identity groups (Hurtado, Dey & Trevino, 1994; Nora & Cabrera, 1996). There are indeed consequences of being continually discriminated against in the workplace, which can lead to feeling marginalized and silenced, and

as a result can be physically and psychologically detrimental to one's health. As Tatum (1997) wrote:

“As a society, we pay a price for our silence. Unchallenged personal, cultural and institutional racism results in the loss of human potential, lowered productivity and a rising tide of fear and violence in our society. Individually, racism stifles our own growth and development. It clouds our vision and distorts our perceptions. It alienates us not only from others but also from ourselves and our own experiences” (p. 200).

The overall results demonstrate that subtle racism is pervasive in the workplace and detrimental to employee well-being. In the psychological literature, microaggressions fulfill the criteria of being stressors; they represent external events or situations that place a psychological or physical demand on targets (Sue, 2010, p. 88).

Being fully cognizant of how racial microaggressions impact daily well-being will help elucidate the effect on the targets and inform scholars and practitioners about how racial microaggressions are fully managed and processed by the targets (Burke 1984; Harrell 2000; Outlaw 1993). Harris (2008) challenges Sue's claim, “I came to the same conclusion: The flight attendant had treated us like second-class citizens because of our race” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 275). Harris went as far as to contact Sue to try and question his thinking around how he knows for sure that a microaggression was committed. After not being able to



have a dialogue because “requests for Sue’s time have been so exorbitant over the years that he is unable to respond,” Harris concluded, “What if Sue’s “experiential reality” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 275) is not real yet is espoused in paper presentations and professional articles as if it is so? The dissemination of biases and self-interests would be a tragic twist...” (Harris, 2009). Harris’ assertion is significant to note because the nature of microaggressions is such that they often leave individuals, both targets and observers “wondering and second-guessing” if in fact a microaggression just transpired. Sue explained, “Were it not for my colleague who validated my experiential reality, I would have left that encounter wondering whether I was correct or incorrect in my perceptions” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 275).

In summary, racial microaggressions perpetuate an existing negative racial climate in predominantly White institutions and academic work spaces, which result in real consequences for individuals attempting to coalesce, including feelings of self-doubt and frustration, as well as isolation. And while negotiating a work-life balance, staff of color have the extra burden of managing conflict that arise from stereotypes and microaggressions by co-workers (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). The accumulated impact of racial microaggressions, “slights, insults, invalidations, and indignities visited upon marginalized groups by well-intentioned, moral, and decent family members, friends, neighbors, co-workers, students, teachers, clerks, waiters and waitresses, employers, health care professionals, and educators,” take a toll mentally, emotionally, and physically,

manifesting in the bodies of the targeted (Sue, 2010, p. 9) . As exemplified in Table 1, racial microaggressions are often expressed in the form of indirect snubs or condescending looks, dismissive gestures, inappropriate tones and comments.

Table 1. Examples of racial microaggressions (adapted from Sue et al. 2007, 276)

Theme	Microaggression	Message
<p>Ascription of intelligence:</p> <p>Assigning intelligence to a person of color on the basis of their race.</p>	<p>‘You are a credit to your race.’</p> <p>‘You are so articulate/ well-spoken.’</p>	<p>People of color are generally not as intelligent as Whites.</p> <p>It is unusual for someone of your race to be so intelligent/ educated/ well-read.</p>
<p>Color blindness:</p> <p>Statements that indicate that a White person does not want to acknowledge race.</p>	<p>‘When I look at you, I don’t see color.’</p> <p>‘America is a melting pot.’</p> <p>‘There is only one race, the human race.’</p> <p>‘I entirely understand; I experience exactly the same thing, coming from a working class background.’</p>	<p>Denying a person of color’s racial/ethnic experiences.</p> <p>Assimilate/acculturate to the dominant culture.</p> <p>Denying the individual as a racial/cultural human being.</p> <p>Ignoring that irrespective of social class similarities, experiences are shaped differently because of race.</p>
<p>Denial of individual racism:</p> <p>A statement made when Whites deny their racial biases or privilege.</p>	<p>‘I’m not racist. I have several Black friends.’</p> <p>‘As a woman, I know what you go through as a racial minority.’</p>	<p>I am immune to racism because I have friends of color.</p> <p>Your racial oppression is no different than my gender oppression.</p> <p>I can’t be racist. I’m like you.</p>

## **Strategies to Manage and Interrupt Microaggressions in the Workplace**

In order to learn more about microaggressions, and how they impact staff in the workplace, I turned to literature that has analyzed the possible learning gained from diversity and social justice training initiatives. Because the focus of this study is intentionally higher education staff who have voluntarily participated in training to prepare them for engaging in a diverse higher education workplace, the hope is that we may gain some insight into the learning to which they would have had access.

Notably, many researchers argue these initiatives help minimize stereotypes and microaggressions; many others claim that these efforts, although awareness-raising, actually perpetuate racial tension. A review of the professional and scholarly literature about diversity training reveals that after thirty years and thousands of workplace interventions, the results of whether or not these interventions are necessary are unclear (Paluck, 2006). However, diversity and social justice trainings have become a fixture of the American workplace; for example, in 2005, 66% of U.S. employers used diversity and social justice training initiatives despite the fact that training is not required by federal equal opportunity law (Compensation and Benefits for Law Offices, 2006).

Positively, a number of initiatives over the past decade have addressed issues of diversity and inclusion in higher educational institutions (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999; Smith et al., 1997). There are general trainings, usually required, that help bring workplace awareness, such as antiracist

education and diversity days. Also available are optional trainings that provide employees with techniques and tools to be able to speak-up in the face of discrimination. As DiAngelo (2012) states, “antiracist education deliberately goes beyond the ‘celebrating differences’ approach common to most diversity training and centers the analysis on the social, cultural, and institutional power that so profoundly shapes the meaning and outcome of racial difference” (p.4). In regards to diversity and inclusion, perhaps an emphasis on campus climate for employees needs to be reflected in concrete and tangible ways, namely through required staff orientation, increased institutional participation in diversity initiatives, the proliferation of campus media designed to increase awareness about marginalized groups and through increased visibility and recognition of these groups on campus (Mayhew, Grunwald & Dey, 2006).

In this section, I will highlight three that have been offered in the higher educational institutions where the study takes place: Active Bystander Awareness, Intergroup Dialogue (IGD), and Mindfulness Education trainings. A growing number of organizations and institutions have been offering Active Bystander Awareness trainings to their employees for at least two reasons: to encourage the positive in order to build community and foster inclusion in the workplace, and to discourage the negative in order to curtail discriminatory, destructive and unacceptable behavior (Scully & Rowe, 2009, p. 1). Active bystander trainings typically include role-play to give employees an opportunity to practice “taking action” given a particular uncomfortable situation. The goal is to raise awareness

around workplace conflict that can occur and provide staff with tools to strategically manage and minimize conflict. Allies are trained to provide support not just for other members of their own social identity group, but across dimensions of difference (Scully & Rowe, 2009, p. 5).

Increasingly, IGD has emerged as a sought-after discipline in higher education for cultivating learning and fostering mutual understanding among those from diverse social backgrounds (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, and Allen 1999; President's Initiative on Race Advisory Board, 1998). The extensive literature review carried out indicates that IGD work in the public arena is widely representative of many disciplines and is gaining currency in social work (Nagda & Zuniga, 2003; Schoem & Hurtado, 2001). IGD provides opportunities for sustained and meaningful engagement across race and other social group boundaries. By encouraging open and reflective communication about difficult topics, especially issues of power and privilege, IGD can help build skills for developing and maintaining relationships across differences and enhance their ability to work together toward social justice (Zúñiga, Nagda & Sevig, 2002). IGD is "a facilitated group experience that may occur once or may be sustained over time and is designed to give individuals and groups a safe and structured opportunity to explore attitudes about polarizing societal issues" (Dessel & Rogge, 2008, p. 201). Therefore, IGD is an effective way to engage colleagues in exploring difficult and taboo topics across various social and work spaces.

Mindfulness is defined as a perspective of non-judgmental attention and awareness of the present moment (Bishop, Lau, Shapiro, Carlson, Anderson, Carmody, & Devins, 2004). Mindfulness Education in the workplace encourages staff to sustain a moment-by-moment awareness of thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, as well as the surrounding environment, and can therefore lead to decreased bias in the workplace. Four elements of mindfulness-- awareness, attention, focus on the present, and acceptance, can each contribute to breaking negative patterns and automatic thought processes (Kang, Gruber, & Gray, 2013). Over the last decade, an expansive body of research indicates that mindfulness fosters successful management of stressful and difficult situations, and thus, may serve as a buffer for employees against the stress of experiencing discrimination and microaggressions in the workplace (Brown-Iannuzzi, Adair, Payne, Richman, & Fredrickson, 2014).

Despite advances in diversity and social justice trainings and initiatives, such as active bystander, intergroup dialogue and mindfulness approaches, all of these currently take place in structured workshops, where there are trained facilitators and established ground rules in place to help guide participants. A challenge in the workplace is that most personal interactions do not occur in structured intentional settings such as a training or workshop, but rather in unstructured and unexpected moments. Thus, the first challenge is when one encounters a colleague at work and has a difficult interaction, that other person may or may not have had access to the same preparation that one has had for that

interaction. For example, in intergroup dialogue, one learns to suspend judgment and listen deeply; in active bystander training, one learns to name or acknowledge an offense and interrupt the behavior; and in mindfulness education, one develops a moment-by-moment awareness of themselves and others around them. Another challenge is that the boundaries of the interaction are less clear in an everyday, real-life work setting. For example, there are no facilitators and agreed upon guidelines to assist in communicating with others, no official beginning or end to the interaction. In addition, with a microaggression, the interaction may not even be recognized by both parties. Thus, this research is particularly warranted as it will provide insight not only into the experiences of microaggressions but also the types of strategies to which informed staff members perceive they have access when “in the moment” at work and such a transgression takes place.

### **Current Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study of staff members from higher education institutions is to explore the feelings and impact, as well as coping strategies of participants when experiencing or witnessing racial microaggressions in the workplace, where the participants have had some exposure to social justice and diversity and inclusion training initiatives such as Intergroup Dialogue, Active Bystander Awareness and Mindfulness Education, and how it contributes to a poor or healthy workplace climate.



As previously mentioned, little has been written about the experiences of staff members from higher educational institutions and whether they are adequately or ill-equipped to deal with workplace conflict and microaggressions. Staff are an essential and significant part of any institution. Therefore, it is a critical necessity to try and understand the experiences of the participants and gain insight about how they experience microaggressions, whether it is directed towards them or whether they are witness to it.

Although the literature has uncovered the negative effects of discrimination and covert racism in the workplace, and the role those play in determining the climate of an organization, I am looking to find if any of the aforementioned interventions can possibly provide a safe space for individuals to be able to confront and process such incivilities. I aim to examine the issues of key elements of a successful institution. In particular, I will explore the outcomes that those elements have on the quality of relationships and the daily interactions of the workplace.

The research question is:

- 1) How do higher education staff manage microaggressions in the workplace, as targets and witnesses? How do White staff and staff of color describe their experiences similarly and differently?
- 2) Under which circumstances or situations are participants able to access strategies from their learning through workforce preparation (their experiences of diversity and social justice training initiatives)?

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

Ten higher education staff participated in the study. Academic staff in higher education institutions are a critical resource to this study as they play a significant part in achieving the goals of said institution (Capelleras, 2005, p. 147). Participants worked at one of five institutions located in New England, including four private colleges and one state university. The gender and racial background of the participants were as follows: three women of color (one Asian-American, one Middle Eastern, one African-American), two men of color (one Latino, one Black), three White women and two White men (see Table 2).

Table 2: Racial Identity and Social Justice Experience of Participants

Higher Education Staff	Identity	Social Justice Training
Dianna	Asian-American	IGD, Social Justice Institute, Active Bystander Awareness, Microaggressions Workshop
Maya	Middle Eastern	IGD, Social Justice Mediation, Active Bystander Awareness
Angela	African-American	IGD, Active Bystander Awareness
Gerald	Latino	Mindfulness Education
Brett	Black	Racial Stereotype, Active Bystander Awareness
Peter	White	IGD, Active Bystander Awareness, Social Justice Institute, Social Justice Mediation
Yvonne	White	IGD, Social Justice Mediation, Active Bystander Awareness
Nate	White	IGD, Active Bystander Awareness
Karla	White	IGD, Mindfulness Meditation, Active Bystander Awareness

To meet the criteria to participate in this study, staff needed to hold a position in a higher educational institution and have been exposed to or participated in a social justice, or diversity and inclusion initiative on their campus, such as Intergroup Dialogue, Active Bystander Awareness, Social Justice Mediation and Mindfulness Education, just to name a few. A purposive sample was recruited to be deliberately gender and racially-balanced. For the purpose of this study, staff of color in the study are recognized as people who voluntarily identify as a member of an underrepresented minority and/or belonging to a racial and ethnic group that is not considered White by the dominant power structure in the United States (Adams, et al, 2013, p. 58). Specifically, the term staff of color or people of color includes, but is not limited to American Indian/Alaska Native, Black/African American, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic Latino, Asian, and those who declare multiple race/ethnicities. People referred to as White are considered to be of European descent, non-Hispanic or non-Latin@.

### **Procedure**

Recruitment took place on three levels: 1) A recruitment flyer was distributed to staff leading initiatives on these topics at each higher education institution, and in turn, they distributed to staff members who have participated and 2) I asked participants from the initiatives I met if they would like to nominate a peer/colleague to participate, and I did not tell the nominee who

nominated them. This method of recruitment yielded a racially-balanced group of ten staff across the range of institutions.

Employing qualitative research methods is preferred when exploring new topics for which theory is just emerging (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). The goal of qualitative data analysis is to uncover social assumptions, emerging themes, patterns, concepts, insights, and understandings. The most common sources of qualitative data include interviews, observations, and documents (Patton, 2005).

I conducted in-depth narrative interviews lasting approximately 45 minutes with each participant (see Appendix A). Questions ranged from inquiring about the participants role in their institution and their satisfaction and dissatisfaction of their job, to microaggressions they have experienced or witnessed in the last 6-12 months in their workplace. All participants were invited to share in the interview their experiences of a microaggression, its impact, whether or not they were able to address the perpetrator or the target of the microaggression, what strategies or tools and any thoughts and feelings that surfaced as a result. Participants were informed that participation in the study was completely voluntary and confidentiality of identity was assured by disguising key characteristics and the use of pseudonyms. Interviews were digitally recorded for transcription purposes.

During an interview, the researcher restates or summarizes information gathered from the participant in an attempt to double-check understanding and determine accuracy (Harper & Cole, 2012). This gives the participant an

opportunity to either agree or disagree as to whether the summary in-fact reflects their views, feelings, and experiences. If accuracy, integrity and completeness are confirmed, then the study is said to have credibility (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Data analysis**

Thematic analysis is “a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. It organizes and describes the data set in rich detail” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). In using thematic analysis, detailed memories and insights can be gained from the interviews in a guided, structured manner. Because microaggressions with this population is still in a state of exploration, a method was sought that allowed the participants’ voices and experiences to be thoroughly shared, while also revealing patterns in those experiences. In addition, as I reflected on my interviews with the participants, I heard and recognized particular themes across the nine participants. Therefore, I decided thematic analysis would aid in analyzing the data.

Thematic analysis has six phases: 1) familiarizing yourself with the data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) producing a report (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). Using this as a guide, I followed the following steps in my own analysis to organize, code, and interpret patterns of findings. The five participants who identified as staff of color chose to recount their own experienced racial

microaggression in their workplace. Four of the five White staff participants could not or chose not to share their own lived experience of a microaggression, and instead shared a witness account of a microaggression towards a colleague of color perpetrated by a White colleague. Because nine out of the ten participants interviewed for this study reported having experienced or witnessed a racial microaggression in their workplace, I chose to focus on their nine narratives in order to create cohesion in the analysis, and then included the tenth participant's experience as an additionally important referent.

First, the interviews were transcribed verbatim. After transcribing the interviews, the next step in the process involved reading each transcript thoroughly to become familiar with the data. I noted some preliminary patterns and wrote analytic memos. I engaged in an initial coding phase to analyze the data for meaningful words, phrases and segments to generate concepts and categories, writing descriptive memos to record my thinking as I went along. Then, I organized data based on the research questions, and used these as organizational frames to cluster the initial codes: 1) Impact, referring to the feelings or after-effects of the experience, 2) Management Strategies, or how participants dealt with the experience and 3) Situation Analysis, or how participants perceived the situation as affording or constraining the chance to access their learning from workforce trainings in diversity and social justice. Within each of these frames, I went back to the interview transcripts and re-read using these categories as a lens to ensure that I had captured all instances.

In the steps that involved reviewing and naming themes, I chose to keep as many themes as were clearly distinct, and only pulled together codes that were clearly reflecting similar sentiments. An example of this is when I reviewed the transcripts and coded phrases like: “feeling alone”, “I don’t have anyone at work to talk to about these issues”, and “I have to look out for myself.” Each of these I clustered into a theme called, “Isolation” as a theme. Then, I re-read each transcript with that theme in mind to see if additional occurrences existed. Upon re-reading, I noticed, “I’m the only staff of color in the department and it’s so hard.” This was how the Isolation theme was ultimately named and reflected multiple occurrences across the participants’ stories. The last phase of thematic analysis is producing a scholarly report, as in a thesis, dissertation, research assignment or for publication, and the purpose is to share how the data “within and across themes” tell the story of participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 93).

### **Ethical Considerations**

There were ethical considerations I considered when conducting this research study. First, I made sure that the research adhered to the ethical standards for conducting research with human participants at my institution. Before interviewing participants, I reviewed with participants a consent form. Participants were assured that their real names would not be attached to anything they shared, and that all participants in the study would be given pseudonyms and that transcripts of interviews would be kept in a locked office.



One ethical dilemma that arose while analyzing the data and reporting results was in regard to the stories that were shared by the participants which included details about social identities and situations that might make them and others identifiable to the small community in which the study was conducted. In order to address this, when necessary, I altered the details of the story while still capturing the gist of the participants' narratives.

### **Researcher Positionality**

In qualitative studies, "the researcher is the instrument" (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 112). Therefore, it was important for me to be reflective on how my identities, experiences and assumptions impact my views during data analysis. According to Milner (2007), dangers "seen, unseen, and unforeseen" may emerge when conducting research without paying close attention to "one's own and others' racialized and cultural systems of knowing" (p. 388).

In addition to reasons outlined above regarding the importance of examining microaggressions and their impact on the workplace environment, this topic also has personal significance for me based on my identities and life experiences. My experiences around trauma and not having the space or the wherewithal to process those experiences left me believing that my voice didn't matter. A lot of time was spent hiding and internalizing those traumatic experiences, meanwhile blaming myself. Consequently, numerous relationships and situations arose where I felt voiceless. I noticed many times when I longed to

Speak up, yet I kept my thoughts and ideas to myself. This became habitual: the hiding, the self-doubt, the second-guessing myself, the appeasing others.

Coming to study and work in higher education institutions, I experienced the power and privilege present at PWIs, and fortunately, I was privy to diversity and inclusion initiatives, where I discovered Active Bystander Awareness Training, Intergroup Dialogue and Mindfulness Education. These were intentional spaces where one was encouraged and given a space to reflect, share and express stories and feelings while others listened attentively. Dialogues about race, class, religion, gender and ability took place with fellow staff members from area colleges. We were encouraged by our facilitator to go back to our workplaces and attempt to have conversations with colleagues about race, among other themes and “practice conflict.” During these transformative dialogues is when I began to realize that I was not alone in feeling like I didn't have a voice; that others also felt voiceless and silenced by their partners, families, friends, colleagues, and bosses.

An administrator in my institution invited staff to read a book called “Fierce Conversations,” which made one examine and take action steps in having a difficult conversation with people who were in our lives, whether at home or at work. I began to hear people's stories about relationships at work and how challenging it was to talk to a coworker or boss about issues of racism, classism, sexism, etc. Engaging conflict effectively and productively in the workplace was something most people were not equipped to manage.

I began to wonder and examine why this was the case. Why was it so challenging and difficult to speak one's mind, to tell someone else how you felt or what you thought? I remember thinking, "Wow, people spend years living and working with other people and don't feel they can be authentic." I thought about the impact that bottling one's feelings up had on that individual's health and well-being. I wondered about the role of Diversity and Inclusion and Social Justice Training Initiatives such as Active Bystander Awareness Training, Intergroup Dialogue and Mindfulness Education, and how those assist people in finding tools to be able to be more aware and authentic about how they feel when there is a difficult interaction.

Through this project, my Master's thesis, I wanted to examine if other people like myself, given some tools to address difficult situations as they occur, could potentially find their voice and express how a microaggression they experienced or witnessed made them feel deep down inside. I disclose my positionality in the research because I do believe in the power of such preparations within the workplace, and yet I recognize the limitations they may hold for participants when they find themselves in the moment, outside of the structured workshop.

## **RESULTS**

In this section, I will first discuss the five staff of color and their lived experiences of racial microaggressions; the impact the microaggressions have had, any strategies used to manage the conflict, their perceptions of White staff who witnessed their microaggressions and an analysis of the situation in regards to what was present or absent that either helped or hindered the participant of color from accessing their learning from any previous exposure to workplace trainings on diversity and social justice.

I will then discuss the four White staff and their witness accounts of racial microaggressions; the impact the microaggressions had, any strategies used to manage the interactions, and an analysis of the situation in regards to what was present or absent that either helped or hindered the White participants in recognizing and managing the microaggressions in the moment.

Finally, I will briefly mention the fifth White participant and her lived experience of a disability-based microaggression.

### **Staff of Color Experiences: Impact, Strategies, and Situations**

#### ***Impact***

When the five staff of color were asked to reflect on a time when they experienced a microaggression at their workplace, they all reflected on a racial microaggression perpetrated by a white colleague. Overall, thirteen themes conveyed the nature of the impact of the microaggressions for these participants.

These included: second-guessing, stunned into silence, disbelief, low morale, isolation, resentment, hopelessness, anger, disempowered, frustration, confusion, triggered, and asking “how” and “why?”

**Dianna** recalled experiencing a racial microaggression when she was repeatedly challenged in a departmental meeting by a white female colleague named Beth who has worked in student affairs for quite some time. Beth could not understand why Dianna couldn't “just pick-up after her students.” Dianna recalled initially thinking of the interactions with Beth as recurring disagreements, and not necessarily a microaggression, because Beth had an extensive social justice background and has an awareness of social justice issues. Because the interactions happened with Beth, rather than another colleague, Dianna second-guessed her interpretation. A third colleague named Rachelle drew attention to the dynamic in a discussion with Dianna which led her to view the interaction with Beth in a negative light.

In contrast, **Maya** expressed distress in her experience on campus running special programs for students. She adamantly expressed that she frequently experienced racial microaggressions. In her interview, she specifically shared a microinsult where, as a department, they collectively brainstormed how they would choose to dress up for Halloween. A white male colleague, named Karl, said to her, “Why don't you wear your traditional dress as your costume for Halloween?” After being stunned into silence by this rude comment, in addition

to other disturbing exchanges, Maya recalled experiencing low morale and described her working relationship with Karl as burdensome.

**Gerald**, who advises and runs a program for students of color recalled a recurring microinsult about the importance of his work, which concerned first-generation and underrepresented college students. He recalled a White male administrator, named Eric being very dismissive of the work that his program was doing and referred to his work using language such as “marginal and insignificant.” Gerald often felt isolated being the only staff of color in his department. Like Maya, he remembers feeling disempowered about his program because he ran the risk of put-downs when discussing it.

**Angela**, although fairly new in her position, reported experiencing many microaggressions. One particular microinvalidation involved a young White colleague named Shelly who began at the same time in the same entry-level position in the same office. Angela noticed that she and Shelly were treated very differently. Angela received negative feedback from her White female supervisor named Carol, and was told outright, “You’re not allowed to have a creative idea unless you run it by me.” Shelly, in contrast, had been afforded quite a bit of autonomy and encouraged by Carol to, “Keep up the great work.” This led Angela to feel resentful and she often “hated going to work.”

Finally, **Brett** has been a skilled worker for Facilities and Maintenance over 20 years and cites a recurring microaggression. He continues to be called into his management’s office of all white male supervisors for petty things like

using his phone while he's working, taking longer breaks than allotted, or not working up to par. In each instance, he strongly disagreed with the accusations and would ask management to identify who was coming forward with these accusations. Meanwhile, Brett works closely with white colleagues who do the same things he gets accused of, and they never get questioned. He believes he is the target of these microassaults because he is vocal about injustices in his department, and it's a way of making him pay for being a "loudmouth." Much like Angela, he has felt "discouraged and hopeless" for many years.

### ***Strategies to Manage by Staff of Color***

Three primary strategies were named by staff of color that helped them process and in some cases, address the microaggressions: 1) Reflection, 2) Confronting, and 3) Overlooking. I describe each strategy based in the staff experiences.

**Reflection** refers to a process of wanting or needing to make meaning of and understand experiences. Understanding experiences encourages insight and complex learning. When asked if and how they dealt with the microaggression, the strategy of reflection was discussed by four of the five participants in various ways.

Dianna recalled, "I didn't think it was a big deal until other staff members asked me after the meeting, 'How could she say that to you? Why would a White person say that to a person of color?'" And that's when I started wondering what

just happened.” She didn’t realize it was a microaggression in the moment, until further reflection and discussion with her supervisor Rachelle, who is also a person of color. Similarly, Maya admitted, “I was very angry and hurt, but I didn’t saying anything in the moment.” Two of her colleagues approached her afterwards and apologized for what was said by Karl. As a result, Maya was able to have some thoughtful reflection.

In contrast, Angela “felt crazy and hopeless,” so after reflecting on her own, she felt moved to share her thoughts with Shelly regarding the unjust situation at work. Upon further discussion, Angela learned that Shelly was unaware of the inequities that existed and she too was not pleased. In a similar way to Angela, Gerald reached out to a colleague after reflecting on his own. He expressed, “I felt some kind of way about their dismissiveness and what they said, and although I wasn’t aware they were microaggressions at that point, what came up for me was lots of anger and frustration.” Gerald processed and reflected with his white male colleague Jim, who was in the same field and who was present in both meetings where the microaggression occurred.

**Confronting** the perpetrator of a microaggression is a second strategy noted by the participants. Confronting involves staff addressing what was said or done by the perpetrator and expressing the feelings that surfaced and its impact. When confronting, sometimes there is risk of the perpetrator denying either what transpired, or the intent behind it. For example, “that’s not what I meant” or “it was just a joke” deflects responsibility from the perpetrator. Sue refers to this as a



Catch 22. However, staff who were targets of microaggressions often feel as if they have had enough and cannot take anymore. This strategy was also used by 4 participants.

Maya responded to Karl, “I don’t expect you to be an expert on every culture, but I’ve been working with you for six years now and I expect that you understand something about me!” Similarly, Angela was able to approach Carol and be transparent, questioning Carol’s reasoning. Unfortunately, Carol got defensive and made excuses for her decisions. Also, Brett confronted management to raise his concerns; he was told they could not identify who was coming forward with the accusations because of confidentiality reasons.

Rather than confront the administrator directly, Gerald took a different approach by addressing the issue that was dismissed. In a subsequent meeting, Gerald made a case for the significance of their programs that cater to first-generation and marginalized students of color.

**Overlooking** was a third strategy used by participants. In the case of microaggressions, overlooking does not mean “a failure to notice,” but a strategy to “rise above” and choose not to engage. Three participants used overlooking as a strategy to manage and cope.

Interestingly enough, even after the realization that what had transpired was in fact a microaggression, both Dianna and Gerald chose not to address it with the perpetrator. Dianna stated that “microaggressions happen all the time, and you have to pick your battles.” Gerald’s reasoning behind why he didn’t

address Erik directly regarding the microaggression was as he mentioned, “you can’t always control what others say and do, you can only control your reaction.” He chose instead to focus on how to strengthen the reputation of his program and speak out about its value.

In Brett’s case, although he has confronted management previously, the chronic nature of the microaggression makes it challenging to deal with on an ongoing basis, and forces staff like him to “just suck it up.”

### ***Perceptions of Strategies used by White Witnesses***

In this section, I review how staff of color perceived the strategies used by White witnesses present during their own lived racial microaggressions.

Witnesses in these exchanges most often exercised three primary approaches: 1) consoling a colleague, 2) apologizing for the perpetrator, and 3) standing in solidarity with their colleague.

**Consoling a colleague and apologizing for the perpetrator** in the following cases can go hand-in-hand, and involves caretaking, compassion and empathy for the target of a microaggression. Dianna’s supervisor, Rachelle approached her afterwards and asked if she was okay. Beth’s supervisor also called Dianna and apologized for Beth’s behavior. Likewise, Maya’s colleagues came up to her privately and said, “I’m so sorry about what happened, he didn’t mean anything by it! Why are you so upset?”

Dianna definitely felt supported because other people from different experiences and backgrounds brought it to her attention. She wondered, “it was awkward because why was that person’s supervisor apologizing and not the actual person?” Maya also raised concerns, “although I appreciated them for noticing, I wish they could have been allies and said something to Karl in the moment.”

**Standing in solidarity** describes the strategy when a coworker, also referred to as an ally, and in the following cases were all white staff, understands and empathizes with a coworker around a microaggression in the workplace. Often times, the ally “has their back,” and standing in solidarity creates trust and mutual respect between the white ally and their coworker. This strategy was used by 3 of the 5 participants.

Angela approached Shelly, which took a lot of courage. As a result, Shelley was able to stand in solidarity with Angela, thus enabling her to address the microinvalidations with their supervisor, Carol. Comparatively, Gerald and Jim strategized on how to make a case for the programs for students of color. In a subsequent meeting and alongside Jim, Gerald was able to make a case for the significance of their programs that cater to first-generation and marginalized students of color. Likewise, Brett’s direct supervisor Dominic, who is a white male that also has had a tendency to be vocal about discriminatory practices in the workplace, has stood in solidarity with Brett in the past, agreeing that it felt like management has been harassing him.

Although standing in solidarity can lead to an interruption of a microaggression, it is notable that none of the accounts of microaggressions involved a witness interrupting the behavior within the actual situation. This could be what led participants to share this particular experience. One of the staff of color shared the following, “At an Active Bystander Awareness Training, we asked the trainers, ‘how can we challenge our higher-ups and how can we be bystanders to other people when there is authority in the room?’ Unfortunately, they had no answer.”

### ***Situation Analysis***

When I looked at situations surrounding these microaggressions, and what was present that afforded staff of color to utilize what they had learned from the trainings, or what was absent that hindered them, I found that participants perceived they could, for example, better manage emotions in the moment and ask good questions regardless of the situation, which are both techniques emphasized in the trainings. Staff of color felt empowered in particular when they had an ally or someone they could process the situation with.

The tools that Dianna learned in Intergroup Dialogue and other Social Justice trainings were useful in dealing with her particular microaggression. They have given her a frame for understanding privilege and that awareness is key in dealing with colleagues in the workplace. Dianna admits, “I always have a hard time trying to figure out how to advocate when you’re a person of color and you’re in your position and then you have someone, particularly who is white and

has that racial privilege.” Perhaps, it would have been valuable if her colleagues acting as allies were willing to accompany Dianna to approach Beth and help facilitate a dialogue where they can all have expressed their feelings, be heard and understood. The fact that Dianna had only been in her institution for a year and her colleague Beth had been there well over fifteen years certainly played a role in her attempting to overlook the microaggression and not “rock the boat.”

Maya expressed, “I don’t know how much of the trainings actually come into play because sometimes you try to let things go and then you blow up and you forget all about the tools you learned in the trainings!” She had been in her current position for over twenty years and felt some agency around that. Maya admitted, “When I was exposed to more of these microaggressions, they totally affected my health. It’s all so complex, and there were times my husband would pick me up from work and before going home I would have him stop somewhere because I wanted to just cry without the kids seeing me.”

According to Angela, “Intergroup Dialogue has been great because it has helped me communicate and be able to express myself in ways I have never been able to. IGD has helped me mature and find constructive ways to deal with my issues.” I believe ultimately, this was the reason Angela was able to share her feelings with Shelley in a way that Shelley was able to hear her and not get defensive about her position and support her.

Brett seems to have become cynical and doubtful with everything he has seen happen at his institution, and as much as he likes working with people, he

has a challenging time trusting upper-management. He has no qualms with being vocal and questioning his supervisors, because he shares, “I have to stand up and look out for myself, no one else will look out for me.” He appreciates his direct supervisor, Dominic being an ally when issues come up.

However, participants did note the limits of their training when they were in the moment, and when emotions ran high. For example, Maya said, “I don’t know how much of the trainings actually come into play because sometimes you try to let things go and then you blow up and you forget all of the tools you learned.” Gerald makes a point about his Mindfulness Awareness training, “It helped me identify which emotions or emotional responses were interfering with a more useful or coolheaded response.” I imagine being able to take a step back, reflect, and strategize about how to provide an informed and calculated response makes a big difference.

### **White Staff Witness Accounts: Impact, Strategies, and Situation**

#### ***Impact***

The four White staff articulated their witness accounts of racial microaggressions in the workplace, also all focusing on a staff member of color with a White perpetrator. Overall, 10 themes conveyed the nature of impact for these participants. They were second-guessing, disbelief, isolation, distraught, discomfort, frustration, confusion, discomfort, triggered, and asking “how” and “why?”

**Peter** shared a microaggression that he had witnessed play out among his colleagues in his own department in student affairs. The person of color named Tatiana is the only staff of color in the office, as well as in the department. He has continually noticed that other people in the office frequently defer to one of the two white female staff, Marci and Ellen, as opposed to Tatiana, as well as Marci and Ellen will frequently answer questions without giving Tatiana a chance to respond. For example, when students come into the office with general questions that any of them can answer, either Marci or Ellen will be the first to step-up, overlooking Tatiana. Peter claims that Tatiana is newer than Marci or Ellen, but that should not be an excuse. He admitted to sometimes doing it as well, without even recognizing it until after the fact. He felt frustrated about this disturbing pattern and not always knowing how to best address it with his colleagues.

**Yvonne** discussed a microaggression that she had witnessed and was somewhat pulled into by a white female manager, named Sue who was supervising a young female staff of color named Christy, who was one of the few staff of color in their whole fundraising division and was the receptionist for their department. Christy was outgoing, a great listener, extremely friendly and happened to sit right near Yvonne's office. Because of this, they were collegial and became close. When it came time for Sue to write up Christy's evaluation, she approached Yvonne and said, "I've heard rumors that Christy is always on the phone and is always making personal phone calls. Let me know if this is true." Yvonne didn't know how to respond in the moment, but recalled being disgusted

that Sue would put her in that position because she felt, “1) I’m not Christy’s supervisor, and 2) Why are you not discussing these rumors with Christy directly?” Even more disconcerting to Yvonne was the fact that Sue was using her power inappropriately.

**Nate** cited a microaggression he witnessed where a white male administrator named Bob publicly called out his female colleague of color named Amina in a meeting insinuating that she wasn’t paying attention. Nate noted that there actually had been other women and men that had seemed disengaged from the meeting and from time-to-time were looking at their phones, doing other things or just not paying attention. He thought it was interesting to see that Amina was singled out, perhaps because she was a younger staff of color, somewhat newer in her position. He recalled that it felt like she was being singled out in an indirect, bullying manner when Bob asked, “Do you have anything to add to this conversation?” Nate expressed that during these ongoing staff meetings as well as other departmental meetings, many other staff members had definitely been checked out. He felt very uncomfortable during this interaction in the meeting wondering why Amina was being singled out, and in front of everybody.

**Karla** recalled witnessing a microaggression by a white male staff member named Alex in another department against one of her female colleagues of color named Mo. Karla accompanied Mo to their campus library to make copies of a flyer for a cultural event that Mo was coordinating, and they asked Alex for assistance with the copy machine. As Alex helped Mo, he saw the flyer



and mumbled a comment about “campus police being busy this weekend.” Karla admitted that she didn’t catch the comment right away, not until they returned to their office about an hour later. She also recalled being uncertain if Mo heard it because it was mumbled by Alex. Karla felt distraught and conflicted because she was unsure how to bring up the racist comment without upsetting Mo.

### ***Witness Strategies***

Witnesses in these exchanges exercised three primary strategies: 1) interrupting the behavior, 2) consulting with a colleague, and/or 3) apologizing for the perpetrator.

**Interrupting** a microaggression can be a verbal or nonverbal act, however, it is most definitely an action, often done by speaking up or challenging the perpetrator.

Peter saw this pattern of microaggressions and so attempted to interrupt the behavior by “calling out” Marci and Ellen and saying, “you are talking a lot, you need to stop.” He admitted that even with his attempts of interrupting the behavior, he saw the pattern continue. He adds that when he has committed the related microaggression, he has had no problem saying to Tatiana, “I’m sorry!”

**Consulting** with a colleague or “checking-in” was a helpful strategy for the witness because it provided a different perspective on the matter. Yvonne didn’t trust Sue and wondered what other instances of microaggressions were playing out between her and their receptionist, Christy. So Yvonne confided in

her supervisor, and also reported to Sue's supervisor what had transpired.

Likewise, Karla processed the microinsult with another colleague who also had some self-awareness, and in doing so allowed Karla to bring up what was said by Alex to Mo in the library.

**Apologizing** for the perpetrator requires compassion and empathy on the part of the ally. Nate addressed the microaggression with Amina after the meeting and said, "Sorry, that was really out of place. How are you feeling?" Similarly, Karla apologized to Mo for the "ignorant" comment that was made by Alex.

Nate admits he didn't direct it to Bob, the white administrator who made the comment, and he didn't react or respond during the meeting although he noticed the microaggression almost immediately. He wanted to reach out to Amina and be supportive and understanding of what happened. Karla mentioned that Mo didn't seem as upset as she was about the racist comment, and she understood that she was probably used to hearing similar ignorant comments.

### ***Situation Analysis***

When I looked at situations and what was present that afforded White staff to utilize what they had learned from the trainings, I found that participants perceived they could, for example, check their own privilege and be aware of triggers, which also are techniques emphasized in the trainings. White staff wanted their colleagues of color to know that they were apologetic for their White

colleagues who perpetrated the microaggressions and that they were willing to stand in solidarity and be allies.

Peter believed that his training around managing triggers and also noticing group dynamics has been extremely useful in the workplace. He has been able to scan rooms and assess, “Here’s who’s in the room, here’s what voices are missing, here’s what voices are present, here are the ones that are speaking the loudest.” He expressed that Marci and Ellen probably think that the issue is based on a “personality” difference as opposed to a “racial dynamic.” He has also intentionally continued to build a “foundational relationship” with Tatiana in order to be an ally, and to provide an avenue of support and open communication with her.

Yvonne felt strongly that her Social Justice Mediation training helped give her the tools to interrupt “these type of overt and covert microaggressions.” Because she was able to act, Sue was taken out of her managerial role. Yvonne was then able to say to Sue, “I was really uncomfortable with what you did and I have talked to people about it, and I warned Christy that you did this. I just feel like it was really inappropriate.” People avoided Yvonne after that, and not surprisingly, Sue’s supervisor didn’t really take any responsibility, but instead tried to deflect the whole issue. “It was just very eye-opening,” Yvonne sighed.

Nate claimed that the skills he developed in Intergroup Dialogue have absolutely been useful in the workplace in terms of stepping back from situations and really listening, identifying microaggressions, and asking questions to

understand what's really at the core. With this particular example, Bob, the one who had committed the microaggression, had also been kind of rude and undermining to other staff members as well. Bob's supervisors are having conversations with him, but not as a result of this particular microaggression, but due to feedback from a number of staff members and direct observations that identified a broader pattern. He has been asked that changes be made in his behavior. Nate expressed, "I was glad to see that happen and that leadership in my direct chain of command was willing to look out for their own staff."

Karla remembered her training in Self-Awareness and was able to notice, "I was really triggered, like my whole body physiologically was like, whoa!" She was able to debrief with another colleague who had also had some Self-Awareness and Active Bystander Training before she approached Mo. Karla felt positive about her interaction with Mo, and it strengthened her relationships at work because other staff saw her as someone that they can trust and as someone who has some awareness.

### **An Addendum: Fay's Lived Experience of Disability Microaggression**

The tenth staff participant, Fay, who was a White female was not included in the primary data analysis because her story was not focused on an experienced or witnessed racial microaggression. She did however experience a disability-based microaggression. She discussed how the campus is not set-up to support her disability as she navigates the ramps and the "unstable wood planks placed on top

of the stairs during the winter.” She felt microaggressed against by the campus and the administrators who have done little to nothing to implement systems to assist her, and other people with disabilities.

I wanted to include a comparison of Fay’s experience to the staff of color and white staff already mentioned. Her experience was similar to the staff participants of color because she recalled feelings of frustration, low morale, disempowerment and being triggered due to her disability-based microaggression. She also used all three strategies that the staff participants of color used to manage the microaggressions, which were reflection, overlooking and confronting. Her experiences had no particular similarities to that of the four white staff participants. Fay did credit IGD as a tool that had given her strategies to manage the daily microaggression she experienced.

### **Similarities and Differences: Staff of Color and White Staff**

Finally, I considered the similarities and differences between staff of color and White staff regarding the impact of microaggressions (Table 3) and strategies (Table 4). I noticed a number of similarities including second-guessing and disbelief, as well as unique impacts for each group. I also noticed similar strategies in the form of reflecting, but different strategies in the form of consoling for White staff and confronting for staff of color.

Table 3: Impact of Microaggressions on Participants whether Experiencing or Witnessing

Impact of Experiencing or Witnessing Microaggression	Staff of Color who Experienced	White Staff who Witnessed
Second-guessing	X	X
Stunned into Silence	X	
Disbelief	X	X
Low Morale	X	
Isolation	X	X
Resentment	X	
Hopelessness	X	
Anger	X	
Disempowered	X	
Distraught		X
Disgusted		X
Frustration	X	X
Confusion	X	X
Discomfort		X
Triggered	X	X
Asking How and Why	X	X

Table 4: Strategies Participants used to Manage Microaggressions

Strategies Used to Manage	Staff of Color	White Staff who Witnessed
Reflection	X	X
Overlooking	X	
Confronting	X	
Interrupting		X
Consulting		X
Apologizing		X
Consoling		X
Standing in Solidarity		X

## DISCUSSION

The primary objective of this study was to examine staff members' experiences with microaggressions, their impact on individuals in the workplace, and coping strategies that staff perceived as available to them following their participation in diversity trainings to assist them in managing workplace conflict. Despite having the freedom to discuss any type of microaggression, nine out of the ten staff interviewed chose to discuss a racial microaggression. Thus, the focus of the study turned to the experiences and witness accounts of racial microaggressions, demonstrating the continuing importance of race in the lives of individuals working in higher education (Chrobot-Mason, 2004; Constantine, Smith, Redington, & Owens, 2008).

Furthermore, whether staff experienced or witnessed microaggressions in the workplace, the experienced had lasting influences on their psychological well-being and satisfaction in the workplace. Similar to past research, microaggressions can exert a harmful and lasting psychological impact (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008). Nearly all of the research participants reported that there were feelings of anger, frustration, isolation, hopelessness, confusion, disempowerment and low morale while experiencing and witnessing microaggressions. Ong, Fuller-Rowell and Burrow (2009) found that daily life stressors, accompanied with racial discrimination mediates the relationship between chronic discrimination and psychological distress. Thus, it is difficult to

disentangle any direct impact from a single or even cumulative set of microaggressions, but this collective research base points to their contribution to negatively impacting overall well-being.

The experiences of staff of color and White staff demonstrate that even in a diverse workplace that is equipped with various optional diversity and social justice trainings, and where conditions on the surface appear to be equal, inequality and discrimination still exist, albeit in subtle, hidden, or institutional forms (Solorzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000). Racial microaggressions were delivered and performed through subtle yet insistent daily reoccurrences that serve to remind staff of color that they are judged to be different, perhaps incompetent, less intelligent and inferior as compared to their White counterparts (Sue, Capodilupo, and Holder 2008).

The results of the study revealed nine main strategies that staff of color and White staff used to manage racial microaggressions experienced and witnessed in the workplace. There are dynamics that complicate being able to communicate comfortably cross-racially. Fear and silence go hand-in-hand and keep us from embracing cross-racial dialogue, especially in the workplace. Specifically, the silence of Whites has a very different implication and impact than the silence of people of color, based on the unequal positioning of the two groups in society; these silences are not equivalent in the least (DiAngelo, 2012).

It is notable that few participants felt comfortable talking to the White perpetrator, and instead chose to console the person of color. This raises the



concept of White fragility, which DiAngelo (2011) defined as “a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable” [for Whites].

Defensive moves can ensue which include argument, silence, or displays of anger or fear. As a result of this concern for White fragility, individuals of color may be left alone or in private consoled because the cost of approaching the White perpetrator is so great.

Finally, when I compared and contrasted situations for staff of color and White staff surrounding experiencing and witnessing racial microaggressions, and what was present that afforded them to utilize what they had learned from the trainings, or what was absent that hindered them from accessing their learning; I found overwhelmingly that social justice and diversity and inclusion training initiatives in higher educational institutions are not only helpful, but necessary (Hurtado et al., 1999; Smith et al., 1997). The tools and strategies that are offered in Active Bystander Awareness (e.g., to raise awareness around workplace conflict and practice taking action), Intergroup Dialogue (e.g., to build skills for developing and maintaining relationships), and Mindfulness Education (e.g., to foster successful management of stressful and difficult situations), were effective in assisting staff in various ways. Even when participants were not necessarily able to confront a colleague to address a racial microaggression, staff of color and White staff referred to the tools as being valuable in personally helping process and reflect on the situation at hand.

Thus, even though at the surface, the workplace preparation was not always effective at resolution, the participants still took meaning from the preparation, and being able to reflect on what happened in particular was a useful takeaway from the learning from the workshops. There were challenges that arose in the situation analysis regarding the limits of the aforementioned training initiatives. For example, when trainings are offered in the workplace, there are very clear guidelines as to how to communicate and respond in the moment. As we all know, real life situations are different, as emotions surface unexpectedly that are difficult to immediately recognize or work through. I found that participants relied and drew upon relationships at their workplace to help cope, in particular co-workers and allies who were understanding and aware of differences. Through variants in future training initiatives, we can help identify more allies in the workplace, there would be more support to confront and interrupt racial microaggressions as they happen. Possibly, more trainings can help to talk about ways to enact guidelines and norms into workplace situations when not everyone is clued into the “script” or norms for engagement. This kind of preparation would likely help staff to engage with colleagues who had not attended the trainings and permit people to use similar vocabulary.

### **Limitations and Implications for Future Research**

The current study conducted interviews with a small pool of staff of color and White staff from one region in New England. Future research is needed to

continue to explore the range of microaggressions experienced in higher education workplaces, with a focus on different kinds of microaggressions. Only one White participant interviewed was able to describe her own lived experience of a microaggression, focused on disability, and described the experience as an institutional rather than interpersonal microaggression (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). While the research focused on LGBTQ identity, gender, and race continue to expand, less research has captured the lived experiences of microaggressions as experienced by White participants reflecting on a marginalized social identity they additionally hold, revealing important intersectional identities (McCall, 2005).

In addition, the focus of the interviews was general experience, and due to the small sample could not adequately disentangle the range of power dynamics (i.e., boss and employee, management and new hires, white male supervisor and entry-level staff of color) and how this influences the impact of the workplace dynamics when experiencing microaggressions. Research suggests that a negative exchange with a direct supervisor, for example, rather than peer may have differential impact (Tangirala, Green, & Ramanujam, 2007).

In addition, future research should examine the racial composition of departments in institutions and investigate for example, if a department in an institution is more diversified, does this decrease the likelihood of racial microaggressions happening, likewise, does this increase the likelihood of a racial microaggression being interrupted? According to Smith (2009), “diversity is a

powerful agent of change and is an imperative that must be embraced if colleges and universities are to be successful in a pluralistic and interconnected world.”

Our charge as higher education institutions is to make diversity central to our vision and mission, where it can facilitate and inform our policies and practices around increased diverse staff recruitment, retention, orientations and trainings, and can therefore lead to a more inclusive workplace climate for all.

### **Implications for Education**

Despite these limitations, the current study still has important implications for educators. The implications of the current study demonstrate the negative effects of racial microaggression on an institution’s employees. Racial microaggressions in the workplace is strongly related to multiple negative outcomes, including lowered job satisfaction and lower employee morale (Sue et al., 2008). Both staff of color and White staff were significantly negatively affected by working in a climate of racial microaggressions. Institutions should be proactive in teaching, monitoring and intervening in instances of workplace racial microaggressions to prevent negative outcomes and consequences for all staff, no matter how diverse.

Managers and supervisors need to be intentional about teaching and orienting staff and faculty about microaggressions when they discuss race, racism, sexual harassment, work-life balance, and workplace conflict management. IGD,

Active Bystander Awareness Training and Mindfulness Education are just some ways higher education institutions have offered support to staff (Zuniga et al., 2011). However, this support may need to be targeted at the supervisory level to impact climate more generally (Tangirala et al., 2007). Being able to coexist and function together in the workplace requires having an awareness of what stressors affect us and those we work with and how it manifests (Scully, & Rowe, 2009; Katz, 2008). Without the supervisory-level engagement, it is difficult for an entire division or department to be on the same page, or share vocabulary, or even the ability to reflect on things that happen at work.

This study raised additional examples of microaggressions when at work, whether making assumptions about the skill level or Halloween costume of a candidate because of his or her background, checking email or texting during a committee discussion, or challenging someone repeatedly on their ideas. While such actions may seem commonplace, they can have a toxic impact on both valued employees when such patterns go unrecognized. Helping staff in the workplace to find mechanisms more collectively where they can raise issues and questions with one another without fear of retaliation appears necessary. Tatum (2007) instructs us that it is critical to talk about race as much and as often as we can, not in a reactive defensive manner, however, in proactive, dialogical and healthy ways.

The findings of this study contribute to discussions on how to identify a racial microaggression, how to garner support from colleagues and allies, how to

be an ally and interrupt racial microaggressions, strategies on managing workplace conflict, and diversity and social justice initiatives that actually raise awareness at the same time, equip staff with tools on how to address racial microaggressions. The evidence of the negative and toxic psychological, physical, and occupational outcomes is apparent on both staff of color and White staff in any given institution. The significant negative effects of subtle and covert racism in the form of racial microinsults, microinvalidations and microassaults illustrate the need for open dialogue amongst staff in individual departments within their institution, to help combat some of the stereotypes that drive racial microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007). When institutions provide staff with tools and strategies for preventing and interrupting racial microaggressions, they simultaneously promote diversity and inclusion, and ultimately, well-being at work.

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## APPENDIX A INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

“Thank you for taking time to meet with me today. I appreciate you volunteering to participate in this study. I look forward to hearing about your role as a staff member in your institution and what that means to you. The questions I will ask today center around the notion of the importance of psychological health, diversity and inclusion in your workplace and coping with workplace conflicts.”

In discussing your institution and individuals at your workplace, you can use a pseudonym, a first name, or an initial. The names of your institution and individuals will be removed or changed in the write up of my findings.

Before we begin, I have a consent form that I would like for you to read. Please note the risks and benefits associated with participating in this study. The risks that I foresee are potential negative feelings that may arise due to discussing conflicted or difficult experiences. The benefits that I foresee include the experience of sharing your story, hearing your voice and narrating an experience, which may have had a myriad of emotions, associated to it. It will also be an opportunity for you to articulate out loud thoughts and feelings you may have been holding in for some time.

After you have read through this consent form, feel free to ask me any questions or to inform me if you'd like to stop participating in this study now or at anytime throughout this interview. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin?

Semi-Structured Interview—the following will serve as a guide.

- 1) Describe your role as a staff member in your institution.
  - a) How long have you been in that position and with your institution?
  - b) How satisfied are you with your job? What contributes to your satisfaction/dissatisfaction?
- 2) Do you feel your institution has a commitment to diversity and inclusion? Explain.
  - a) What initiatives are in place that support your institution's commitment to diversity and inclusion?
  - b) Which initiatives have you taken part in throughout your time as a staff member? What have you learned from your involvement? Was your participation helpful to you? How is the institution equipped for managing conflict productively at work?
- 3) Have you participated in Intergroup Dialogue (IGD), Active Bystander Awareness Training (ABAT), Mindfulness Education (ME) or any other Social Justice Training Initiatives at your or another institution, and describe your experience.
  - a) Have you found the tools you learned in IGD, ABAT, ME or other Social Justice Training Initiatives useful in dealing with conflict-management?

- b) Give a specific example of when you did and/or did not find it useful. I'm especially interested in whether you were able to access the tools you learned in the training(s) when an issue arose at work.
- 4) I will define a Microaggression to give you context because I will ask several questions that pertain to microaggressions. It is defined as brief everyday verbal or behavioral responses, perpetrated intentionally or unintentionally, that create bias for members of disadvantaged groups.
- 5) Now, I'd like for you to reflect on the last 6-12 months at work. Can you think of a time when you experienced a microaggression at your workplace? Yes or No?
  - a) If so, did you address it? Who was involved? What happened?
  - b) Did you know it was a microaggression the first time it occurred or did it have to happen one, two or several more times before you knew what it was?
  - c) Think back to the specific moment when you realized a microaggression had occurred, was there anything from your IGD, ABAT, ME or any other Social Justice Training Initiatives that helped you process that moment?
  - d) Did you feel heard and supported when addressing it? Explain. How did this affect your work/productivity/satisfaction/health at work?
- 6) Can you think of a time when you observed a microaggression at your workplace?
  - a) If so, did you address it? Who was involved? What happened?
  - b) Did you feel heard and supported when addressing it? Explain. How did this affect your work/productivity/satisfaction/health at work? What, if anything, did you need from another party? From yourself?
- 7) Is there anything that you think I should know that I have not asked about in this interview?



APPENDIX B  
RECRUITMENT FLYER

LOOKING FOR INDIVIDUALS WHO WORK AS STAFF AT A HIGHER-ED  
INSTITUTION

- Would you be willing to share your experiences around diversity?
- Have you been involved in Intergroup Dialogue or Bystander Awareness?
- Have you experienced or witnessed a microaggression in your workplace?



IF SO, PLEASE VOLUNTEER TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS INTERVIEW  
STUDY!