Microaggressions Among Online Graduate Students

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Abstract: Microaggressions are brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to a target group. This study analyzes empirical data taken from a graduate multicultural course taught online. The study explores the various ways interactions between adult students demonstrate forms of microaggressions.

Introduction

The demand for higher education institutions to offer online courses competitive, flexible, and equivalent to traditional students attending the brick and mortar institution is still growing. This demand is forcing institutions to look at delivering degrees completely online. Along with all of the courses being offered online, this phenomenon permits to anyone anywhere in the world being able to complete a class or an entire degree. Any student with the means and desire can enroll in these online courses. This occurrence greatly impacts the diversity in the online classroom. Faculty and students must be aware of the growing diversity which, is not without challenges for faculty and students as they never meet face-to-face. This relationship has a tendency to not allow knowing the traits of classmates and faculty member, such as: age, race, gender, ethnicity, disabilities, or religious affiliation along with many other personality traits. The distance as well as varied learning activities for the course may lead to miscommunications and misinterpretation of written text. In this study, microaggressions of under-represented groups are being studied to help create awareness for both students and faculty and enrichment of the classroom experience of the online learner.

Background

Microaggressions are "brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages" to a target group like multicultural and multiracial persons, religious and ethnic minorities, women, persons with disabilities, and LGBT individuals (Sue & Sue, 2008) along with other under-represented socio-cultural groups. They are subtle in nature and can be manifested as verbal or nonverbal, visual, written, or behavioral actions. Microaggressions can be enacted automatically and unconsciously (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Microaggressive exchanges are so pervasive and automatic in daily conversations and interactions that they are often dismissed and glossed over as being innocent and innocuous (Sue & Constantine, 2007). They are extremely damaging because they impair classroom performance and workplace productivity by creating emotional turmoil and depleting psychological resources (Sue, 2010) for all under-represented groups. While significant research that has been conducted on microaggressions are generally discussed from the perspective of race and racism (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Sue et al., 2007), this study will utilize discourse analysis to look at written text in message boards to find patterns of microaggressions and will take into consideration any marginalized group in our

society who may become targets: people of color, women, lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered people (LGBTs), those with disabilities, religious minorities, and so on" (Sue, 2010, p. 3). "Many adult online students have responsibilities in their life that needs to take into account simultaneously as they participate in their online courses (Hrastinski & Jaldemark, 2012, p.255). "Complexity reaches a new level in online education while the facilitation of such participation comprises both offline and online aspects (Hrastinski & Jaldemark, 2012, p.255).

Implications for Adult Educators

With recent events in Ferguson, Missouri with riots erupting involving protests about racial profiling and the local police and a social media video going viral from a fraternity on the campus of the University of Oklahoma, it becomes apparent that racism and prejudices still surround us in society today. This research builds on the foundational work by Derald Wing Sue to open the communication lines about verbal slights to marginalized groups. Without hardly trying, just about every person can give an example of a comment that was taken personally and resulted in hurt feelings. In the book *The Handbook of Race and Adult Education,* the authors stated "we think that engaging in discourse about race and racism may lead to changing structures and systems of oppression and marginalization"(2010, p.4) and this study will build on that thinking but go deeper than just race, but all types of marginalized groups. With access to education through the utilization of technology, educators cannot leave out the online classroom. Most of the engagement in the course is with the discussion boards. Educators need to be aware and recognize these slights so that all students enrolled in the course feel they are in a safe learning environment. Now is the time to begin the discussions in order to affect change and create a safe learning environment both in the classroom and online for all marginalized groups.

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