

RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

Diversity, Inclusiveness, Research, & Equity Series



VOICES OF STUDENTS OF COLOR LIVING IN UNIVERSITY HOUSING

Stacy Harwood, Margaret Browne Hunt, & Ruby Mendenhall



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**RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN:
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LIVING IN UNIVERSITY HOUSING**

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INTRODUCTION

The University of Illinois is committed to excellence in research, teaching, and public engagement. The university's mission is to transform lives and to serve society by educating, creating knowledge, and putting knowledge to work within a framework of excellence. The University of Illinois serves the state, the nation, and the global market through innovation in research. In addition, the University of Illinois prepares students to live in a global society and uses the transfer and application of knowledge to meet societal needs.

This campus has been and is committed to undergraduate and graduate education. Over 30,000 undergraduate students are enrolled in nine (9) divisions that cumulatively offer over 4,000 courses in over 150 fields of study. The university has an enrollment of over 11,000 graduate students from around the world and ranks among the top five (5) universities in the nation in doctoral degrees awarded. In its 2008 rankings, *U.S. News & World Report's* America's Best Colleges rated Illinois as the number 8 public university and the number 38 national university.

However, although the institution is one of the most prestigious in the nation, not everything is so glamorous. Joy A. Williamson (2003) in *Black Power on Campus: The University of Illinois 1965–75* describes the institutional hostility and apathy toward individuals of color, particularly Blacks. She describes the social support mechanisms that lead to student activism and student and group solidarity and advancement. This work documents the trials and tribulations of being a student of color at Illinois during a rigid time of racial change.

At the dawn of the 21st century, higher education was faced with taking a stance on issues of multiculturalism and diversity. The affirmative action cases of *Gratz v. Bollinger* and *Grutter v. Bollinger* placed the University of Michigan at the forefront of implementing policies to diversify college campuses. Even though the decision limited the formulaic use of race in college admission decisions, the University of Michigan's core argument—which allowed for colleges and universities to implement affirmative action policies in which race could be used as a factor in admissions decisions—prevailed. This allowed for the creation of a diverse environment that leads to positive educational outcomes. Illinois, like other institutions of higher education, was affected by this decision and was tasked with documenting the positive educational outcomes diversity provides.

In response to this charge, the University of Illinois, through the Center on Democracy in a Multiracial Society (CDMS), sponsored a conference in 2006 titled “Documenting the Differences Racial and Ethnic Diversity Makes.” The major objectives of this conference included determining and understanding how racial and ethnic diversity differs depending on the institutional context; discussing how to foster an environment where colleagues can address racial and ethnic diversity issues; initiating a dialogue around issues of racial and ethnic diversity on the Urbana–Champaign campus; providing an interactive atmosphere whereby participants are able to recognize and respect the pluralistic nature of race and ethnicity; and providing a context in which participants are able to discuss student life, curriculum, teaching, and research, and to brainstorm on how to create a campus climate that promotes inclusion and social justice. In his closing remarks at the conference, Chancellor Richard Herman stated:

Research presented at today's conference adds to the growing body of evidence that confirms what many of us have always known to be true: Diversity inside and outside of the classroom enhances the campus learning environment. . . Diversity matters in the development of faculty members' pedagogical approaches, and styles. Diversity matters because it shapes how we interact with one another, informs the research that we do, and permeates the traditions, policies, and practices we uphold. Finally, diversity matters because it helps to cultivate a welcoming campus climate and culture for all segments of our community.

The benefits of diversity were clear to the chancellor. As a result, he announced that the Documenting the Differences Diversity Makes conference would become a biannual event for the Illinois campus community and would serve as a vehicle for sharing the campus' progress with the campus (because Illinois is decentralized) and local communities, state, and national scholars. The campus remained charged with discussions surrounding race and the role it plays on campus. In the spring of 2008, the Illinois community participated in another conference focusing on "Race, Diversity, and Campus Climate." After many interdisciplinary sessions and discussions, it was determined at the conclusion of the conference that there is yet more work to be done.

CDMS is a unique interdisciplinary research and service institute organized around a commitment to the practice of democracy, equality, and social justice within the changing multiracial society of the United States. It includes a network of UIUC-affiliated scholars with an expertise in and sensitivity to the persistent and significant role of race in many aspects of life in the United States. It is important to explore the experiences of students of color in order to work to eliminate the negative academic outcomes and health effects of subtle and contemporary forms of racism on college campuses. One of the implications of this research project is to promote and foster an inclusive campus community that respects differences and offers all members an equal opportunity to engage in a diverse democracy. During the 2007-2008 academic year, the Center on Democracy in a Multiracial Society (CDMS) initiated the foundation of the Racial Microaggressions Working Group. In the 2008-2009 academic year, CDMS supported research to explore the experiences of students of color as part of its work to eliminate the negative academic outcomes and health effects of subtle and contemporary forms of racism on college campuses.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

As the Racial Microaggressions Working Group explores and writes about the experiences of students of color, the foundational basis of the study can be found in critical race theory (CRT). West (1995, xi) states that CRT "compels us to confront critically the most explosive issue in American civilization: the historical centrality and complicity of law upholding White supremacy (and concomitant hierarchies of gender, class, and sexual orientation)." Critical race theorists explore legal thought from the perspective of the law's role in constructing and maintaining social domination and subordination. Similarly, laws within the university context are both spoken and unspoken policies and procedures that greatly affect campus climate. Under the auspices of CRT, the principle of racial equality and interest convergence manifests in

examining the issues. Bell (1980) asserts that “the interest of Blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of Whites.” While the focus in Bell’s (1980) work is Blacks, the same statement can be made for other minority or subordinate groups.

Over the past few decades, college campuses have become increasingly diverse, both racially and ethnically. As a result, colleges and universities have initiated policies to increase racial representation on campuses. More recently, higher education administrators have attempted to promote multicultural awareness and sensitivity in an effort to create an inclusive and diverse democracy on college campuses. Over the last twenty years, researchers and educators have conducted research that has concluded that a variety of benefits to diversity in higher education exist, including critical thinking, intellectual engagement, cultural awareness, democratic sensibilities, perspective taking, and increased community and civic engagement (Chang, 2002; Engberg & Mayhew, 2007; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Hurtado, 2005; Lopez, 2004).

Despite increases in numerical diversity and research highlighting the benefits of diversity, members of historically underrepresented groups tend to perceive the general campus climate differently than their majority group peers. In general, racial minority students perceive the campus climate as unwelcoming and unsupportive, which has been associated with adverse outcomes, including poor academic performance, greater levels of stress, and poor mental health outcomes (Worthington, Navarro, Loewy, & Hart, 2008). In addition, research indicates that racial minority students may perceive greater racial tension on campus, particularly in residence halls, which decreases academic persistence and may lead to decreases in racial minority retention rates.

There has been an increased attention to subtle and contemporary forms of racism in the social science literature. According to Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, and Esquilin (2007), “Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (p. 271). These racial microaggressions are often perpetuated by individuals who are unaware that they communicate in this way when interacting with racial and ethnic minorities. Given the increase in diversity on college campuses and the negative perceptions of campus climate among students of color, racial microaggressions may be one area of research that can help explain these phenomena.

This research project is collecting empirical data to describe the experiences of students of color at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign (Illinois). We explore the various forms of racial microaggressions, their impact on recipients, and the ways in which students cope with these experiences. The objectives of this research project include:

1. Uncovering the extent to which racial microaggressions affect the lives of students of color on the University of Illinois campus.
2. Educating the campus community about the negative impact of racial microaggressions in fostering an inclusive Illinois community.
3. Providing the administration with recommendations to improve the campus climate for all community members.

The investigation consists of three phases of data collection. Phases I and II gather rich descriptions of racial microaggressions through small, intensive focus groups with students of color. The qualitative data provide the best way to gather information about the lived experiences of students of color on campus (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mishler, 1986). Phase III builds upon what is discovered in the focus group and quantifies the types and extent of racial microaggressions through a campus-wide survey of students of color.

Phase I occurred during the Spring semester of 2008. The research team obtained a list (name, e-mail, and assigned code number) of all racial/ethnic minority students living in university housing. Researchers selected a random sub-sample of students from this list and sent an e-mail requesting their participation in one of two focus groups (Appendix A). Participants were reminded that their participation was voluntary and that there was no penalty if they chose not to participate. Students who agreed to participate were given an informed consent form (Appendix B). For Phase I, a total of ten undergraduate students participated, both male and female, representing Latino/a, Black, and Native American students on campus. Phase I was funded by the CDMS.

Focus group participants received a light lunch and a chance to participate in a drawing worth \$300.00. Focus group sessions were approximately 60 to 120 minutes and were conducted in English. The sessions began with questions on educational backgrounds and then inquired about the students' experiences on campus in various settings (Appendix C). The focus groups provided narratives that illuminate students' "lived experiences" (Creswell, 1994, p. 12).

We conducted Phase II of our study between the Summer of 2008 and Spring 2009. The research team worked closely with the African American Cultural Center, the Asian American Cultural Center, and La Casa Cultural Latina to recruit students for Phase II. Nine additional focus groups were completed during Phase II. Each focus group targeted specific subpopulations of students of color, including McNair students, Black undergraduate and graduate male students, Black undergraduate and graduate female students, Asian undergraduate students, and undergraduate and graduate Latino/a students. A total of 82 undergraduate and graduate students participated in focus groups, which were transcribed and checked for accuracy. Data analysis of all of the focus groups began in Fall 2009. Phase II was funded by Campus Research Board and CDMS.

We plan to conduct Phase III of data collection during the 2010 – 2011 academic year, which will include a Web-based survey. Specifically, the research team will send a personalized e-mail to all racial/ethnic minority students and invite them to participate in the Web-based survey. We plan to obtain from the Division of Management Information (DMI) a list of all racial/ethnic minority students who currently attend the university, and solicit participation for our study by using personalized e-mail, flyers, word-of-mouth, and other forms of advertisement. We are currently looking for funding to complete Phase III.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The focus groups revealed that racial microaggressions occur in university housing, as well as in many different spatial contexts across campus and throughout the greater Champaign–Urbana community. For the purposes of this report, we will focus on the racial microaggressions that students reported experiencing within the University Housing context. In general, racial microaggressions are race-related encounters that happen between individuals. Individual level encounters can be verbal, nonverbal, or behavioral exchanges between people. Microaggressions can also occur on the environmental level, which are race-related messages that individuals receive from their environment. First, we will discuss four types of racial microaggressions that students reported experiencing in University Housing, and then we will highlight three types of environmental microaggressions.

Racial Microaggressions in University Housing

Racial microaggressions have three different forms: microassaults (verbal or nonverbal behavior aimed at hurting the person), microinsults (subtle demeaning snubs or dismissive looks and gestures that are often unconscious), and microinvalidations (minimize or deny the racialized experiences of people of color). Next, we will define each of these forms of microaggressions and discuss the main themes that students in our sample reported. *Microassaults* consist of “explicit racial derogations characterized primarily by a violent verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior or purposeful discriminatory actions” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 278).

Racial Slurs Written in Dorms: Participants reported that they noticed several racial slurs written in various spaces throughout the residence halls (elevators, chalkboards, dorm room doors). Participants perceived these slurs as racist acts committed with the intention of perpetuating microassaults towards students of color. For example, one student stated:

And I remember when I seen the [N-word]... I went to the front desk and I told them about it and it was a Caucasian girl there and she was just like, we’ve been hearing about it all day, and she kind of blew it off, and then my floor had a meeting about the whole situation and my RA told me that nobody told them about the racial slurs on the elevator... someone hadn’t got there yet, but I did a lot of stuff that day and I came back and it was still up there... my RA, we had a meeting and she said that every racial slur for every race has been written up there...

The student noted that as a result, racial/ethnic stereotypes persisted within that space. For example, students reported that racial slurs were written in dorm elevators and were more upset about the slurs not being removed immediately. A student reported the incident to the residence hall front desk personnel, who was non-responsive. When the slurs remained within the elevator doors for some time, the student questioned why the insults remained. Participants reported feeling like these slurs made the space feel unsafe and unwelcoming to them as students of color. An Asian male stated:

At my dorm, on the third floor there's two Asian guys and they're international students and they're actually called the misplaced Asians, it's written on their door and I felt really bad, I just remembered that now because they are the only Asian guys on that floor.

This is an example of a racialized comment being placed on a student of color's door, which can be considered a microassault. In addition, this is also an example of racialized spaces in the residence halls, which makes students of color feel unwelcome. They are paired together as the only two Asian students, but also their predominantly White peers give them the message that they are not welcomed in this space, which can have detrimental effects on these students.

Microinsults are defined as, "behavioral/verbal remarks or comments that convey rudeness, insensitivity and demean a person's racial heritage or identity" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 278).

A Different Set of Rules: Participants reported that they felt there was a different set of rules for their dorm, which had more students of color versus the predominantly White dorms. Students reported that they had to take off their book bags when they went into the dining halls or the snack shops in the residence halls at their dorm, which they perceive to have a greater number of students of color. However, they do not need to take off their book bags at the dorms which are perceived to be predominantly White. For example, one student stated:

There was like arguments that would start about taking your book bag off because they said that you know there's like high theft. But at the six-pack, I would go with my book bag, with my purse. I would walk in. Nobody ever told me anything. And then finally, I think us RAs in our meeting in Urbana South, FAR/PAR. We got really angry. We're like I'm not going to take my book bag off until the people in the six-pack start taking their book bags off too. For me, it was blatantly a race issue. Dining was making it seem that we were taking stuff. Even if it wasn't, because of the people who do live at PAR because it is a lot more diverse, they made it seem like the blacks and Latinos were the ones stealing. So I think people have to be very racially conscious of the decisions that they make and the rules they make.

Participants reported feeling like this different set of rules is based on a stereotype that the students of color might steal something, whereas this is not the assumption for the White students. This makes students of color feel insulted and demeaned because there is an assumption of criminal status that is based on negative stereotypes about students of color.

Racial Jokes by Roommates/Peers: Participants reported hearing insulting racial jokes and comments from their roommates or other peers in the residence halls which made them feel uncomfortable. Often these jokes highlighted their minority status and made them feel like an outsider in the residence hall space. For example, one Latina woman stated:

There was a girl there [on her dorm floor] who was joking around and she was making nicknames for everybody. Just like little subtle things about them, and joking around. And then she named me Tacos... she's like ha ha cause you're Mexican. I was like oh yeah...ha ha...like I didn't want to start any drama within the hall so I didn't say anything. But like you could tell that she didn't realize what she did.

Other students discussed having similar experiences with roommates in the dorms. Over time, these microinsults become taxing to the person of color and they begin to choose to hang out with other students of color to avoid these injuries to their psychological well-being.

Microinvalidations have been characterized by “verbal comments or behaviors that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 278).

Minimizing Racial Slurs: Participants reported the lack of response by Resident Directors and Resident Advisors to incidences of racial slurs written on elevators and doors in the residence halls. Participants reported feeling upset and insulted by these racial slurs, yet the RDs and RAs minimized these incidents as pranks rather than taking these microassaults more seriously. One Black male stated:

Someone wrote the [N word] on the blackboard in one of the study rooms. So we had a meeting with the Residence Hall Director, and we were trying to get some kind of resolution... what came across from the Residence Hall guy was that this was just a prank... whereas we students saw it, it wasn't just a prank. And so we were trying to speak to this larger issue of racism, not just within the University, but more specifically within our dorm, how that affect us as students of color, but the Residence Director saw otherwise.

In this situation, the student reported feeling invalidated by the lack of response from the RD in this dorm. In addition, the participant wanted a resolution to the matter and felt that some constructive dialogue would have made the situation a teachable moment, but that the RD wanted to ignore and minimize the severity of the situation from the perspective of the students of color.

Environmental Microaggressions in University Housing

Environmental racial microaggressions are macro-level microaggressions that occur as systematic forms of assaults (overt hurtful messages), insults (subtle demeaning messages), and invalidations (messages that minimize or deny racialized experiences). Environmental racial microaggressions are derogatory messages conveyed by the environment that demean, exclude, or invalidate people of color and their experiences. Environmental racial microaggressions can appear as racial indignities, such as a lack of people of color in a workplace or educational setting, and negative messages, like racial slurs, which appear in physical spaces. Next, we will discuss some of the environmental microaggressions that students in our focus groups experienced.

Perceived Segregation: Most of the participants reported feeling like the dormitories and other spaces on campus appear to be segregated. One Latino man stated:

I've heard Florida Avenue Residence halls and Pennsylvania Avenue Residence halls called minority central and the projects.

An Asian American man stated:

It's just kind of strange how the dorms seem, kind of, to be almost racially segregated.

Participants discussed the visible number of Black, Asian, and Latino students at these dorms compared to other dorms closer to the main part of campus. In addition, participants discussed the fact that they didn't feel comfortable going to the dorms with a predominantly White population which were closer to the main part of campus. Students shared that the lack of people of color is what caused these feelings of discomfort. A lack of people of color in the environment gives the message to students of color that they are not wanted in the space and that they are not welcomed. Students of color may feel like they don't belong and that they are outsiders in these predominantly White dorm spaces.

Racialization of Housing Assignments: Students living in University Housing have strong perceptions about how residence hall rooms are assigned. Based on their lens of knowledge and experience, participants perceived that the dorm and room assignments were socio-economically based and highly racialized. Although housing assignments may not be based on race or socioeconomic status, students view these dorms as racialized.

Perception of Living in the Projects: Students of color residing in the residence halls have found that they are perceived to reside in a ghetto or the projects because of the number of racial/ethnic minorities. For example, one student stated:

I've heard minority central, beehive... I've heard beehive cause like, this is gonna sound really bad but, black and yellow... Yeah, so I've heard minority central, beehive, the projects, Cabrini Green...

Students perceive a stigma associated with living in these highly urbanized spaces. One student contextualized the experience by stating the impact word of mouth has on the students. When choosing a place to reside for incoming freshman, they value the opinions and advice of family members, friends, and school counselors. Participants also perceived that Housing tour guides would steer students away from viewing FAR and PAR. For example, one student stated:

They show you ISR. They don't show you FAR. ...I knew that I was coming to FAR before I came to my orientation. So I want to see what my campus is gonna look like and they're coming up with excuses why they don't want to take me to FAR. And they like, 'Are you sure?' They said, 'the air conditioners don't work.' They made it sound like some crack head is gonna sit in the hallway somewhere and roaches are gonna crawl up in the room...

Students felt like university staff members perpetuated the notion that FAR and PAR are inferior dorms.

In summary, participants in our study reported various experiences with racial and environmental microaggressions while living in university housing. Many participants reported experiencing a range of encounters with both university housing staff and peers within their dormitory

communities. Racial microaggressions ranged from racial jokes by peers to racial slurs written in the dorm elevators. In addition, environmental microaggressions ranged from perceived segregation of the dorms to stereotypes about living in the projects. Regardless of the type of microaggression experienced, most students reported that these experiences felt like assaults, insults, and invalidations. Moreover, these experiences had a negative psychological impact on their well-being, either temporarily or over time. However, students of color on campus have developed strategies to cope with these experiences. Next, we will highlight some of the resiliency strategies that students reported in the focus groups.

Coping Strategies of Students of Color

As illustrated in the previous section, students of color have experienced a variety of racial microaggressions at the University of Illinois. These microaggressions are “verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 271).

The participants in our focus groups shared a variety of ways that they cope with racial microaggressions. Participants shared that they were able to adapt to their environment by developing coping strategies over time. By the senior year, students of color have developed a sophisticated set of coping strategies.

When students experience racial microaggressions, they respond in a variety of ways. Focus group participants used the following words to describe their feelings: *fear*, *anger*, *frustration*, *disbelief*, *awkward*, *uncomfortable*, *isolated*, and *invisible*. One student almost dropped out after his freshman year because he felt so unwelcome at the university.

The most common responses to racial microaggressions included the following: to ignore or dismiss it, to assume the person is ignorant or cowardly, and to blame the media. Most of the students—while they often got used to racial microaggressions and did not do anything about them—also told us of situations in which they did more. They called it “picking your battles.”

For the obvious racist actions, students reported problems to a higher authority, such as the person who sits at the front desk in housing or to a Residential Advisor. Students gave examples such as reporting racial slurs written on an elevator door and racially motivated pranks.

To counter the negative stereotypes about the intelligence of students of color, focus group participants said they chose to “prove themselves” to peers by working harder in class to “beat the stereotypes.” Some examples include participating in class, talking to classmates to make friends, learning the class material better than others, being leaders in group projects, and meeting with the instructor and teaching assistant.

Participants in the focus groups also mentioned the importance of getting information firsthand. For example, students made the decision not to rely on what friends told them but instead would go to housing directly to find out how assignments are made. In addition, participants talked

about educating self and getting involved in programming around the campus. One student expressed that doing so made her feel the campus was less racist.

Restorative justice appears to be important for students of color. At times, students could not be quiet about the racial microaggressions they experienced on campus. The focus group participants told us of examples in which they confronted others, both in class and in university housing contexts—this occurred face to face with the intention to correct the negative perceptions or stereotypes. In one case, a student caught another student setting up a prank on his door; he felt targeted because of his race. The student chased the other student down the hallway of the dorms, not to turn him in, but to tell him how he felt about his actions. Students of color know that if they respond physically, they will only perpetuate stereotypes. None of the students in the focus groups pointed to violence as a solution. However, one student’s parents did send their son a police baton for protection.

Overall, students work to build a supportive network of friends while at the University of Illinois. They look for students facing similar situations. These friend networks become key interpreters of potential racial microaggressions on campus. For example, students discussed whether because of their race they were assigned to a particular floor or received a lower grade. This subculture on campus has led students to tell incoming students to do group projects with other student of color; to take or not take particular courses; to hang out at the cultural houses, libraries, certain places on campus; and to choose FAR and PAR because these building are known to be more comfortable than “Caucasian” dorms.

DISCUSSION

The primary objectives of this research project are to uncover the extent to which racial microaggressions affect the lives of students of color on the University of Illinois campus; to educate the campus community about the negative impact of racial microaggressions in fostering an inclusive Illinois community; and to provide the administration with recommendations to improve the campus climate for all community members. The students who participated in the focus groups reported both subtle and apparent forms of microaggressions within various locales on campus. Residence halls were noted as being a site for reoccurring incidents. The researchers found that the responses to these incidents could have short-term and long-term effects on the university and residence life. The larger question to consider is, “What is in the best interest of the university?” The response to this macro question should fuel initiatives in response to micro-level questions regarding racial microaggressions. The qualitative findings from the students who participated in the focus groups highlight this as an area for review. As a result, the university should be apparent and transparent when addressing incidents of racial microaggressions. The reality of microaggressions causes individuals to respond differently in order to persist at Illinois.

University Housing’s Role in Shaping Campus Climate

Research revealed a complexity of issues taking place within the university residence halls. These issues affect students academically, emotionally, physically, and psychosocially. We also found that the overall campus climate shapes attitudes about campus housing and the interactions

of students inside of the campus housing environment. The discussions with students in the university housing focus group suggest that university housing might consider putting energy and resources into the following areas:

Re-evaluate the University Housing's Educational Purpose: University housing does more than provide food and shelter for students while at the university. Academic departments play an important role in providing formal education to students; however, university housing provides a space for students to learn how to be more independent from their parents, make friends, resolve conflicts, and negotiate the boundaries of what it means to be a positive member of a community.

University housing might re-evaluate how it fits into the larger goals of the University (for example, in leadership, sustainability, civic engagement, diversity, and so on) and determine where it contributes or could contribute to these university priority areas. Unit One and Intersections offer examples in which university housing makes these goals explicit. Why not with the rest of university housing? University housing is positioned to promote a range of living environments and learning objectives. Students often default to living where their high school friends want to live if not given a more compelling set of choices. Selecting a housing option should be as important as deciding on a major.

Manage the Perception of University Housing: Even before students arrive on campus, they begin formulating opinions about the different housing options. The perception of some student housing as a “ghetto” contributes to the perception that the university is racially segregated and an unwelcome place for students of color. University housing must grapple with the contradictory messages between the official university view of housing (Web site, brochures, application materials), the public perception (high school students, counselors, parents), and the actual student experiences. Managing the perception of university housing means bringing these three perspectives into alignment to create a clear and more truthful image of university housing.

Address Racial Steering: One of the ways to deal with the image of university housing is to take a strong stand against racial steering. Racial steering is the practice of guiding prospective students toward or away from university housing options based on race. Based on the focus group, students of color perceive racial steering occurring in two ways on this campus. Students (of all races) believe they are advised to live in certain housing options based on race. And when asking about housing options, students are not provided with all options because of their race. In the formal realm, prospective students must be told about and shown all housing options. This is particularly important in consultations on the phone and campus tours. Informally, racial steering is difficult to address directly but can be shaped by changing outsider and insider perspectives about campus.

Increase Transparency in Housing Assignments: This point is related to racial steering, but we feel it is worth calling out because it came up several times in the focus groups. The university housing assignment process is not well understood by students. University housing might consider placing more attention on explaining how the assignment process works. For example, university housing should let students know that not selecting a housing choice is in fact a choice. Random assignment does not lead to a random distribution of students. While this is a short-term solution to a bigger problem, University Housing must rethink what is meant by

random. Do 95% of students really get first choice? How many do not indicate a choice? From the students' perspective, housing is not randomly assigned. Rather, some students view housing assignments as racially motivated.

Provide Multicultural Competence Training for Staff: One of the most important implications of our findings is that students are experiencing these microaggressions in various aspects of campus life, including in university housing. One way to directly address these types of experiences and decrease the potential for microaggressions to be perpetuated is to train housing staff. Some students reported having experiences with housing staff that were perceived to be race-related. It is important to create an inclusive campus community by educating staff about ways that they could unknowingly perpetuate microaggressions and make students of color feel unwelcome in campus housing. Comprehensive multicultural education and training may be one direct way to combat racial microaggressions.

Provide Multicultural Education for Students: University Housing currently has multicultural living learning communities, such as Intersections, as well as the Multicultural Advocate program. These programs are great opportunities for peer education around issues of diversity. One important implication from our research is that this information about racial microaggressions could be infused into the existing multicultural training curriculum in order to increase students' awareness about these interracial interactions. Multicultural education that addresses racial microaggressions can help students identify when these events occur; it can be very helpful for both students of color who might be targets and White students who might be unaware of perpetuating these insults and invalidations.

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APPENDIX A

PHASE I RECRUITMENT MATERIALS

Recruitment Letter

Dear (insert student name):

We are looking for students of color who attend the University of Illinois and would like to participate in a small group discussion about issues related to race and the campus climate. Your participation will help us develop a campus-wide study examining student attitudes and experiences around issues of race, diversity, and campus climate. Receiving your feedback is important to us. We would like your participation in a focus group in order to hear about your experiences at the University of Illinois.

If you are interested in participating, please email us at cdms@uiuc.edu and let us know which date and time you can attend. The focus group should take approximately 60 to 90 minutes of your time. All of your responses will be strictly confidential and you can choose to discontinue your participation at any time.

To express our appreciation, all students who take part in the focus group will be placed in a drawing to win a cash prize of \$300.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Cordially,

Stacy Harwood, Ph.D.
Department of Urban and Regional Planning

Ruby Mendenhall, Ph.D.
Sociology, African American Studies and Research Program

APPENDIX B

PHASE I CONSENT FORM



University of Illinois, Urbana–Champaign

Sociology, African American Studies and Research Program, and Urban & Regional Planning

CONSENT FORM—FOCUS GROUP

Project Title: Racial Microaggressions at the University of Illinois
Responsible Project Investigators: Stacy Harwood and Ruby Mendenhall

Introduction/Purpose:

You are invited to participate in a study whose purpose is to examine the experiences of students of color at the University of Illinois. The professors conducting this study are Stacy Harwood and Ruby Mendenhall at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign. Dr. Harwood is in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning and Dr. Mendenhall is in the Department of Sociology and the African American Studies and Research Program. Two trained research assistants will be assisting Drs. Harwood and Mendenhall with these focus groups. The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of day-to-day discrimination and experiences of subtle racism at the University of Illinois.

Procedures:

As a participant in this study, you will be asked questions about your experiences at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign. The focus group will last for approximately 60 to 90 minutes and take place on campus at the University of Illinois. This study is completely voluntary, and you can stop participating at any time. With your permission, to aid us in recording your answers, we will use an audio recorder.

Risks:

Participation is not expected to cause any harm outside of what is normally encountered in daily life. In the rare event that you become upset or deeply offended by any questions, you may choose not to respond. In addition, you can choose to discontinue your participation at any time during the study.

Benefits:

A potential benefit of your participation is that you may learn more about your experiences with subtle forms of racism on campus. Furthermore, potential benefits exist for the UIUC campus,

such that administrators and faculty may become more aware of the ways in which they may be unintentionally harming the well-being of students of color on campus.

Alternatives and Subject’s Rights:

Your decision whether to participate will not affect your future relations with the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you can choose not to participate in this research study at any time. You can also skip any questions that you prefer not to answer.

Confidentiality:

Several safeguards will be taken to protect your identity. All of your responses will be strictly confidential.

Financial Information:

As a token of appreciation for your participation, you will be given an opportunity to enter your name into a drawing to win a cash prize of \$300. The cash award will be selected after each of the phases of data collection, and the winner will be notified by e-mail.

Contact Persons:

Any questions you may have about this study may be directed to Stacy Harwood at (217) 265-0874 or by e-mail: sharwood@uiuc.edu. You can also contact Ruby Mendenhall at (217) 333-2528 or by e-mail: rubymen@uiuc.edu. Questions about research subjects’ rights may be directed to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (217) 333-2670 or irb@uiuc.edu. The IRB is a review board that monitors the research process and ensures the ethical and legal conduct of human subject research at UIUC. You are welcome to call collect if you identify yourself as a research participant.

Consent:

I have read this form, and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions, and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. If I have additional questions, I have been told who to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above, and I agree to be audiotaped.

I may be contacted at a later point as a follow-up to this study; however, I will be given an opportunity to provide consent to that aspect of the study at that time.

I understand that I will receive a copy of this consent form.

Participant’s Signature

Date

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Date

Investigator’s Signature

Date

APPENDIX C

PHASE I FOCUS GROUP SCRIPT

(adapted from Sue, Bucci, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007)

Hi, my name is “facilitator.” Thank you for coming here today to participate in this focus group. The purpose of today’s focus group is to gain a better understanding of day-to-day discrimination and experiences of subtle racism. I am sure that you are familiar with overt forms of discrimination such as racial slurs or hate crimes. However, today we are interested in hearing about your experiences of subtle acts of being discriminated against because of your race. These experiences may have occurred in any setting or at any time in your life. We will be asking you some questions that we encourage you to answer to the best of your ability, and we recognize that many of you will have unique experiences of being subtly discriminated against. There are no wrong answers. At this time, I’d like to introduce “observer,” who will be a nonparticipating member of our group today. He/She is here to record our conversation so that I can be involved in the group without having to take too many notes. Okay, so, I am going to give everyone a form now, which basically states that your participation in this group is entirely voluntary and that you may decline to participate and leave the group at any time. Please read this sheet carefully before signing it. It discusses potential risks to you as members of this group as well as the use of audiotaping during this session. I’d like to give everyone the opportunity to ask any questions they may have before we begin the group.

Question/Answer. . .

Statement of Confidentiality

We will be audiotaping this session in an effort to maintain the integrity of your dialogue. However, your identities will not be revealed to anyone, and only the researchers will have access to this tape. This discussion is to be considered confidential, and we would hope that you will all respect each other’s rights to privacy by not repeating any portion of this discussion outside of this session.

Opening Question

At this time we would like for each of you to say your first name, major, year in school, and why you are interested in participating in this study.

General Question

People of color often have experiences in which they are subtly invalidated, discriminated against, and made to feel uncomfortable because of their race. In thinking about your daily experiences at the University of Illinois, could you describe a situation in which you witnessed or were personally subtly discriminated against because of your race?

Interview Questions

- What are some subtle ways that people treat you differently because of your race?

- Describe a situation in which you felt uncomfortable, insulted, or disrespected by a comment that had racial overtones.
- Think of some of the stereotypes that exist about your racial group. How have others subtly expressed their stereotypical beliefs about you?
- In what ways have others made you feel “put down” because of your cultural values or communication style?
- In what ways have people subtly expressed that “the White way is the right way”?
- In what subtle ways have others expressed that they think you’re a second-class citizen or inferior to them?
- How have people suggested that you do not belong here because of your race?
- What have people done or said to invalidate your experiences of being discriminated against?

Transition Questions

- Where are these experiences taking place on the University of Illinois campus? (Probing questions: Are there places on campus where you do not feel welcomed? Are there places on campus that make you feel uncomfortable as a result of your experiences?)
- Who have been perpetrators of these forms of racism on campus? (Probing questions: Peers that you know, peers that you do not know, faculty, staff, and/or administrators?)
- What are some of the ways that you dealt with these experiences?
- How did you or do you cope with these experiences? (Probing questions include: Did you file a formal complaint? Did you actively do something—such as speak up about it? Did you talk to other people about it? Did you ignore it? Did you confront the perpetrator in a physical altercation?)
- What do you think the overall impact of your experiences has been on your life?
- How have these experiences affected you emotionally?
- Do you feel like you are a part of the campus community?
- Has the experience(s) made you consider leaving the university?
- Have you discouraged others from attending the University of Illinois as a result of your experiences?
- Have you gotten involved in campus social activist organizations or activities to fight against these forms of racism and discrimination?

Ending Questions

So today you shared several experiences of subtle discrimination. Some of you said. . .

There were several themes that were consistent across many of your experiences. These themes include. . . Does that sound correct? If not, what themes might you add?

ABOUT THE CENTER ON DEMOCRACY IN A MULTIRACIAL SOCIETY

The Center on Democracy in a Multiracial Society (CDMS) is a unique interdisciplinary research and service institute organized around a commitment to the practice of democracy, equality, and social justice within the changing multiracial society of the United States. It includes a network of scholars with an expertise in and sensitivity to the persistent and significant role of race in many aspects of life in the United States. The Center's three core principles are to:

1. Learn how to fully realize the benefits of diversity, negotiate conflicts, and form coalitions with individuals and groups of various racial and ethnic backgrounds;
2. Empower members of the University of Illinois community to live in racially diverse communities, maintain friendships with people of different backgrounds and function more effectively in an increasingly diverse workplace by teaching and learning about racial diversity in formal classroom activities and informal interactions on campus; and,
3. Prepare students for civic engagement and participation in a democratic society.

CDMS strives to inform university multiracial diversity efforts here and throughout the country by conducting and publishing academic research on this subject. In the fall of 2010, we will publish the following:

- Implementing Diversity;
- Elusive Equity: Graduate Education at Illinois' Flagship University; and
- Racial Microaggressions at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign: Voices of Students of Color Living in University Housing.

The complete text of this report is available at <http://cdms.illinois.edu/>. To order print copies or to learn about other CDMS publications, visit <http://cdms.illinois.edu/> or call (217) 244-0188.

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Stacy A. Harwood, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor, Department of Urban and Regional Planning, University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign. Dr. Harwood's research focuses on the emerging field of planning for difference and diversity. She examines how planning codes and regulations differentially affect diverse populations, with a focus on local policy and immigration. She is exploring ways to better prepare planners to work in diverse communities. Her publications have appeared in the *Critical Policy Analysis*, *International Planning Studies*, *Journal of Planning Education & Research*, *Policy Studies Journal*, and *Planning Research & Practice*.

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Ruby Mendenhall, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor, Sociology, African American Studies, and Urban and Regional Planning, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She was a Fellow at the National Center for Institutional Diversity at the University of Michigan while working on this manuscript. Dr. Mendenhall's research focuses on issues of social inequality over the life course and the role of public policy and individuals' agency in facilitating social and economic mobility. She is especially interested in the various policies (housing, welfare, education, etc.) influence the life course of individuals and how individuals respond to those policies. She uses quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze administrative welfare and employment data, census data, in-depth interviews, and focus group data.



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