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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Indigenous Canadian University Students' Experiences of Microaggressions

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Abstract Racial microaggressions are defined as daily indignities directed towards disempowered racial groups that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights (Sue et al. *American Psychologist*, 62, 271–286, 2007b). The purpose of the present study was to investigate Indigenous Canadian university students' experiences of racial microaggresions and provide suggestions for culturally competent educational practices. The study utilized a qualitative method and involved a focus-group and follow-up interviews. Seven domains or themes emerged. These domains were: *overt discrimination*; *assumption of intellectual inferiority*; *assumption of criminality*; *invalidation or denial*; *second-class citizen*; *racial segregation*; and *myth of meritocracy*. Implications for counselors and educators were discussed.

Keywords Racism · Discrimination · Indigenous Canadian · Microaggressions

Introduction

Racism can be defined as "a complex aggregate of prejudice and discrimination based on an ideology of racial domination and oppression" (Essed 1990, p. 11). Racist attitudes can be intentional, overt, and direct, as well as subtle, indirect and unintentional (Sue et al. 2007b). The indirect and subtle expressions of racism are difficult to detect, yet the effects are just as harmful or damaging as those inflicted by direct expressions (Sue and Sue 2003). For example, in North America, members of the majority culture tend to be unaware of their privileges and how their attitudes and actions discriminate against minorities, or people of color (Steinberg 2005). Consequently, more subtle and perhaps unintentional acts of racism continue to affect the lives of racialized peoples (Dovidio et al. 2002).

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Racial microaggressions are defined as "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" (Sue et al. 2007b, p. 271). We were curious to determine whether the concept of microagressions was relevant in the Canadian context, and with Indigenous Canadians in particular. The term Indigenous is used throughout the article to refer to the Indigenous peoples of Canada, including Inuit, First Nations and Metis, because it is the term used by the Canadian government (Rousell and Giles 2012). Thus, the purpose of the present study was to investigate the experiences of Indigenous Canadian university students regarding racial microaggresions.

Derald Wing Sue and his colleagues have investigated the experiences of various ethnic groups in the U.S. (Constantine 2007; Sue et al. 2007a; 2008). The term *micro* refers to the individual or private aspects of racism (Sue et al. 2007b), as opposed to the institutional or more public aspects. Sue and his colleagues identified three forms of racial microaggressions: (a) microassault, (b) microinsult, and (c) microinvalidation (Sue et al. 2007b). Microassaults are more direct, intentional and overt compared to microinsults and microinvalidations. Microassaults involve verbal and nonverbal attacks, avoidant behaviors, and purposeful discriminatory actions. They are similar to what is called "old fashioned" racism. Examples of microassaults are discouraging interracial interactions, serving a white Canadian before an Indigenous Canadian customer, and referring to someone as "colored" or "Oriental." Microassaults are usually displayed when the perpetrator has anonymity and feels safe acting out, or when the perpetrator can no longer control their biases and negative attitudes towards racialized persons (Sue et al. 2007b). Although microassaults are not the main focus of the present study, intentional and overt acts of racism are usually intertwined with the more subtle and unintentional acts, and therefore, will be explored as needed.

Microinsults, on the other hand, may be unintentional. Nevertheless, they are insensitive and insulting. Microinsults include rude remarks that demean a person's cultural identity or heritage. An example is mispronouncing an Indigenous student's last name and asking what kind of a name it is. Similarly, an instructor avoiding eye contact with an Indigenous student or turning her back when the student has his/her hand up can communicate the message that contributions of Indigenous students are not valued. Although it may seem innocuous when such an act is committed once by an instructor or a faculty member, students may encounter these types of offenses or even more pronounced offenses regularly in the classroom even though the instructor may not be aware of his or her actions and commit them unintentionally (Sue et al. 2007b). Therefore, investigating the students' perceptions of microaggressions is especially important to bring awareness to this, often hidden, issue.

Finally, microinvalidations are communications that deny the psychological effects of racism and the experiences of persons of color. Microinvalidations "...exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color" (Sue et al. 2007b, p. 274). For example, taking the stance of color blindness or telling an Indigenous student that we are all human negates the experiences of racism and discrimination that the student has personally experienced. Similarly, telling a friend that he is having unwarranted reactions to a racist comment negates that friend's racial reality as well.

In addition to the three types of microaggressions, Sue et al. (2007b) identified nine themes, or categories of racial microaggressions. They are: (1) alien in one's own land, (2) ascription of (low or high) intelligence, (3) color blindness, (4) criminality or assumption of criminal status, (5) denial of individual racism, (6) myth of meritocracy, (7) pathologizing cultural values and communication styles, (8) second class status, and (9) environmental invalidation. An example

for the theme of being an alien in one's own land is asking where a person is from or telling a second generation Chinese-descent student who lives in Vancouver, Canada, that she speaks English very well. These remarks communicate the underlying assumption that the person cannot be from Canada and that English must be her second language. The myth of meritocracy theme includes assumptions that race does not play a role in life successes. Pathologizing cultural values and communication styles would include criticizing a student for not making eye contact when talking.

Such acts of racial microaggressions create dilemmas for the recipients (Sue et al. 2007b). One such dilemma is the clash of racial realities. According to Sue and his colleagues, members of the mainstream culture tend to believe that racialized groups are doing well in life, racism is no longer an issue, and that discrimination is declining, and, moreover, most in that culture do not believe that they are capable of racist behaviors. Racialized groups, on the other hand, face daily acts of racism and have a different racial reality. Another dilemma involves the person of color's uncertainty regarding how to respond to the subtle racist act. Should they keep quiet about it? If the person chooses to keep quiet, then they have to deal with internal effects of the racist act. Should they say something? If the person chooses to say something to the offender, will they need to prove that the act was indeed racist and put themselves in a vulnerable position of trying to explain the situation from their perspective?

Several studies provide support for the racialized groups' experiences of racial microaggressions in post-secondary settings. Sue and colleagues (Sue et al. 2007a; 2008) conducted focus groups with Asian-American and African-American university students. The researchers found that Asian-Americans tended to face microaggressions such as being perceived as aliens in their own land, being ascribed high intelligence, denial of their racial reality, and exoticization of Asian-American women. Sue and his colleagues explained that Asian-Americans are usually viewed as the model minority, but such assumptions mask the racial reality of Asian-Americans and reaffirms the myth that hard work is sufficient to succeed in U.S. society. African-Americans, on the other hand, face assumptions of intellectual inferiority, second-class citizenship, criminality, and being of inferior status (Sue et al. 2008). The authors concluded that racial microaggressions create disparities in education, often reflect assumptions of white supremacy, and are manifested in individuals, as well as institutions. As such, it is imperative that educators and other personnel in educational institutions are cognizant of the range of experiences of racism that are at play in order to respond appropriately as part of their efforts to enhance cultural safety and competence at post-secondary institutions.

Racist policies and discriminatory practices were ubiquitous throughout Canadian history (Driedger and Halli 2000; Walker 2008) and were reflected in educational institutions. According to Rousell and Giles (2012) "the government of Canada has facilitated linguistic, cognitive, and cultural imperialism by establishing laws such as the Indian Act and the development of residential schools" (Rousell and Giles 2012, p. 423). Rousell and Giles explained that the Indian Act "is a Canadian statute that was enacted in 1876 by the Parliament of Canada to determine who is and is not an' Indian' as well as their rights and freedoms" (Rousell and Giles 2012, p. 426). Even though the Indian Act gave certain rights to Indigenous people, such as the right to live on a reserve, it was a combination of previous colonial ordinances, which essentially aimed to assimilate Indigenous people and it caused trauma and human rights violations for generations of Indigenous peoples (Henderson 2016). Driven by these policies, residential schools functioned between nineteenth century and 1996, and during this time, over 150,000 Indigenous youth were taken from their families and placed in residential schools to assimilate them to the Euro-Canadian culture (Rousell and Giles

2012). Thus, the education system in Canada is rooted in such imperialistic practices since its early beginnings.

Neegan (2005) explained that the Canadian educational system has been built on the Western worldview, and Indigenous approaches to education have been systematically ignored, and this has resulted in continued subjugation of Canadian Indigenous. Barker (2009) concluded that "Canadian society remains driven by the logic of imperialism and engages in concerted colonial action against Indigenous peoples whose claims to land and self-determination continue to undermine the legitimacy of Canadian authority and hegemony" (Barker 2009, p. 325). Finally, As a result of the contributions of indigenous scholars across Canadian universities and, more recently, the Truth and Reconciliation Council's (TRC) calls for action around education and institutions of higher education across Canada, there are signs of beginning to respond to these long standing calls to make indigenous education and worldviews a central component of all education in Canada.

Given that Canadian universities are becoming responsive to the TRC's call for action and are acknowledging the government's role in facilitating institutional racism that affected several generations of Canadian Indigenous (Rousell and Giles 2012), it is timely to pay attention to issue of racial microaggressions. Although much attention has been paid to institutional forms of racism, especially in relation to the Indigenous community and experiences, little attention has been paid to subjective experiences of racism encountered within the private domain of people's lives. Given psychology's attention to the individual, a focus on both public and private (i.e., in regard to microaggressions) forms or racism, are relevant.

Few recent studies in Canada have focused on Indigenous university students' experiences of racism. In one study, researchers Currie et al. (2012) specifically focused on the discrimination experiences of Indigenous university students in Canada. The researchers used both open-ended questions and a self-report instrument to examine students' experiences of discrimination. In addition, they compared the data from Canada with similar data from the U.S. The researchers found that Canadian Indigenous students experienced discrimination more frequently across a greater number of life situations compared to U.S. participants. For example, female students reported that they were often perceived as a sex-trade worker or as being on social assistance. The researchers explained that Indigenous students may be facing discrimination more commonly due to not relinquishing their traditional culture. Although this study provided evidence that Canadian Indigenous students faced high levels of discrimination, the qualitative information that was provided by the study was rather limited. The researchers focused mainly on quantitative data and provided only a few quotations from participants. In the present study we aimed to provide a richer account of Canadian Indigenous university students' experiences of both subtle and overt discrimination and microaggressions, by using a qualitative methodology.

As the present article was being prepared for publication, another group of researchers published an article on Indigenous students' experiences with racial microaggressions in Canada (see Clark et al. 2014). They conducted a focus group with six Indigenous university students and found five themes. These themes were: encountering expectations of primitiveness, enduring unconstrained voyeurism, withstanding jealous accusations, experiencing curricular elimination or misrepresentation, and living with day-to-day cultural and social isolation. The participants reported that their non-Indigenous peers seemed to expect them to have a primitive life that was stuck in the past and they felt these peers pried into the Indigenous students' identity and life (i.e., voyeurism). Moreover, non-Indigenous peers seemed to think that Indigenous students received unearned educational benefits. The

participants added that Indigenous issues were either not covered or misrepresented in their courses. Finally, they reported that they felt isolated and lonely on campus. Although there is a considerable overlap between the scope of Clark et al.'s study and the present study, we believe that providing more detail and examples regarding Indigenous students' experiences of racism at institutions of higher education is important to demonstrate the consistency of this issue.

Based on these findings, it is clear that racism and discrimination exist in the North American society and, similar to other racialized groups, Indigenous university students are likely to face racial microaggression. As a result, it is crucial for North American educators and counsellors to gain a better understanding of racial microaggressions, their effect on Indigenous individuals, and safeguard against the possibility of such occurrences in the higher education and counselling contexts. The present study aimed to obtain a better understanding of racial microaggressions as experienced by Canadian university Indigenous students and provide suggestions for North American educators and counsellors regarding culturally competent skills and practices.

Method

This qualitative research study was guided by the Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) method as outlined by Hill and colleagues (Hill et al. 2005; 1997). Philosophically, CQR is a constructivist method that is based on the understanding that there are multiple realities, mutuality of influence between researcher and participant, and reliance on naturalistic, highly interactive data collection and analysis methods (Hill et al. 2005). Given that this study sought to replicate research conducted in the U.S., we chose the methodology utilized by Sue and colleagues (see Sue et al. 2008), but modified for the current context, with particular attention to the cultural group we were working with.

While the constructivist qualities of CQR rendered it amenable to research with different ethnic groups, it does not provide guidelines for attending to cultural and contextual factors with participants. Neither was this explicated in previous microaggressions research. Because of the topic of research, and in recognition of Tri-Council Guidelines for Working with Indigenous Peoples (Aboriginal Research Ethics Initiative 2008), attention to personal and cultural safety as well as cultural protocol was paramount for this study. According to the Guidelines, researchers should respect the Indigenous culture, consult the members of the community regarding the design of the research project, employ appropriate members of the Indigenous community for the research project, and seek feedback from community members regarding the results and their relevance. The attention to Indigenous cultural practice and protocol within the context of research is considered critical to honoring the experiences shared by members of this community in Canada and, therefore, the methodology of the present study was adapted to incorporate this.

Both authors are multicultural researchers and practitioners, and one author works in the area of trauma and the other has experience researching racial microagressions. Guided by our training and experience, we ensured all stages of the research as well as interactions with participants were conducted with utmost care. As noted in the research description, we consulted with researchers with expertise in the area, two elders, and ensured that one of the main focus group interviewers was Indigenous. Also, we provided the themes obtained from the focus group to the participants, including the elder, asked for their feedback, and invited them for a follow-up interview. Details of the method are outlined below.

Participants

Interviewees

Seven university students (4 female, 3 male) of Indigenous background (3 Cree, 1 Plains Cree, 1 Métis, 1 Blackfoot-PiiKani First Nation, 1 Dehcho First Nation) participated in a focus group. All seven were invited to participate in individual interviews but only four of them volunteered to participate in that component. The participants' ages ranged between 22 and 54 ($M = 33$, $SD = 12.08$). All the participants agreed that racism and discrimination occurred in Canada and that they had experienced overt and covert forms first hand. An additional participant who was not a university student but a female Métis elder, shared her experiences regarding racism in addition to acting as an elder or consultant (see Table 1).

Research Team and Roles

The research team consisted of two faculty members and two research assistants. The two faculty members identified as non-Indigenous ethnic minorities. One of the research assistants identified as Métis and had a bachelor's degree in anthropology and native studies. The other assistant was a master's student and although she was not of Indigenous background, she had previous experience doing community research with Indigenous populations.

The two faculty members trained the research assistants on methodology of the research project and conducting focus groups. The focus group and the following individual interviews were conducted by the research assistants. Following the focus group, each research assistant conducted two follow-up interviews (involving four participants). Once the audio recordings of the focus group and the interviews were transcribed, one faculty member joined the two research assistants to form the primary research team and the other faculty member served as an auditor.

Procedure

Recruiting Interviewees

Recruitment began once the project was approved by the relevant university's ethics committee. One of the faculty members contacted a student group that organizes cultural activities and

Table 1 Demographic Information

Gender	Age	Year of study	Degree	Major	Occupation	Tribal group
M*	25	4	BA	Native Studies	–	Cree
F**	33	2	BA	Psychology	–	Blackfoot-PiiKani First Nation
F	22	1	BA	Sociology	–	Plains Cree
F	54	–	Ph.D.	–	Politician	Metis
M	45	–	–	Fine Arts	Support and Outreach Worker	Cree
F	24	4	BA	Native Studies	Researcher	Cree
M	28	1	BA	Native Studies	Student	Decho First Nations

*M: Male;

**F: Female

gatherings for Indigenous students on campus. The student group's leader was contacted and provided with a detailed description of the project. The faculty member participated in various gatherings organized by the group and initiated face-to-face contact with the students. In addition, the project was announced through posters and fliers that were posted and distributed on campus and around the student group's community room. An e-mail announcement was also sent to Indigenous students via the student group's list-serv. Potential participants contacted the researchers via e-mail and they were informed about the participation procedure and the date, time and place of the focus group. Participants were provided with a $20 incentive for their participation in the focus group.

The same faculty member also contacted a university office that provides services to Indigenous students within the university community, including elder services. Two elders were subsequently contacted prior to the focus group for consultation regarding the research procedure and cultural sensitivity and safety of participants. In line with cultural protocol, the elders were offered tobacco for the request for consultation. One of the elders was also invited to participate in the focus group to provide support and consultation for the students and also to share her perspective on racial microaggressions. Contact information for the two elders and the Indigenous student services office were also provided in the debriefing form as a resource for the participants in case they needed support regarding emotional issues that may have risen during the focus group.

Focus Group and Interviews

CQR uses both focus groups and interviews as data collection methods. One focus group was conducted that lasted two hours and was adapted by having an elder open and close the discussion with prayer. All questions were open-ended and a semi-structured format was followed. Questions that were asked during the focus group were adapted from those used in other microaggressions research (D. W. Sue, personal communication, November 17, 2008). The original protocol was developed from a review of the literature on microaggressions (Pierce et al. 1978; Solorzano et al. 2000; Sue 2003), research related to implicit and explicit stereotyping (Banaji 2001; Banaji et al. 1993) and aversive racism (Dovidio et al. 2002; Jones 1997).

Questions were grouped under 7 general headings: general experience of discrimination (e.g., what are some subtle ways that people treat you differently because of your race or ethnic identity), responses and reactions (e.g., how did you react in the moment), interpretation (e.g., how do you understand your experience), changes in responses (e.g., what would you have done in retrospect), coping (e.g., how did you deal with the situation), impact (e.g., how have microaggressions affected you over your lifetime), feedback and final comments. For the purpose of the present study, the analysis focused on the participants' experiences of discrimination and their responses and reactions. Demographic information was obtained by a brief form that included questions about gender, age, year of study, degree towards which the student was working, major, occupation, and Indigenous group affiliation.

In addition to the focus group, four follow-up interviews were conducted. The purpose of the follow-up interviews was to provide an opportunity for the participants to reflect on the focus group, add anything they might have thought about afterwards, or give feedback to the researchers. A summary of the focus group content was sent to all the participants and they were invited to participate in a follow-up interview. Four of the participants volunteered to do so and the interviews lasted between 46 min and 71 min. The three participants who did not

participate in the individual interviews either reported scheduling conflicts or did not indicate any reason as to why they would not participate. The interviews also provided additional information about participants' experiences of microaggressions.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the guidelines outlined by the CQR method (Hill et al. 2005; 1997). The audio-recording of the focus group and the follow-up interviews were transcribed verbatim. The two research assistants and one faculty member conducted the analysis as the primary research team and the other faculty member audited the analysis. Initially, the transcripts were broken down into meaning units; defined as a single idea that reflected the respondents' language as much as possible to preserve the intended meaning. Then, three researchers of the primary research team met and discussed the initial list of possible domains. This initial list of possible domains also contained the domains that were reported by Sue and his colleagues (2007a, b). In addition, this study identified domains relating to different ways participants addressed microaggressions in their lives. These will be discussed in another paper relating to resilience among Indigenous post-secondary students in the face of microagressions. Following this initial discussion, each researcher worked independently and grouped the meaning units of the focus group into domains. After this individual coding, the group met, discussed, and came to an agreement regarding the domains and the meaning units under each domain.

The meaning units and domains were given to the auditor. The auditor reviewed the results and gave feedback. Her feedback pointed to an excessive number of categories under each domain and excessive double coding. The primary research team met with the auditor to go over the feedback and discuss ways of overcoming the problems. Later the primary research team met again and revised the list of domains based on the feedback from the auditor. Once the researchers reached a consensus on the revised list of domains, the auditor was consulted again, this time with no additional feedback. Later, the two research assistants went through the follow-up interviews and coded them based on the agreed-upon domains. They added new domains as needed. Moreover, the team discussed the domains across the focus group and follow-up interviews, and a final consensus was reached. Finally, the core ideas for the domains were established.

Results

Seven *domains*, a term used by Hill et al. (1997) to refer to topic areas, relating to experiences of microaggressions emerged from the focus group and the follow-up interviews. These domains were: *overt discrimination*; *assumption of intellectual inferiority*; *assumption of criminality*; *invalidation or denial*; *second-class citizen*; *racial segregation*; and *myth of meritocracy*. In addition, an *other comments* domain was created to address participants' statements that could not be included in any of the other domains.

Overt Discrimination

The domain of *overt discrimination* refers to the experience of explicit or obvious discrimination. This specifically includes experiences that are deemed purposeful, and in many cases, are loaded with the ultimate intention of hurting the victim. Such experiences include, for

example, denial of education, racist comments, and exposure to physical violence or abuse. These experiences often resulted in feelings of anger, confusion about how to react, or sadness regarding missed opportunities. For example, one of the participants from the Ermineskin Cree Nation in Maskwacis explained:

> … my teacher like refused to teach me just because I was Native and I really wanted to learn math and I never got to learn it, I didn't even pass it. So I had to when I went to grade 10 like I had to they just took me into grade 10 math and after that my math just sucked and I hate it now but I really wish she would have taught me that.

The same participant stated:

> I even get pushed really deadly when you're walking to class you know, right I hate that but I used to want to just throw my bag down and do something, but I don't want to be like that anymore you know because I want to be better than that, so I learned to control my anger and try not think in the, like I don't know but what's it called but kinda like a gang mentality kind of thing.

Another participant mentioned during the follow-up interview that he would be called names and made fun of, especially when he was younger. He stated he would be told he was "nothing but an Indian giver, and those typical kinda racist names and Injin Jo Tonto." The same participant added that when he was in grade 8 he used to help a grade 3 teacher and supervise grade 3 students during lunch hours. During a lunch hour one of the grade 3 students made fun of him by doing a stereotypical "Indian dance." The participant explained that he had to sit the student down and explain why that was a racist behavior.

In summary the participants shared that they had been subjected to purposeful acts of racism including mockery, name calling, physical violence, or exclusion from education throughout their schooling.

Assumption of Intellectual Inferiority

This domain refers to the experience of being undermined in an educational setting and facing assumptions of inferior intellectual capability of Indigenous students compared to non-Indigenous students. These experiences result in feeling constantly challenged in an educational environment, such as high school or university. One of the participants identified himself as a Cree from Sturgeon Lake Albert and explained that he grew up on the reserve and later moved to a predominantly White town with his mother and went to a Catholic school. He stated:

> I fought to stay in school and in grade 7, for some reason math clicked for me and I got really good at it and that saved me…. This guy in high school taught all the sciences, so biology, chemistry and all the science classes … and I struggled with his courses and he didn't make it any easier and when I was ready to graduate he heard through the grapevine that I was applying to the university to come here and he said "Well he's not going to get in because he doesn't have a science component." What he didn't know was that I finished my math, grade 12 math early and did a math 31 through correspondence and math 31 is considered a science back then, I don't know if it still is... and that's how I got in. So but he was always trying to undermine all the things I was trying to do, like fighting to stay in school, because he made it really difficult.

In summary, the participant received the message that he was not qualified enough to receive acceptance to a university, which can have a strong negative influence on the student's self-efficacy.

Assumption of Criminality

This domain refers to the Indigenous person being inappropriately confronted by authority figures or other citizens based on the assumption that they were breaking the law, had a history of criminal behavior, or intended to break the law through his or her likely actions. One of the participants from the Northwest Territories identified himself as Dene from Deh Cho First Nations Region and added that he was "an adoption scoopee," meaning he was taken from his Indigenous family and given up for adoption. He added: "I come from a lot of history from that. And I grew-up in Ontario, and where I have had to learn how to identify who I am on a very long and hard journey!" In regards to the assumption of criminality he stated:

> My brother passed away a few years ago, and one of my uncles had found two eagle feathers [eagles are protected birds] on the ground, and he had given them to me because he had not seen me for such a long time. And I was living in Ontario and going to school in Ontario, and so going through the airport I had the feathers in my carry-on, making sure they were not damaged and I had some dried caribou jerky in my coat. And so going through um, the security screening, ah they had you know to check the laptops and I had to take the feathers out, and they were like where did you get those? I said "from my uncle." "Well how did your uncle get them?" I said "He found them on the ground!" And he was like "Well your uncle should not have done that!" I said "well it is molting season, they are going to be losing feathers regardless!

Another participant who is Blackfoot from Peigan First Nation in Southern Alberta, shared her experience of facing similar assumptions:

> Umm, before I was a carpenter I was working in a bank and I was working in that small Mormon community back home and I was the teller for the Native people; white people would not come to me and one guy even he was in a rush one day ended up having to come to me and I told him "well I get trained just like everybody else it's up to you if you want my supervisor to serve you it's okay" and then he asked me what my last name was and I said "my last name is …" and you know it was a big thing for him he was like "oh is it like …"and I said "yeah" and he goes "what kind of name is that?" and of course it's going to be Blackfoot that's where you know he has two great big Blackfoot communities in either side of this community so I'm like "well it's Blackfoot" and then he's like shaking his head and he's like making these you know I don't know I couldn't and I said "yeah" and he goes and I said "I have no control, unless you sign that deposit or withdrawal, I have no control of what happens in your bank account" he goes "no" he goes "I don't want you looking at my account" really hear him he was kinda talking under his breath and umm and he told me "you know what I don't want you looking at my bank account" he said "you're going to get somebody else."

Eventually, the participant's supervisor had to complete the customer's transaction. The participant reported that she felt frustrated and sad, and did not attend to white customers after that. Yet another participant reported that when people heard where she was from they automatically assumed that she was a gang member.

In summary, participants shared that other people did not trust them, they were assumed to be criminals, and they had been in situations where they had to defend themselves even though they had not committed any crime.

Invalidation and Denial

The participants experienced invalidation of their identity and denial of their experiences. Two categories emerged from the *invalidation and denial* domain: *Invalidation or negation of culture, identity, spirituality, and history;* and *denial of racial reality.* The invalidation or negation of culture, identity, spirituality, and history category refers to the experience of facing misinformation, stereotypes, negative beliefs, denial, or a general belittling of Indigenous persons' culture, values, beliefs, and history. There were many statements from participants related to this domain. The participant who identified himself as Dene from Deh Cho First Nations Region explained:

> The Mohawks are blockading roads and blockading the railways, and interrupting traffic on the 401. And, there's my adoptive aunt, who came home, came to our family home for dinner one evening and was just about to leave and she said, "Ah, shit, I gotta go through that damn Indian blockade." And, I looked at her, and she's like, "What?" And it wasn't until like, I graduated from college in Ontario when she realized, she said, "You know what I was thinking about that time there, and ah, remember what I said and you were staring at me, and I am so sorry for that, I didn't realize that."

He was also told that he should not concern himself about racist remarks made by his teacher, because he was adopted by a white family, which meant that he was also White. Before he was adopted by a white family he used to tell himself: "They're not your real family. Just do what you have to do, to get [by], to survive…." He explained that he felt depressed as a child due to living in a racist white community and his adoptive family, especially his mother, could not understand why he was feeling depressed, which eventually led to a suicide attempt during his mid-teen years. Another participant stated: "I was kicked out of high school because my principal denied the residential schools even existed, so my grade 12 my last semester I even had my… everything was set up my invitations were out for my grad ceremony everything and I got booted out of school."

In summary, participants shared that they faced comments that denied their cultural background and history.

The second category, the category of *denial of racial reality*, refers to messages that participants received about their experiences of racism. Messages implied that their perception of racism and discrimination was invalid, that racism and discrimination did not exist, or that the participants were exaggerating the effect of racism. One participant who is originally from Saskatchewan, Muskeg Lake Cree First Nation's Reserve, stated that when she was in elementary school another child made a racist comment about her and she punched the other child. When the teacher asked the participant what happened, she told the teacher about the racist comment, but the teacher said that the participant was using the racist comment as an excuse to get out of trouble. The same participant added:

> The guidance counsellor that's there at the high school I went to before I quit for a while, they weren't prepared for dealing with those kinda issues. They say they are but really they're not because they, you can sit down with somebody and you tell them how you

> feel about you know what just happened about what, you know, you were just punched in the back of the head and called a stupid "Injun." Um and you could try to tell them how that makes you feel but they will never be able to grasp it. They'll never be able to transcribe it properly into their own um understanding. Cause they've never had to deal with it on that personal level. They're dealing with it in a very impersonal way, where they're kind of, they're on the outside looking in so to speak. So they don't know what it is like to experience racism or experience it on a large scale. They may see it on a small scale but they don't necessarily know what it's like on a large scale.

In summary, the participant shared that the educational system was not equipped to deal with racism and her racial reality.

Second-Class Citizen

This domain refers to the experience of being treated as a lesser being, witnessing non-Indigenous receive preferential treatment, and receiving lower quality services. This can often result in feelings of anger, frustration, or an overall sense of feeling hurt. The participant who identified as Blackfoot from Peigan First Nation in Southern Alberta, shared her experience of facing similar assumptions:

> I have a trade, I'm a Scaffolding Carpenter, and being a woman and being Indigenous in the trades it's tough. And especially when you're working downtown Calgary and you get off work at 4:30 and 5:00, just like the rest of the professionals downtown, you have to ride the train with them … but you know people not wanting to sit with you, people only umm homeless people come sit with me. Other girls that were intrigued by me being dirty with my coveralls on and my tools most of the time, or my hard hat, they would come and talk to me but I really felt that you know, like, I work hard in what I do just like anyone else would every day and you know I sweat and I get dirty and that's just the type of work that I do, but you know people on the c-train were, this was just this last summer, they didn't want to sit with me, they didn't want to talk, they wouldn't look me in the eye. My little bench that I would sit on, no one would sit around me and the rest of the train would be crowded so things like that. Umm really I guess painful now that I think about it, but most of the time I try not to umm give it any energy.

The participant who identified as a Cree form Sturgeon Lake Albert talked about an instance at a restaurant. He was seated at the bar rather than at the restaurant part, the waiter served three other tables that came after the participant, and then he told him that he was very busy and said "What do you want?" Yet another student mentioned that the university that he had attended closed the Indigenous student center and turned it into a music room, despite Indigenous students' objections and the fact that the university had adopted a mandate involving anti-discriminatory policies.

In summary, participants stated that they were either avoided, disregarded, or refused service, and thus were not treated equally by people or institutions.

Racial Segregation

This domain refers to experiencing an environment in which there is a clear divide between the Indigenous and the non-Indigenous population. For example, the participant from Ermineskin Cree Nation in Maskwacis stated:

> Ya, and even like in elementary school, like when you play like all the Natives play the Natives, the Whites play with the Whites. I always would get in trouble from my cousin for playing with this white girl named …. She was a really good girl but then all the other Natives would be like "why are you playing with her" you know so it just always been separated in the playground and stuff but yeah.

Such experiences with racial segregation could lead to feelings of isolation. The Blackfoot participant from Peigan First Nation in Southern Alberta reported:

> I grew up on the Reserve and I was bussed to a small Mormon community to go to school and so growing up my whole life it was though and being First Nation you're only friends with other First Nations people you know. You might befriend one White kid in school, but that poor White kid got it bad from the other White kids you know.

In summary, participants grew up in contexts where there was a social divide between the Whites and the Indigenous and they received negative comments and pressure from the community when they attempted to break the unwritten racial segregation rule.

Myth of Meritocracy

The myth of meritocracy domain emerged from the follow-up interviews and refers to the perception in the dominant culture that those who work hard and who have merit can succeed in life and in the society. By the same token, if an Indigenous person is not successful, it must be because he/she does not work hard or is not worthy of success. Yet, due to racism, discrimination, and inequality, Indigenous experience additional difficulty and realize that they might have to be extra talented, hardworking, or exceptionally lucky to reach the same rewards as Whites, or even compared to other minority groups. Thus, principles of meritocracy do not apply to Indigenous, which is usually denied or ignored by the dominant culture.

During the follow-up interview, the participant from Muskeg Lake Cree First Nation explained:

> It's and ah one of the things where people were saying you know, some of the things I've heard recently where they're kinda saying "look at Barack Obama they just elected a black president why can't Native people be as successful as black people in the States" kinda thing. And you know, racism in just in that statement and what comes after it is very blatant where people recently are saying like you know "why aren't you being successful as black people?" You know "the last 200 years … after they … abolished slavery they were allowed to vote, to start voting, and being active citizens in the United States and all the, you know, they were able to work in businesses." And I said, some of these people are wanting those things, and I said "well that hasn't been until the 1990's when Indigenous people were actually able to engage in those areas, engage in their own businesses, engage in getting those legal issues with the government sorted out," and they said "well you know, but they could have been doing that in the 70s, 40, 50 years ago." and I said "well, no they couldn't."

Moreover, her peers at the university seemed to assume that Indigenous students did not have to work hard or have good grades in order to get accepted to the university, and yet, all Indigenous students received scholarships. Therefore, the assumption was that all Indigenous students were abusing the system. The participant reported that she felt frustrated in the face of

such comments, but she held her tongue, and just told her peers that those assumptions were not true.

In summary, the participant received messages that Indigenous benefited from unearned privileges, and if they were not successful it was only because they had not worked hard enough.

Other Comments

Participants also made comments about systemic racism, racist attitudes of institutions without mentioning specific incidents with specific individuals, or witnessing racism that others faced, all of which were placed under *other comments*. An example of systemic racism was mentioned by the participant from Deh Cho First Nations:

> I have come across that a lot, in the last few years working for the military and the Government of Canada in affairs in different positions, where some departments have the poster up. But, they do not know how to address the, it, or issues that are related to race religion, or disabilities. I think it's that they are…when I say that they are afraid to do, it is I think it's because they are afraid they are going to get it wrong and get a lawsuit or something like that because they are afraid of getting it wrong and having, you know, one group of people suing them for racial discrimination or discrimination because they are disabled.

Several other comments, for example the comment about adoption of Indigenous children by white families, could have been categorized as systemic racism. On the other hand, the intention of the present study was to examine individual or private acts of racism as opposed to institutional or public aspects. Therefore, those comments were placed under other domains such as invalidation and denial.

Discussion

This study used a qualitative methodology to explore Canadian Indigenous students' experiences of racial microaggressions. The goal was to understand the nature and experiences of this form of racism and provide suggestions for North American educators and counsellors regarding culturally competent skills and practices. Results from the focus group and follow up interviews indicated seven categories of racial microaggressions: *overt discrimination*; *assumption of intellectual inferiority*; *assumption of criminality*; *invalidation or denial*; *second-class citizen*; *racial segregation*; and *myth of meritocracy.*

Indeed, it was apparent from the onset of the focus group that all participants were well informed about racism and were able to reflect on their own experience with microaggressions. The seven themes identified in this study were consistent with categories of microaggressions identified by Sue et al. (2007b), albeit with some minor differences. That is, participants identified experiences of assumptions of intellectual inferiority, assumptions of criminality, second class citizenship, and myth of meritocracy, and denial of racial reality – all of which have been identified in similar studies with African American students (Sue et al. 2008) and Asian American students (Sue et al. 2007a).

On the other hand, although Sue et al. (2007b) mentioned microassault as a type of microaggression that involves overt discrimination, their findings did not include experiences

of overt discrimination (Sue et al. 2007a), possibly because the instructions that they provided for their participants emphasized subtle acts of discrimination (Sue, personal communication, 2008). The focus group instructions used in the present study also emphasized participants' experiences of subtle racism and discrimination, yet, the participants still described many incidents of overt discrimination in the form of racist comments, physical violence, and verbal abuse. This could be explained as a result of salience of overt racism compared to subtle racism for the participants in the present study. It can also be argued that experiences of overt racism is more prevalent among Canadian Indigenous than other minority groups researched by Sue and colleagues, yet this claim needs to be verified with further research.

Interestingly, name-calling and threats of actual violence from peers were the most frequent forms of racism identified by Baker et al. (2001) in their study of First Nations and African and Black Canadian youth. Likewise, youth in Hare and Pidgeon's (2011) study reported overt as well as subtle forms of racism. Similar to what was expressed by the participants in the present study, such experiences in the aforementioned studies often took place in school settings and with little or no support from staff. In fact, a number of participants described overt discrimination from teachers and faculty in education settings. Further, similar reactions to overt discrimination across both studies included anger, sadness, retaliation or confusion about how to react. Therefore, the present study highlighted again how victims of microaggressions face a dilemma of clashing realities, and this is particularly harmful in education settings where teachers and other authority figures are, at times, the perpetrators of such acts of violence.

This study also provided qualitative support for Currie et al.'s (2012) study of Indigenous university students' experiences with racism in Canada. Both studies revealed that students reported experiencing high levels of discrimination and such incidents occurred both in school and community settings. By providing rich examples, this study described in more detail how Indigenous students not only faced racial microaggressions in school settings, but in restaurants, work settings, on public transport, and even in their own communities. The assumption of intellectual inferiority (a microinsult) and myth of meritocracy (a microinvalidation) were the only domains that were discussed specific to education settings.

Finally, results of the present study supported Clark et al.'s findings (2014). Clark et al.'s theme of withstanding jealous accusations was somewhat similar to the theme of myth of meritocracy in the present study. Participants in both studies commented on the perception that they did not deserve university funding or financial support. Similarly, living with day-to-day cultural and social isolation was analogous to the theme of racial segregation in the present study. The invalidation or denial theme in the present study involved comments similar to the ones included in experiencing curricular elimination or misrepresentation theme found by Clark and colleagues. Yet, some themes found in the present study, such as assumption of intellectual inferiority and assumption of criminality, were not identified by Clark and colleagues. This could be due to different contexts and environments in which the participants lived or simply due to sampling. Most importantly, the participants in the present study emphasized systemic forms of racism and contextualized their individual experiences of microaggressions within the larger social system, which was different from both Sue et al.'s (2007a, b) and Clark et al.'s (2014) findings. Even though our instructions made reference to individual experiences of discrimination, it was obviously important for the participants to explain how their individual experiences were closely related to societal issues and that the two cannot really be separated. The implications of this finding is further discussed below.

Based on these results, we can conclude that Indigenous students, like other visible minority students, experience discrimination in the form of racial microaggressions.

Additionally, being students placed them at further risk of exposure to additional assaults specific to assumptions regarding performance, access to funds, and educational success. Because of the subtle and private nature of these incidents, students who experience microaggressions are further affected by conflicting emotions associated with pain from the incident and not knowing how to react. That is, despite their feelings, the victim has to contend with (1) determining whether a microaggression has occurred, (2) assess how to respond, and (3) be prepared for negative consequences if they do react with anger or retaliation. It should also be noted that the context within which this takes place can also increase students' vulnerability if there is a lack of proximity to community supports and fears of jeopardizing educational opportunities.

Sue et al. (2007b) have argued that this "catch-22 of responding to microaggressions" (p. 279) is potentially more emotionally damaging for the victims than the actual assault and acts as a significant barrier to accessing supports. Implications for educators and counsellors include the urgent need for education and awareness regarding this subtle form of racism and its impact on victims. A public awareness campaign not only would help to bring consciousness to these often unconscious acts of discrimination, but could facilitate the creation of safety for victims and potential victims. In such an environment, victims would more likely report their experiences and access available supports and mechanisms for redressing human rights violations on university campuses.

The Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association's (CCPA) code of ethics (2007), also emphasizes the need for counsellors to be aware of their own attitudes and biases towards other cultural groups. Moreover, it was stated within the CCPA code of ethics that counsellors should "actively work to understand the diverse cultural background of the clients with whom they work, and do not condone or engage in discrimination…" (CCPA 2007, p. 9). As such, it is crucial for Canadian counsellors to inform themselves about the historical events regarding Indigenous communities in Canada and how these events might have affected their clients or their clients' families. Moreover, it is important for counsellors to familiarize themselves with the subtle acts of racism and microaggressions as explained in the present study, in order to be able to adequately acknowledge and address such issues if and when their clients raise such concerns in counselling, and also to be able to avoid such behaviors themselves.

As noted earlier, participants in the present study were highly aware of issues of race and racism in Canada and their experiences as Indigenous peoples. Of note, participants frequently made references to "systemic" or macro-level, institutionalized forms of racism during the focus group and individual interviews. Although the intention of the present study was to examine individual or private acts of racism as opposed to institutional or public aspects, the frequency of these references requires attention. While sharing experiences of microaggressions within the seven categories, participants often reflected on the context within which such acts took place. There was a general consensus amongst participants that microaggressions are harmful and are embedded within a larger system that provides the breeding ground for such harmful attitudes. It should also be noted here that all participants in this study were not passive victims of such incidents. Many discussed various ways of coping and confronting both overt and subtle forms of racism in their lives ranging from individual actions to collective responses.

More specifically, the participants in the present study discussed the importance of situating the issue of microaggressions in the context of the historical relationship between Indigenous peoples and the Canadian government as one of inequality resulting in racial segregation, second class citizenship, and invalidation of culture, identity, spirituality and history. For example, they related how the establishment of reservations, residential schools, and

government policies/practices (such as restrictions on voting and the 1960s Scoop) has had insidious and long-term effects on the lives of Indigenous people, as well as the attitudes of non-Indigenous people towards Indigenous people. A good example of this was one participant's explanation of his response to being questioned as to why Indigenous people were not as politically successful as African Americans in the United States. This participant responded to this assumption of meritocracy by explaining that it is only in the last two decades that Indigenous peoples have been able to engage fully with the Canadian government on issues relating to their rights. Clearly these types of experiences suggest the need for more efforts to educate and raise awareness on Indigenous issues.

The institutionalized aspect of racism in relation to Indigenous peoples is a critical component in understanding racial microaggressions in Canada. If Indigenous students in Canada do not make a distinction between micro- and macro-aggressions, a number of scenarios may potentially arise in educational and counseling settings. Each scenario has implications for educators and counsellors who are interested in addressing racism. In one scenario, if an Indigenous student experiences a microaggression in an education setting, and interprets the individual act as stemming from a problem with the larger system, then the effects could be more devastating because they may perceive both the individual and educational system as perpetrators of such discriminatory acts. This in turn can lead to high degrees of insecurity in an educational setting, and compound the effects of microaggressions.

In a second scenario, if an Indigenous student experiences a microaggression in an education setting and interprets the individual act as stemming from the larger system as opposed to the immediate educational system or the specific situation, this could serve as a temporary protective factor. While their immediate feelings may be shock and anger, viewing the aggressor as a victim of the larger system may serve to temporarily soften their experience. However, the student must still contend with the dilemma of how to respond to a larger and inconspicuous system that appears to be supporting such attitudes. However, if the same student in scenario two is able to respond by addressing racism at a systems level, then they may feel less threatened at the micro level because they have a means to address their concerns. These potential responses to microaggressions suggest that victims' perceptions of racism may contribute to their coping mechanisms. Future research could explore whether a macro-level orientation to racism serves as a risk or protective factor in the face of individual or private acts of racial discrimination.

Implications for interrupting microaggresions at the individual and societal level in post-secondary settings include more efforts to enhance consciousness regarding subtle forms of racism. The current study is a starting point to bring such experiences to light. However, there is a need for research that examines the conditions that facilitate the formation of attitudes that give rise to microaggressions. Further, there is a need for open and ongoing discussions on race relations and forms of racism such as microaggressions amongst all students, faculty and staff. In response to the participants' comments about institutionalized forms of racism, we urge post-secondary schools to take seriously all efforts to heed to the TRC's calls for action in relation to educational institutions, and particularly the integration of indigenous epistemologies and creation of safe, welcoming, and culturally-inclusive learning spaces. Given the long term advocacy and research by Indigenous scholars and communities to integrate indigenous worldviews into Canadian education systems, there is growing evidence for what constitutes culturally-responsive practice and pedagogy. Of critical importance to address systemic forms of racism is the recognition and integration of indigenous epistemology and experiences in education (Pidgeon 2008).

For example, Pidgeon (2008) discusses a holistic approach to education that focuses on developing both professional skills and facilitating human growth. Such an education, built on indigenous worldviews involves all critical supports for students' development including family, community, peers, and institutional staff and faculty. Drawing upon the various resources and supports that are embedded within the culture of students is viewed as critical to supporting students' learning, but also in combating discriminatory practices that deny students' cultural and ethnic heritage (Tierney and Jun 2001; Hare and Pidgeon 2011). Other recommendations stemming from the experiences shared by participants in the present study include increasing student services to Indigenous students, ensuring adequate numbers of cultural providers such as elders, providing culturally sensitive counselling, and increasing the numbers of Indigenous students, faculty and staff on campuses. Finally, in addition to increased efforts to integrate Indigenous culture, history and knowledge systems into curriculum and post-secondary practices, we recommend new and existing faculty in post-secondary schools receive specialized cultural competency training in relation to the life and experiences of Indigenous students, in addition to exposure to anti-racist pedagogies (Schick and St. Denis 2007).

As non-Indigenous faculty who were both born outside of Canada, we (both authors) believe that we would have benefited immensely from receiving this type of training as faculty members at a Canadian institution. Pidgeon (Barnhardt 2002, cited in Pidgeon, 2008) provides a powerful example of an American university in Alaska that has faculty members go and learn about indigenous culture and epistemologies within local indigenous communities to reduce cultural distance and shift power structures relating to teacher-student positions. A notable outcome of such exchanges is that, in addition to increasing knowledge about indigenous culture and communities, faculty are also exposed to different approaches to pedagogy. Other, more common examples of such exchanges (although mostly for students) are community service learning programs that partner with Indigenous communities and agencies as done at the University of British Columbia and University of Alberta.

In summary, the findings suggest that Indigenous Canadian students face microaggressions in a similar manner to other racial minority groups in North America. Similar to studies on racism in Canada, results of the present study indicate that students faced overt forms of racial discrimination both in education and community settings. Finally, the institutionalized aspect of racism in relation to Indigenous peoples in Canada, appears to be a critical component in understanding racial microaggressions in this context.

Conclusions

Racial microaggressions are an emerging area of research on race and racism. By attending to the individual or private aspects of racism, this research is shedding light and giving voice to harmful experiences that have previously been largely ignored or minimized, even in the literature on racism. Given the small sample size, the potential for generalizing the results of the present study are unknown. However, we have been able to identify and shed light on the experiences of Indigenous Canadian students in more detail than previously reflected in the literature. These experiences are generally similar to those of racial minority groups in North America. However, in Canada, the recognition of systemic or macro-level racism appears to be critical to understanding the experiences of Indigenous Canadians. Future research could

expand the present study to include more participants and more focus groups or interviews. Further exploration of the association between systemic racism and microaggressions within the Canadian context would provide more details of the uniqueness of racism in Canada. The use of indigenous methodologies should be considered for future research in this area with this population as this study had to adapt CQR to ensure the cultural and contextual aspects of researching Indigenous students were attended to. Finally, an exploration of racial microaggressions with other groups in Canada would also provide more information on the nature of microaggressions in the Canadian context in general.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declared that they have no conflict on interest.

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