But, why are you offended?
An examination of how microaggressions foster anti-Blackness in the workplace at UC Merced

Tuccoa Polk, MPA
Research Administrator
Sponsored Projects Office, UC Merced
May 7, 2021
What is a racial microaggression?

Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group (Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, and Torino, 2007).
The purpose of this research study

Determine if anti-Black microaggressions are present in the workplace among staff at UC Merced.

Gain an understanding of the lived experiences of Black staff at UC Merced who may have experienced microaggressions while at work at UC Merced.

Share my findings with the UC Merced community and make recommendations to campus leadership.
UC Merced Staff Demographics

• There are 44 Black/African American staff at UC Merced out of 1,144 total staff.

• The percentage of Black/African-American staff has been stagnant remaining at 3-4% since Fall 2016.
UC Merced Staff Demographics

The 3 classifications with highest numbers of Black/African American staff:

- Management: 10
- Advising Services: 12
- Administrative/Personnel/ Budget Analysts: 5

There are no Black/African Americans serving in Executive Leadership at UC Merced - and never in the history of UC Merced (as reflected in available data).
Microaggressions at UC Merced Research Study Survey

Demographics

- **23 total respondents**
- **86.9% of respondents identified as women**
- **97% of respondents identified as Black/African American**
  - 1% Bi-Racial/African American
  - 1% Afro-Latina
  - 1% Cabo Verde
- **65.2% of respondents are exempt**
  - 17.4% Non exempt
  - 13% Union represented
  - 21.7% Non-Mgr
  - 26.1% Managerial
Microaggressions at UC Merced Research Study Results

87% of respondents have experienced microaggressions at work at UCM

65.2% of respondents report experiencing microaggressions from their supervisor and/or co-workers

34.8% of respondents report experiencing microaggressions from a faculty member and/or a member of Sr. Leadership

How often do you experience with microaggressions at work at UC Merced?
23 responses

- Never: 26.1%
- Occasionally: 17.4%
- Sometimes: 8.7%
- Often: 13%
- Always: 34.8%

Which of the following (check all that apply) have you experienced microaggressions from at work?
23 responses

- A coworker: 15 (65.2%)
- A supervisor: 15 (65.2%)
- A faculty member: 8 (34.8%)
- A student: 3 (13%)
- A member of senior leadership: 8 (34.8%)
Microaggressions at UC Merced Research Results

69.6% of respondents feel their supervisor lacks training on microaggressions

60.8% of respondents do not feel safe reporting their experiences to their direct supervisor
Microaggressions at UC Merced
Research Results

Do you feel that UC Merced provides appropriate and adequate training for staff, faculty, and leadership to prevent microaggressions and anti-Blackness from occurring in the workplace?

23 responses

91.3% of respondents feel UC Merced does not provide adequate training.
A window into the lived experiences of Black/African American staff at UC Merced

I am the only Black staff member in my office, and I have not yet experienced any microaggressions. I do hear from my Black peers in other departments that they have. Therefore, I believe Anti-Black microaggressions happen at UC Merced. I think when it comes to curriculum, leadership roles on campus, and the number of Black students & staff on campus, those are areas we need a lot of improvement to increase representation, equity, and inclusion.

Being asked “are those collard greens?”...when clearly I’m eating a salad.

“You are so articulate”

Hair touching without permission (or asking to touch) multiple times from multiple people including my supervisor, everyone complimenting my hair anytime it changes from the usual style; I’m afraid to wear wigs or weaves because I’ve been asked if it’s my real hair, people commenting how I grew my hair so fast when wearing braids.

I’ve always tried my best and always been very productive. I don’t necessarily have race at the forefront of my mind all the time when I’m working, and I’m sure that my coworkers or dept leadership don’t either. It’s just that whenever a racist or microaggressive incident happens, I remember all the others, and that sours my experience little by little. When I’ve reported racist behavior about a supervisor to their supervisor, it wasn’t handled correctly (or at all) and there was no public apology for wrongdoing. Due to lack of diversity in leadership, I don’t think they think it’s a problem. It’s also not my job to teach the fundamentals of race theory and not get paid extra or feel outcast because no one else can relate so I keep my head low.

I had an issue with my supervisor and our director to me that I was a “strong Black woman” as if my feelings didn’t matter but my supervisor’s did.

Commentary related to my hair and whether it’s real can they touch it

I have repeatedly reported my concerns to HR and nothing was done. Nothing. If I had an opportunity to work somewhere I would.

Thank you for putting together this study. It really means a lot that I have space to talk about this.

I think it would be nice to have some way to report these things, without the fear of losing our jobs or being labeled sensitive.

Being told to disagree with Colin Kaepernick’s kneeling protest from a supervisor two levels above me in front of a White co-worker.

Asking if I watched the BET Awards, but not asking anyone who wasn’t Black the same thing.

I was subjected to gripes and coerced into disagreeing with Colin Kaepernick’s kneeling protest from a supervisor two levels above me in front of a White co-worker.

Asking if I watched the BET Awards, but not asking anyone who wasn’t Black the same thing.

Being told I have an attitude or that I’m too direct by my supervisor saying “I’m not racist, I have black friends” or “I’m color-blind”.

I’ve always tried my best and always been very productive. I don’t necessarily have race at the forefront of my mind all the time when I’m working, and I’m sure that my coworkers or dept leadership don’t either. It’s just that whenever a racist or microaggressive incident happens, I remember all the others, and that sours my experience little by little. When I’ve reported racist behavior about a supervisor to their supervisor, it wasn’t handled correctly (or at all) and there was no public apology for wrongdoing. Due to lack of diversity in leadership, I don’t think they think it’s a problem. It’s also not my job to teach the fundamentals of race theory and not get paid extra or feel outcast because no one else can relate so I keep my head low.

I had an issue with my supervisor and our director to me that I was a “strong Black woman” as if my feelings didn’t matter but my supervisor’s did.

Commentary related to my hair and whether it’s real can they touch it

I have repeatedly reported my concerns to HR and nothing was done. Nothing. If I had an opportunity to work somewhere I would.

Thank you for putting together this study. It really means a lot that I have space to talk about this.

I think it would be nice to have some way to report these things, without the fear of losing our jobs or being labeled sensitive.

Being told to disagree with Colin Kaepernick’s kneeling protest from a supervisor two levels above me in front of a White co-worker.

Asking if I watched the BET Awards, but not asking anyone who wasn’t Black the same thing.

Being told I have an attitude or that I’m too direct by my supervisor saying “I’m not racist, I have black friends” or “I’m color-blind”.

I’ve always tried my best and always been very productive. I don’t necessarily have race at the forefront of my mind all the time when I’m working, and I’m sure that my coworkers or dept leadership don’t either. It’s just that whenever a racist or microaggressive incident happens, I remember all the others, and that sours my experience little by little. When I’ve reported racist behavior about a supervisor to their supervisor, it wasn’t handled correctly (or at all) and there was no public apology for wrongdoing. Due to lack of diversity in leadership, I don’t think they think it’s a problem. It’s also not my job to teach the fundamentals of race theory and not get paid extra or feel outcast because no one else can relate so I keep my head low.

I had an issue with my supervisor and our director to me that I was a “strong Black woman” as if my feelings didn’t matter but my supervisor’s did.
“You cannot "DEI committee" and "diversity recruit" your way out of toxic cultures and systemic racism. There is no quick fix for toxic cultures, it takes work. There is no quick fix for systemic racism, it takes work. Shortcuts may solve for optics, but they will never heal the wound. Healing takes time.”
Recommendations

- Acknowledge that Anti-Blackness exist in the workplace at UC Merced and that many Black/African American staff have experienced some form of pain or trauma as a result.
- Actively engage in the specific recruitment of more Black/African Americans for staff, management and executive leadership positions.
- Implement required annual cultural competency training of all staff at all levels that is tied to performance evaluations and includes a “pass-fail” test component.
- Create a clear and safe system for reporting anti-Black microaggressions in the workplace with follow up, feedback and resolution.
- Create and implement a DEI certification program that would be required of all managers and supervisors to complete in order to serve in a management capacity.
- Create and implement required Crown Act Training for all staff.
Thank You