

Impacts of Micro-aggressions and Implicit Bias on the Mental Health of First-Generation Minority College Students

Samuel Camilo, Ana-Gabriela Osorio, Abigale Young, Nicole Fowler, Xiomara Nicole Romero, Dr. Shengli Dong



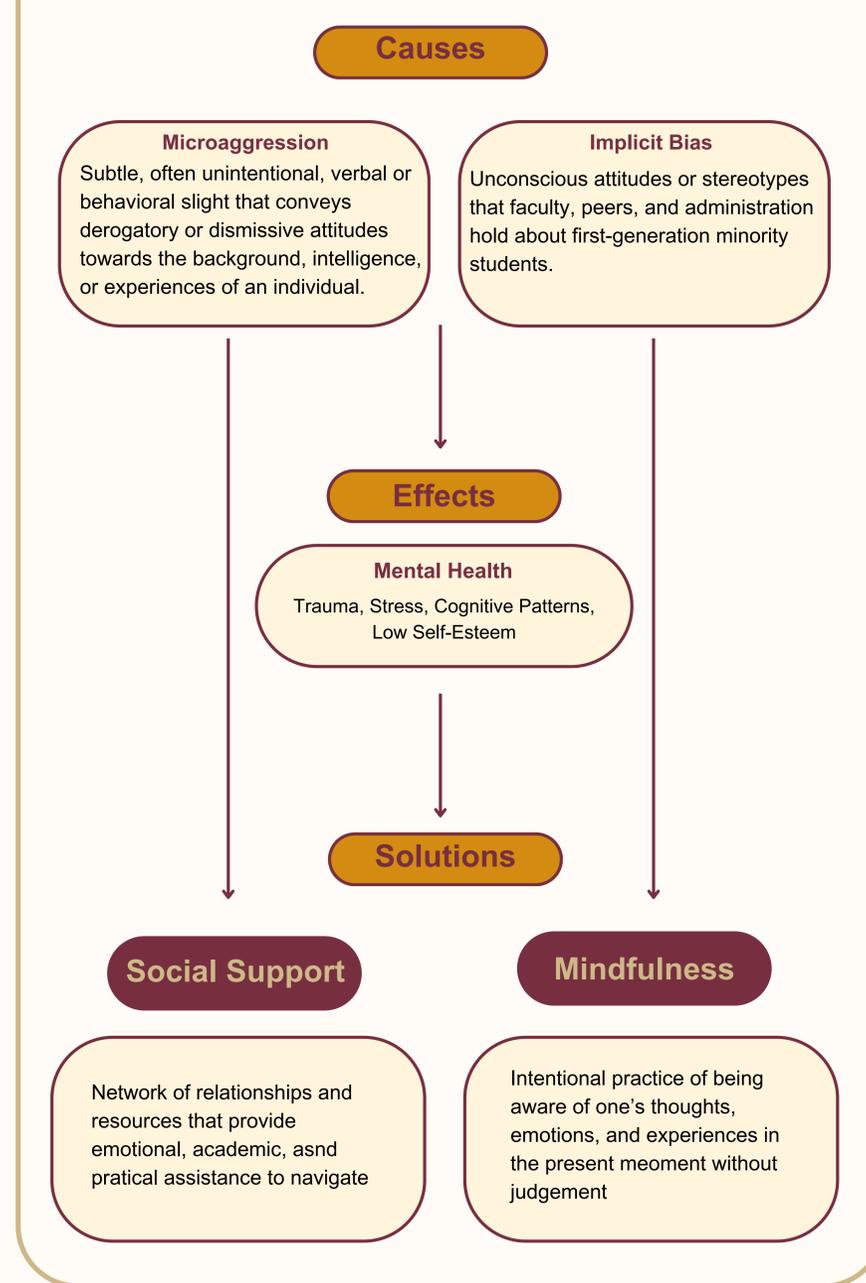
Abstract

- The number of first-generation college students—those whose parents did not complete a four-year degree—is steadily increasing.
- Many of these students come from racially and/or ethnically diverse backgrounds and lower socioeconomic households.
- Compared to students from college-educated families, first-generation students often have less exposure to higher education expectations.
- They may have fewer resources to help them navigate university life, leading to feelings of unpreparedness.
- Limited financial support can create additional stress and barriers to accessing educational opportunities.
- A lack of parental guidance on academic pathways may result in difficulty making informed decisions about coursework, career planning, and networking.
- Many first-generation students experience implicit bias and microaggressions—subtle but harmful behaviors that reinforce stereotypes and create unwelcoming environments.
- These negative experiences can lead to a sense of alienation, reducing their sense of belonging on campus.
- Research indicates that these stressors contribute to higher stress levels, increased risk of depression and anxiety, and lower academic performance.
- Understanding and addressing these challenges is crucial to fostering a more inclusive and supportive academic environment.
- Implementing targeted interventions—such as mentorship programs, financial aid initiatives, and mental health support—can help mitigate the disadvantages faced by first-generation students.
- By recognizing and addressing these barriers, higher education institutions can create more equitable opportunities for success.

Introduction

- First-generation college students from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds face unique challenges, including financial barriers that limit access to resources like textbooks, tutoring, and extracurricular activities (Gibbons et al., 2019).
- They also experience lower academic preparedness due to less exposure to academic expectations and limited social capital, including fewer connections or mentors who can offer guidance, which contributes to feelings of isolation and increased stress (Stebelton et al., 2014).
- Microaggressions—subtle, often unintentional discriminatory behaviors—are a common experience for these students, contributing to feelings of alienation and negatively impacting their mental well-being (Sue et al., 2007). Research links microaggressions to heightened stress, anxiety, and depression, particularly among racially and ethnically minoritized students (Torres et al., 2010; Nadal et al., 2014).
- Racial identity plays a key role in how students respond to these stressors. A strong racial identity has been found to provide resilience against the psychological distress caused by microaggressions and discrimination (Sellers et al., 1998).
- Social support from peers, family, and mentors can act as a buffer against stress and anxiety. Students with higher perceived social support tend to have better mental health outcomes, as it helps them cope with challenges related to their academic and social environments (Yosso, 2005).
- Mindfulness has been suggested as an effective coping mechanism to reduce the negative psychological effects of discrimination. Studies suggest that mindfulness practices help students better manage stress and emotional responses to microaggressions (Garland et al., 2015), although its specific role in supporting first-generation college students remains underexplored.
- This study aims to address gaps in the literature by examining how racial identity, social support, mindfulness, and microaggressions interact to influence mental health outcomes in first-generation college students. This research will help fill critical gaps in understanding how these factors work together to shape students' mental well-being and academic success.

Concept Map

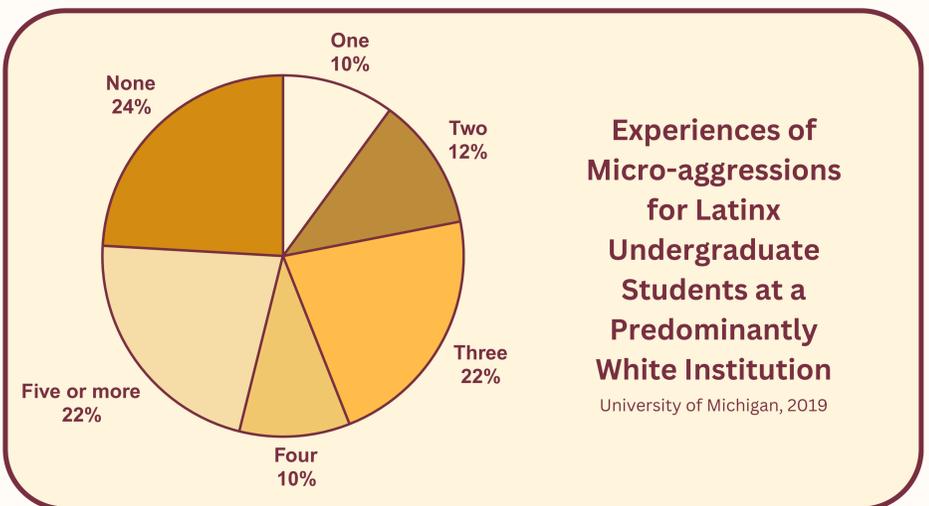


Methods

This study will use an online survey administered via Qualtrics to collect data from participants (TBD). The survey will include demographic questions and validated psychological scales to assess key constructs. Mental health and psychological distress will be measured using the General Health Questionnaire-12 (GHQ-12; Goldberg & Williams, 1988), while racial and ethnic microaggressions will be assessed with the Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS; Nadal, 2011). Perceived social support will be evaluated using the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet et al., 1988), and stress levels will be measured with the Perceived Stress Scale-4 (PSS-4; Cohen et al., 1983). Racial identity will be assessed using Bechwati and Morrin's (2003) scale, while implicit bias and mindfulness will be measured using scales yet to be determined, with potential inclusion of the Implicit Association Test (IAT) and the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ). Informed consent will be obtained before participation, and data analysis methods are yet to be finalized.

Results

As this study is still in the development phase, no results are available at this time. The research team is actively refining the study design, selecting appropriate scales for various measures, and finalizing the Qualtrics survey. Specifically, the selection of scales for implicit bias and mindfulness remains under review, while the development of a customized implicit bias test is ongoing. Additionally, efforts are being made to ensure the Qualtrics survey is clear and effective for data collection. Once these steps are completed, data collection and analysis will proceed as outlined in the methods sections.



Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Dong for giving me this amazing opportunity and allowing to participate in his research. Working along side him has been nothing but a pleasure. I was more than scared to enter the world of research as a first-time undergraduate student, but him and his team guided me down the path effortlessly. Thanks to Dr. Dong I have a newfound respect for all aspects and forms of research. I would also like to thank the rest of the team, Ana-Gabriela Osorio, Abigale Young, Nicole Fowler, and Xiomara Nicole Romero, for sharing their guidance and expertise.



References