

# EXPERIENCES OF MICROAGGRESSIONS AMONG AMERICAN INDIAN AND ALASKA NATIVE STUDENTS IN TWO POST-SECONDARY CONTEXTS

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*Abstract: American Indians/Alaska Natives (AI/ANs) are subject to widespread cultural misrepresentations ranging from intrusive questions about ethnic identity to Native-themed sports team mascots. Racial microaggressions are linked to negative physical health, mental health, and academic consequences for AI/ANs. This study examines microaggressions experienced by AI/AN post-secondary students in New Mexico and Oklahoma. Microaggression prevalence ratings and associated distress were compared across region, gender, income, age, and cultural involvement. Results showed microaggressions were highly prevalent among AI/AN students in New Mexico and Oklahoma and varied by demographic and cultural factors. Increased AI/AN microaggressions research is needed to bring awareness, education, and solutions.*

"All too often we are still seen as objects or as a people trapped in the past-tense. We are twenty first century people, and must be seen as such in order to deal with the serious issues that face us today." Charlene Teters (Spokane)

## INTRODUCTION

Although many middle school textbooks erroneously teach that U.S. history began in 1492, American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities have origin stories and histories far predating European contact (Calloway, 2012). Post-contact, tribal communities were introduced to foreign diseases, models of recreational alcohol use, warfare, and intentional genocidal and assimilation tactics (e.g., forced removal, militaristic-style boarding schools, termination, urban relocation, continual treaty violations; Calloway, 2012; Nabakov, 1999; Thornton, 1987). These broad historical and current events impacted (and continue to impact via intergenerational trauma, see Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998) myriad Indigenous peoples throughout North America. Such

events have had devastating consequences, including the dehumanization of peoples, cultures, and ways of life and represent a form of discrimination felt by AI/ANs in the United States, as well as by First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities in Canada and Indigenous peoples throughout the world. Despite these events, Indigenous peoples remain resilient and continue to adapt while carrying on cultural traditions.

Historic and current racial discrimination results in the invalidation of several aspects of AI/AN life (Sue, 2010). AI/ANs are subject to numerous cultural misrepresentations derived from academic textbooks, media, and tourist attractions (Mihesuah, 1996). These cultural misrepresentations are subsumed under the larger category of discrimination and known as racial microaggressions. Racial microaggressions are “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273). Recently, the microaggressions construct and research methods used to measure these experiences (e.g., subjective self-report) have been questioned (Lilienfeld, 2017). Despite critiques surrounding the operational definition and scientific rigor of microaggressions research, there is a simultaneous acknowledgement that “the existence of such indignities is undeniable” and that continued research on daily, subtle forms of discrimination is needed (Lilienfeld, 2017, p. 141). Examples of microaggressions targeting Indigenous peoples include sports team mascots with Native-themed names/caricatures (e.g., Chief Illiniwek; Cleveland Indians; Chae & Walters, 2009; Clark, Spanierman, Reed, Soble, & Cabana, 2011; Sue, 2010), dismissing Indigenous peoples’ lived experiences (e.g., minimizing the importance of culture; Jones & Galliher, 2015; Walls, Gonzalez, Gladney, & Onello, 2015), questioning racial/ethnic identity (e.g., non-Indigenous strangers making disparaging comments/questions about racial/ethnic identity; Clark, Kleinman, Spanierman, Isaac, & Poolokasingham, 2014), historical misrepresentations of contemporary experiences (e.g., assuming Indigenous peoples live in teepees; Clark et al., 2014), and physical or symbolical invisibility (e.g., absence of Indigenous peoples on campus or omission from textbooks/curricula; Clark et al., 2014).

### **American Indian/Alaska Native Microaggressions Research**

Recent empirical research demonstrates negative health impacts associated with microaggressions. Among AI adults with type 2 diabetes, microaggressions experienced while seeking health care were related to past year heart attack history and hospitalization after controlling for demographic and clinic factors (Walls et al., 2015). In another study, racial

microaggressions were associated with physical pain among two-spirit AI/ANs (Chae & Walters, 2009). Microaggressions have also been associated with lower self-esteem and feeling less value in community (Fryberg, Markus, Oyserman, & Stone, 2008), depression symptoms (Walls et al., 2015), and feeling upset by these occurrences (Jones & Galliher, 2015) among Indigenous youth and adults.

The racial discrimination that students experience extends a historical aim to assimilate Indigenous peoples to mainstream society vis-à-vis educational settings (e.g., boarding/residential schools; Cerecer, 2013). According to Grande (2004), “Indian education was never simply about the desire to ‘civilize’ or even deculturalize a people, but rather, from its very inception, it was a project designed to colonize Indian minds as a means of gaining access to Indian labor, land, and resources” (p. 23). Unfortunately, AI/AN students continue to experience pervasive racism (including microaggressions) in their day-to-day lives (e.g., Cerecer, 2013). One study found nearly all Indigenous adults, many of whom were college students, reported experiencing a racial microaggression (Jones & Galliher, 2015). Clark and colleagues (2014) qualitatively examined racial microaggression themes experienced by Canadian Indigenous undergraduate students. Nearly all students encountered individuals who assumed Indigenous life was encapsulated in a historical past and conflicted with mainstream society.

To date, research has not compared microaggression experiences by tribe or geographic region. This is an oversight given the vast diversity of the 573 federally recognized tribes (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2018), state recognized tribes, and tribes without federal/state recognition in the United States, all with distinct histories, cultures, and contemporary contexts (Calloway, 2012). The current study compares the microaggression experiences of AI/AN students residing in New Mexico (NM) and Oklahoma (OK). These two studies were conducted separately by the authors; however, these regions are significant in that OK is ranked second and NM fourth in states with largest populations of self-identified AI/ANs (Norris, Vines, & Hoeffel, 2012). In addition, historical context is vital to understand the current impact of racism against Indigenous peoples (Robertson, 2015). NM and OK are located in geographic regions with distinct histories influencing current social environments and cultural contexts. Historical events associated with intergenerational trauma differ by tribal community, though a commonality exists in shared suffering related to attempted physical and cultural genocide (Evans-Campbell, 2008). Many of the 38 tribes currently in OK (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2016) were forcibly removed to “Indian Territory” (Strickland, 1980). The birth of the Native American Church

occurred in this area (Calloway, 2012) and continues to thrive in several communities in addition to tribal ceremonies and cultural activities (e.g., pow wows, stomp dances). Furthermore, OK colleges' and universities' enrollment of Native students ranges from approximately less than 1% to 33% (for non-Tribal Colleges and Universities; The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2016). OK is home to two Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), which allow for postsecondary education in tribal communities and foster a culturally-engaged environment for students (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2018). In NM, Spanish settlers' interactions with AI communities played a distinct role. In the late 1500s and early 1600s, tribes residing in NM encountered Spanish conquistadors who enslaved AIs, abused AI women, and punished those who did not convert to Catholicism or Christianity (Calloway, 2012). Despite a painful history of colonization, the 23 federally recognized tribal communities in NM (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2016) are strong nations. Tribal ceremonies (e.g., feast days; Indian Pueblo Cultural Center, 2016), languages, tribal oral histories, and cultural activities have survived and persisted in NM (Johnson, 2013). Similar to educational opportunities available for AI/AN students in OK, NM has three TCUs (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2018) and other universities (non-TCUs) with enrollment of AI/AN students ranging from less than 1% to 77.5% (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2016).

### **Study Aims**

Beyond institutional-level racism that can exist and is often unseen by individuals, the research question presented was how common are microaggressions, and what type are experienced by AI/AN students in their day-to-day lives? This study provides the prevalence of nine different categories of microaggressions among 504 AI/AN students attending post-secondary institutions in NM and OK. It also examines the degree to which these microaggressions bothered students. Finally, prevalence and bothered ratings are compared across region, gender, income, age, and cultural involvement to provide a nuanced picture of factors that may impact microaggression experiences.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

The NM sample included 347 AI/AN students attending two post-secondary institutions in a large city where they comprised approximately 6% of students. Eligibility criteria included: (a)

enrolled part-time or more at the four-year public university or community college, (b) 18 years or older, (c) enrolled tribal citizen or self-identify as at least ¼ AI/AN,<sup>1</sup> and (d) completed the survey while in the city. Graduate students at the university were not eligible to participate.

The OK sample included 157 AI students attending three universities throughout the state where they comprised approximately 4%, 5%, and 22% of students. These three universities have been identified as top institutions from which AI students graduate with bachelor's degrees. Eligibility criteria included: (a) undergraduate or graduate student at one of three four-year public universities, (b) 18 years or older, and (c) specified a tribe they identified with and self-identified as AI/AN or biracial/more than one race selected. Eleven participants identified as another race/ethnicity or had missing data; they were excluded from analyses.

## **Procedure**

Both studies were approved by Institutional Review Boards at the respective institutions. Recruitment for the NM sample occurred in February to July of 2013 and for OK, between December 2011 and December 2012. The survey was completed online, informed consent was obtained, and participants were entered into a gift card raffle following completion.

Participants were recruited for both studies via posted flyers and email announcements sent to listservs specific to AI/AN students. In addition, participants in NM were recruited via e-mail invitations sent out to registered students who listed AI/AN as their race/ethnicity, as well as through flyers, in-person presentations at AI/AN student organizations, Facebook, and through word of mouth from community advisory board members. Additional methods for the OK sample included classroom announcements, word-of-mouth at AI/AN campus groups/events, and e-mail invitations sent through AI/AN campus organizations. The majority of participants (93%) across both studies heard about the studies via email, and this figure did not differ significantly by study.

The OK sample was part of a larger study with a focus on suicide prevention. Community engagement as part of the overall study included the researchers having a vendor table at one of the university's local pow wows to provide suicide prevention information and resources, publications by the research team, water and snacks, and to allow time for any community members to share their thoughts and stories related to suicide prevention. Community engagement also included seeking consultation from an OK AI researcher who reviewed/edited this manuscript.

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<sup>1</sup>This eligibility criterion was used to match that of the Honor Project (Chae & Walters, 2009), the study that originally used the Microaggressions Distress Scale.

Consistent with community-based participatory research principles, the NM research was guided by input from a community advisory board consisting of AI/AN faculty, staff, and students from the participating institutions. The board assisted in all aspects of the study, including the addition of relevant measures, participant recruitment, interpretation and dissemination of findings, and review of this manuscript.

## Measures

### Microaggressions Scale

The Microaggressions Distress Scale (MDS; Walters, 2005) includes 10 questions that inquire about past-year overt and subtle forms of discrimination (e.g., “told by non-Natives how ‘lucky’ you are to be Indian,” “hit or physically attacked because you are Native”). Due to researcher error, one item was missing in the OK sample (“told by non-Natives that they felt a spiritual connection to Indians”). Therefore, only nine MDS items were included in these analyses. The MDS was developed specifically for AI/ANs; an earlier version of this measure demonstrated good internal reliability ( $\alpha = 0.97$ ; Chae & Walters, 2009).

Each MDS item had two parts. The first asked whether a particular microaggression occurred in the past year. Response options included (0) No, (1) I’m not sure but I think so, and (2) Yes. Options (1) and (2) were collapsed to create dichotomous response categories of (0) No and (1) Yes/not sure but think so. The responses to these items were summed for the MDS Total, which had a range of 0 to 9 and represented the number of microaggressions participants experienced in the past year. The second part of each MDS item asked how much participants were bothered by each microaggression. This was only presented if participants responded “Yes” or “I’m not sure but I think so” to the first part of each MDS item. Response options to this second part included (0) Not at all, (1) A little, (2) Some, (3) A lot, and (4) Extremely; we report average bothered levels for participants that experienced the microaggression.

### American Indian/Alaska Native Cultural Involvement

Three yes/no questions inquired about whether participants (a) spoke their tribal language, (b) participated in their tribe’s traditional ceremonies/dances, and (c) made cultural arts. The wording for each sample was slightly different but overall comparable. An additional question (Whitbeck, Chen, Hoyt, & Adams, 2004) inquired about the importance of traditional spiritual beliefs/values and response options included “Not at all,” “Somewhat,” or “Very important.”

## **Statistical Analyses**

All analyses were conducted in SPSS version 24 (IBM Corporation, 2016). Basic demographic differences between the two samples were computed using independent samples *t*-tests and Pearson's chi-square tests. The percentage of students endorsing each of the nine microaggressions is reported for the sample overall and also by location (NM vs. OK), gender (male vs. female), age (18-25 years, 26-39 years, and 40-65 years), annual household income (\$0-9,999; \$10,000-29,999; \$30,000-49,999; \$50,000-79,999; \$80,000 and above), and the three cultural variables (speak tribe's language; make cultural arts; participate in traditional ceremonies/dances). The total score on the MDS is reported for the sample overall and for each subgroup, and average bothered ratings on the MDS are provided for the total sample and each subgroup. Differences between the groups listed above were computed using independent samples *t*-tests, Pearson's chi-square tests, and one-way analysis of variance. Significance levels were set to  $p < .01$  to control for multiple comparisons.

## **RESULTS**

### **Sample Demographics**

The overall sample included 504 students (31% male) ages 18 to 65 years, with an average age of 27 years (Table 1). Most students identified as AI/AN only (89%), and 93% were from tribes in the same geographic region as their respective universities. Sixty percent had an annual family income of less than \$30,000 ( $n = 299$ ). Compared to OK, students in NM were significantly older and more likely to be male, identify an additional race/ethnicity, have lower income, and be from a tribe from a region outside of their university (Table 1). About half spoke their tribal language (55%), 43% participated in traditional ceremonies/dances, 41% said traditional spiritual values were very important to how they lived their lives, and 38% engaged in cultural arts. Language knowledge did not differ between NM and OK students. However, students from NM were significantly more likely to participate in traditional ceremonies/dances, make cultural arts, and rate traditional spiritual beliefs as important (Table 1).

**Table 1**  
**Participant Characteristics and Differences by Geographic Region**

	Overall sample	New Mexico	Oklahoma	p-value
Age, years ( <i>M, SD</i> )	26.85 (9.55)	28.45 (9.97)	23.32 (7.44)	<.001
Community college: years working on degree	n/a	2.15 (2.32)	n/a	
University: academic status				
Freshman	42 (16.0)	11 (10.1)	31 (20.1)	<.001
Sophomore	59 (22.4)	26 (23.9)	33 (21.4)	
Junior	60 (22.8)	26 (23.9)	34 (22.1)	
Senior	86 (32.7)	46 (42.2)	40 (26.0)	
Graduate Student	16 (6.1)	0 (0.0)	16 (10.4)	
Self-identified race				
Native American only	448 (88.9)	297 (85.6)	151 (96.2)	<.001
Biracial/more than race selected	56 (11.1)	50 (14.4)	6 (3.8)	
Gender				
Male	156 (31)	119 (34.4)	37 (23.6)	0.017
Female	347 (69)	227 (65.6)	120 (76.4)	
Annual household income				
\$0-9,999	158 (31.8)	147 (42.7)	11 (7.2)	<.001
\$10,000-29,999	141 (28.4)	104 (30.2)	37 (24.2)	
\$30,000-49,999	80 (16.1)	44 (12.8)	36 (23.5)	
\$50,000-79,999	66 (13.3)	27 (7.8)	39 (25.5)	
\$80,000+	52 (10.5)	22 (6.4)	30 (19.6)	
Location of home tribal nation				
Same region as university	466 (92.5)	313 (90.2)	153 (97.5)	0.002
Different region than university	37 (7.3)	34 (9.8)	3 (1.9)	
Speak tribe's language				
Yes	274 (54.5)	179 (51.7)	95 (60.5)	0.082
No	229 (45.4)	167 (48.3)	62 (39.5)	
Participate in traditional ceremonies or dances				
Yes	217 (43.1)	196 (56.5)	21 (13.5)	<.001
No	286 (56.9)	151 (43.5)	135 (86.5)	
Make cultural arts				
Yes	191 (38.0)	155 (44.9)	36 (22.9)	<.001
No	311 (62.0)	190 (55.1)	121 (77.1)	
Importance of traditional spiritual values/beliefs				
Not at all	120 (24.7)	79 (23.8)	41 (26.6)	<.001
Somewhat	166 (34.2)	82 (24.7)	84 (54.5)	
Very	200 (41.2)	171 (51.5)	29 (18.8)	

*Note.* Community college includes New Mexico participants only. Outside of age and years working on degree, data presented begins with *N* and then the percentage is presented in parentheses.

## Microaggressions Prevalence

### Overall Sample

In the past year, almost all students experienced at least one microaggression (93%;  $n = 466$ ). The average number of past-year microaggressions was 3.12 ( $SD = 1.99$ ; range 0 – 9). The two most common were being told the participant was “lucky” to be Indian (61.4%;  $n = 309$ ) and being mistaken as a racial group other than Native (60.2%;  $n = 303$ ; Table 2). The least commonly experienced microaggression was a racially-related physical attack (2.2%;  $n = 11$ ).

### Region

There was no significant difference in number of total past-year microaggressions experienced by students in NM versus OK (Table 2). However, item-level differences existed. Significantly more students in NM than OK endorsed being mistaken as a different racial group (65% vs. 50%), told the speaker was an Indian in a past life or had a grandmother who was a Cherokee princess (55% vs. 29%), followed in a store (32% vs. 12%), and treated unfairly by the police (22% vs. 8%). Conversely, significantly more students in OK than NM were told they were “lucky” to be Indian (76% vs. 55%) and asked to prove their authenticity as Native (45% vs. 25%; Table 2).

### Gender

Male and female participants experienced a similar number of past-year microaggressions. More females than males were told they were “lucky” to be Indian (65% vs. 52%). For the remaining eight microaggressions, there were no significant differences by gender in past-year prevalence (Table 2).

### Age

Participants aged 40 to 65 years old experienced significantly fewer past year microaggressions than those 39 and younger. This group reported two microaggressions on average, compared to three microaggressions for those 39 years and below. For individual microaggressions, those ages 18 to 25 had the highest rates of being told they were “lucky” to be Indian and being asked if they were a “real Indian.” Those ages 26 to 39 years had the highest rates of being told the speaker was an Indian in a past life or had a grandmother who was a Cherokee princess, called a racist name, and experiencing unfair police treatment (Table 2).

**Income**

Microaggression experiences differed significantly by income, although the total number experienced was not significantly different by income (see Table 2). Participants with household incomes of \$0 to \$9,999 were most likely to be followed in a store and treated unfairly by the police. For example, 29% were followed in a store, compared to 8% of participants with an income of \$80,000 or more. Participants with household incomes of \$10,000 to \$29,999 had the highest rates of being told the speaker was an Indian in a past life or had a Cherokee princess grandmother. Finally, those with the highest incomes – \$80,000 per year and above – were most likely to be questioned about their authenticity. There were no significant differences by income for the other microaggressions (Table 2).

**Table 2**  
**Past-Year Prevalence of Microaggressions Distress Scale (MDS) Items, Overall and by Demographic Variables**

Microaggressions Distress Scale Item	Overall	Location		Gender		Age			Income				
		NM (n=347)	OK (n=157)	Male (n=156)	Female (n=347)	18-25 (n=309)	26-39 (n=137)	40-65 (n=58)	0-10k (n=158)	10-30k (n=141)	30-50k (n=80)	50-80k (n=66)	80k+ (n=52)
Lucky to be Indian	61.4	54.9**	75.8**	52.3*	65.4*	69.3**	54.7**	35.1**	64.3	54.6	57.5	68.2	65.4
Mistaken as non-Native	60.2	64.7*	50.3*	59	60.7	62.7	59.9	48.3	62.4	68.1	53.8	43.9	61.5
Indian in past life/ Cherokee princess grandmother	46.8	55.1**	28.7**	47.4	46.4	42.4*	58.4*	42.9*	49.4*	57.9*	41.3*	36.9*	32.7*
Asked if real Indian	45.0	42.7	50.3	41.0	47.0	51.5**	38.7**	25.9**	46.8	48.2	40.0	37.9	48.1
Prove authenticity	31.0	24.9**	44.6**	32.1	30.6	35.6	25.0	20.7	24.2*	27.7*	33.8*	39.4*	48.1*
Followed in store	25.8	32.4**	11.5**	28.2	24.9	21.7	31.4	35.1	40.8**	27.0**	13.8**	12.1**	17.3**
Racist name	22.1	22.3	21.7	21.3	22.5	20.8*	29.9*	10.5*	26.1	24.1	19.0	9.1	26.9
Unfair police treatment	17.7	21.9**	8.3**	23.7	15.0	13.6*	27.0*	17.2*	29.1**	13.5**	17.5**	9.1**	7.7**
Physical attack	2.2	2.9	0.6	3.2	1.7	1.3	5.2	0	5.1	0.7	1.3	1.5	0
MDS Total (M, SD)	3.12 (1.99)	3.22 (1.99)	2.92 (1.96)	3.08 (2.01)	3.14 (1.98)	3.19 (1.86)*	3.31 (2.16)*	2.34 (2.06)*	3.48 (2.17)	3.22 (1.90)	2.78 (2.01)	2.58 (1.77)	3.08 (1.78)

Note. MDS = Microaggressions Distress Scale; M = mean; SD = standard deviation. For income, k = thousand (e.g., 30k = \$30,000). Numbers presented for each MDS item represent the percentage of participants endorsing experiencing that item in the past year. Comparisons are conducted using chi-square tests, independent sample t-tests, and one-way ANOVA. The significance level was set to  $p < .01$  to control for multiple comparisons.  
 \* $p < .01$ . \*\* $p < .001$ .

### Cultural Involvement

The total number of past-year microaggressions did not differ by cultural involvement. At the item-level, tribal language speakers were more likely to be treated unfairly by the police (22% vs. 12%) than language non-speakers. Those who made traditional cultural arts were more likely than those who did not to be told the speaker was an Indian in a past life or had a Cherokee princess grandmother (58% vs. 40%). Those who participated in traditional dances/ceremonies were more likely than those who did not to be told the speaker was an Indian in a past life or had a Cherokee princess grandmother (57% vs. 39%) and followed in a store (32% vs. 21%). In the reverse direction, those who endorsed *not* participating in traditional ceremonies/dances had a higher prevalence of being told they were “lucky” to be Indian (67% vs. 54%). All other item-level prevalence differences were non-significant (Table 3).

**Table 3**  
**Past-Year Prevalence of Microaggressions Distress Scale (MDS) Items, Overall and by Cultural Variables**

Microaggressions Distress Scale Item	Overall	Speak Native language		Make cultural arts		Participate in traditional ceremonies/dances	
		Yes (n=274)	No (n=229)	Yes (n=191)	No (n=311)	Yes (n=217)	No (n=192)
Lucky to be Indian	61.4	66.1	55.7	58.6	63.2	54.2*	67.1*
Mistaken as non-Native	60.2	61.3	58.8	64.4	57.7	61.3	59.3
Indian in past life/ Cherokee princess grandmother	46.8	49.1	44.3	58.1**	39.8**	56.9**	39.3**
Asked if real Indian	45.0	45.6	44.5	46.6	44.1	41.0	48.3
Prove authenticity	31.0	30.8	31.4	31.4	31.0	25.9	35.0
Followed in store	25.8	28.6	22.7	28.4	24.4	31.9*	21.3*
Racist name	22.1	26.5	17.0	26.8	19.0	25.6	19.6
Unfair police treatment	17.7	22.3*	12.2*	22.0	15.1	22.1	14.3
Physical attack	2.2	2.2	2.2	2.1	2.3	1.9	2.5
MDS Total (M, SD)	3.12 (1.99)	3.32 (2.11)	2.89 (1.81)	3.39 (2.06)	2.97 (1.92)	3.20 (2.02)	3.07 (1.96)

Note. MDS = Microaggressions Distress Scale; M = mean; SD = standard deviation. Numbers presented for each MDS item represent the percentage of participants endorsing experiencing that item in the past year. Comparisons by the three cultural variables are conducted using chi-square tests. The significance level was set to  $p < .01$  to control for multiple comparisons.

\* $p < .01$ . \*\* $p < .001$ .

**Microaggressions Bothered Ratings**

The most common microaggressions were not necessarily the most bothersome: participants were most bothered by being physically attacked, treated unfairly by the police, and being followed in a store (Table 4). Ratings for these items corresponded to a bothered level between “some” and “a lot.” Comparatively, the least bothersome microaggression was being told they were “lucky” to be Indian, which corresponded to “a little” bothered.

There were few group-level differences in bothered ratings. Unfair police treatment bothered students 40 to 65 years more than those 18 to 25 years old ( $M = 3.80$  vs.  $2.68$ ,  $p = .009$ ) and being asked whether they were a “real Indian” bothered women more than men ( $M = 2.10$  vs.  $1.53$ ,  $p = .007$ ). All other differences in bothered ratings for individual microaggressions were non-significant.

**Table 4**  
**Average Bothered Rating for Items on the Microaggressions Distress Scale**

<b>Microaggressions Distress Scale Item</b>	<b>Bothered Rating <i>M (SD)</i></b>
Physical attack ( $n=11$ )	2.82 (1.60)
Unfair police treatment ( $n=86$ )	2.87 (1.08)
Followed in store ( $n=127$ )	2.69 (1.24)
Racist name ( $n=111$ )	2.08 (1.34)
Indian in past life/Cherokee princess grandmother ( $n=234$ )	2.00 (1.55)
Asked if real Indian ( $n=227$ )	1.94 (1.45)
Prove authenticity ( $n=156$ )	1.90 (1.48)
Mistaken as non-Native ( $n=303$ )	1.34 (1.37)
Lucky to be Indian ( $n=309$ )	1.28 (1.47)

*Note.* For each item, bothered ratings are included only for those participants who endorsed experiencing that particular microaggression in the past year. The rating scale ranged from 0 to 4, with 0 = not at all and 4 = extremely bothered. Items are presented in order of bothered ratings, from highest to lowest mean rating.

**DISCUSSION**

Nearly all (93%) of the AI/AN students in New Mexico and Oklahoma in this study reported experiencing at least one microaggression, with an average of three over the past year. High prevalence of microaggression experiences in this study is consistent with past research in which

98% of Indigenous young adults (Jones & Galliher, 2015) and 94% of AI youth (Johnston-Goodstar & VeLure Roholt, 2017) reported experiencing microaggressions. The degree to which individuals are affected by discrimination varies. AI/AN students in this study reported feeling “a little” to “a lot” bothered for each microaggression. Jones and Galliher (2015) found that participants rated the level of their microaggression-related distress between none and mild, although all possible levels of distress were endorsed. Walters (2010) found that approximately 10 to 15% of two-spirit AI/ANs were bothered “quite a bit” or “extremely” by microaggressions. However, it is important to note that microaggression prevalence rates among a two-spirit sample may be impacted by multiple minority status. Taken together, the current study and past research suggest widespread prevalence and varied distress levels endorsed when experiencing microaggressions. It is possible that variability in microaggression prevalence and bothersome ratings across this study and other studies relate to differences in microaggressions measures or point to the subjective, flexible boundaries within the definition of microaggressions (Lilienfeld, 2017).

Most commonly, NM and OK students reported being told they were lucky to be Native and being mistaken as another racial/ethnic group. Despite the commonplace experience of being told they were lucky to be AI/AN, students reported this was the least bothersome microaggression experienced. Underlying this microaggression may be the desire for non-Native individuals to be Indigenous due to romanticization and/or the false assumption that all AI/ANs receive educational/economic benefits (Clark et al., 2014; Mihesuah, 1996). Being mistaken for another race as a common microaggression is consistent with another study of Aboriginal university students who reported “unconstrained voyeurism” in which others intrusively inquired about their ethnic identity and based judgments on phenotypical characteristics (e.g., skin color; Clark et al., 2014). This microaggression may have serious implications. For example, in one study, AI adolescents and adults living in an urban area expressed concerns about being mistaken for another race, feeling invisible, and thus preventing access to appropriate suicide prevention resources (Burrage, Gone, & Momper, 2016).

The least common microaggression experienced by all participants in the current study was being physically attacked, although this was reported as most bothersome. Additionally, participants reported distress from being followed around in a store due to being AI/AN. It is not surprising that these two microaggressions are most troubling, as these fall under the category of “microassaults,” which most closely resemble overt racism intended to harm people of color (Sue et al., 2007). Future research should distinguish between microassaults and overt racism versus

microinsults and microinvalidations, and consider how they may differentially affect health, mental health, and academic outcomes. If certain microassaults are more prevalent in certain regions, systemic and institutional-level intervention and change may be necessary.

Related to geographic region, there were no differences between the OK and NM sample in how bothered students were by microaggressions. However, there were significant differences in specific type of microaggression reported by participants in the NM versus OK sample. It is possible that geographic region and/or university setting may be related to level of AI/AN inclusion and positive representations of AI/AN communities (or lack thereof) and may account for such differences. For example, in NM, AI students endorsed higher rates of being mistaken as another race than did those in OK; this may be due to the large percentage of Latino/a and Hispanic populations in NM as compared to OK. As another example, in OK, AI/AN students endorsed being asked to prove their ethnic identity; this may be due to public misperceptions that all Native peoples phenotypically look the same. Alternatively, this may be due to the stereotype that all AIs live on reservations (Mihsuah, 1996) and residence pattern mistakenly equates to Native identity. Most OK tribes do not have reservations (with the exception of one, the Osage Nation Reservation; U.S. Census Bureau, 1994, 2017) and are geographically dispersed across the state, possibly contributing to AI/AN individuals being questioned about their identity (Mihsuah, 1996).

Nadal and colleagues (2015) point to the importance of examining intersectional identities (e.g., race by gender) in the study of microaggressions. Current study results show there were differences in frequency and distress level for particular types of microaggressions experienced by AI/AN students. However, it is difficult to fully interpret all results due to intersectionality. Female participants in this study reported more distress related to their identity as AI/AN being questioned compared to males. Another study found that Indigenous females were significantly more upset by specific types of microaggressions compared to others (Jones & Galliher, 2015). The current study also found that microaggression experiences significantly varied by income level. Those with lower family incomes were more likely to be followed in a store and treated unfairly by the police compared to those with higher incomes. It is possible that students with lower income levels shop in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods with increased police presence. Students with higher income levels were more likely to have their AI/AN identity questioned, which may be motivated by stereotypes about AI/ANs and poverty and their presence in certain settings with economic advantages and less apparent visibility of AI/AN individuals. The intersection between income, race, and microaggressions is another important area of future study.

We found some significant differences in microaggression prevalence by cultural involvement, with those who spoke their tribal language or participated in traditional dances or made cultural arts more likely to experience microaggressions. It is possible that being active in traditional dances, making cultural arts, and speaking one's language signals to others that a person is AI/AN, and then they experience more microaggressions. Furthermore, AI/AN students who are active in cultural traditions and activities, related to ethnic/cultural identification, may exhibit increased awareness about how they are treated and more readily identify microaggressions they experience. Although ethnic/cultural identification was not measured in the current study, these findings may relate to past research showing stronger ethnic identification as AI/AN being associated with increased microaggression experiences (Jones & Galliher, 2015). Although we did not measure identity, engagement in cultural activities may serve as a proxy related to ethnic/cultural identification.

### **Limitations**

One limitation was that one item from the Microaggressions Distress Scale (Walters, 2005) was missing during data collection in the OK sample due to researcher error. Thus, this item was excluded from analyses. The overall total for the Microaggression Distress Scale here has a lower possible maximum than for studies that include all items; this should be taken into account in future research and comparisons. Given that we focused on differences in prevalence of individual items and still had nine items for comparison, this omission is a minor limitation. Another limitation includes study results not generalizing to other geographic regions and tribal groups given heterogeneity in history, culture, and contemporary contexts of the more than 500 tribes in the United States. Given that this was a college sample, results may not generalize to the microaggression experiences of non-college students, although the wide age range included does increase overall generalizability. In addition, the colleges and universities included in the current study had AI/AN student enrollment percentages ranging from 4% to 22%. It is possible that AI/AN students attending post-secondary institutions with lower Native student enrollment have different microaggression experiences in a culturally isolated setting. It would also be useful to look at microaggression experiences of AI/AN students attending tribal colleges compared to other post-secondary institutions, as these settings may be more culturally supportive.

## CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

To our knowledge, the current study is the first to compare microaggression prevalence and distress ratings among two AI/AN samples from different regions and by age, gender, income level, and cultural involvement. This study adds literature demonstrating widespread prevalence of discrimination against AI/ANs in two distinct regions of the United States. Microaggressions have negative implications in a variety of domains for Indigenous communities. Research on microaggressions with Indigenous communities is accumulating on associated negative health impacts, including cardiac health (Walls et al., 2015), physical pain (Chae & Walters, 2009), low self-esteem (Fryberg et al., 2008), depression symptoms (Walls et al., 2015), and an indirect relationship to suicide ideation (O’Keefe, Wingate, Cole, Hollingsworth, & Tucker, 2015). There are also significant academic implications of microaggressions for AI/AN students. Continued research is needed to understand the lived academic experiences of Indigenous students attending institutions with historical legacies of assimilation and colonization concurrently with daily discrimination inside and outside the classroom. Academic settings should be safe environments in which AI/AN students can focus on achieving goals; however, the manifestation of microaggressions may represent a form of trauma for AI/AN students (Johnston-Goodstar & VeLure Roholt, 2017) and impede success and possibly retention. Further, invisibility and stereotyped representations impact behavior (e.g., physical attack – “microassault”). One example includes initial lack of media (i.e., invisibility) and subsequent stereotyped portrayals of Indigenous peoples protecting sacred lands and fighting environmental injustice at the Dakota Access Pipeline site (DAPL; Fryberg & Eason 2017). According to Fryberg and Eason (2017, p. 554), “the DAPL protests demonstrate that bias toward Natives manifests in the minds and behaviors of individuals (e.g., the police and paramilitary forces who attacked Native protesters) and at the collective, representational levels (e.g., the media representations of Native protesters as violent warriors).”

Future research should continue to examine microaggression prevalence and distress across regions with diverse tribal representation using a culturally validated microaggressions scale to capture unique experiences of AI/AN peoples. Such research will provide important information about the unique microaggression experiences of AI/ANs and similarities/differences across geographically, historically, and culturally heterogeneous communities and also its relation to physical, mental, and spiritual health outcomes. Qualitative research is also imperative to augment quantitative results to better understand differences across individual and community level factors.

In addition, research might help identify ways in which microaggressions may be decreased from an institutional standpoint (e.g., training and evaluation for all students) or support systems that AI/AN students can utilize. For example, student organizations (at public, private, or tribal colleges) and local communities might find points of collaboration to support students who experience microaggressions. Many AI/AN student organizations hold meetings, campus events, and other gatherings that may foster a sense of belongingness, cultural connection, and social support. Overall, continued research is vital to support local grassroots and national organizations calling for an end to microaggressions and other forms of discrimination against AI/ANs and Indigenous peoples globally.

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