Pursuing Existence: Understanding Racial Microaggressions as Experienced by Post-Secondary American Indian Students

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Abstract: *Despite decades of research documenting racial microaggressions across marginalized groups, American Indian post-secondary students (one of the smallest and most academically at-risk populations in higher education) have been almost entirely left out of the conversation. This qualitative descriptive study explored how American Indian post-secondary students understand and respond to racial microaggressions that cast doubt on their academic ability and potential for success. Using Microaggression Theory as the theoretical foundation, two research questions guided the study: (1) how American Indian post-secondary students come to understand the racial microaggressions they experience, and (2) how they respond to these racial microaggressions. Convenience sampling was used to recruit 10 AI/AN post-secondary students. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and a focus group. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. Findings indicated that students' acknowledgment of negative experiences led to the recognition of racial microaggressions and increased awareness of limited institutional resources, which negatively affected their emotional well-being and academic success. Social support systems played a critical role in fostering resilience and determination, helping students respond to microaggressions. Participants also identified strategies for improvement, including the development of coping mechanisms, increased access to resources, and enhanced diversity and inclusion efforts on campus. These findings may assist higher education institutions in improving recruitment, retention, and completion rates of AI/AN students.*

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INTRODUCTION

American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/AN) experience significant academic disparities compared to other racial and ethnic groups, with AI/AN students reporting the lowest college enrollment and graduation rates in the United States (Oxendine et al., 2018). In higher education, AI/ANs remain the most underrepresented population (Fish & Syed, 2018) and face disproportionate levels of discrimination, systemic injustice, and educational inequities (Walters et al., 2019). These disparities are not solely the result of individual-level factors but are embedded within broader institutional and sociocultural contexts that shape AI/AN students' daily experiences on campus (Walters et al., 2019) and include experiences of racial microaggressions. However, AI/AN students are frequently overlooked in research addressing racial microaggressions and academic success. Scholars have called for further investigation into how microaggressions influence the academic experiences, college persistence, and achievement of AI/AN students (O'Keefe & Greenfield, 2019; Palmer, 2018).

American Indian Strength, Persistence, and Higher Education

Despite centuries of systemic oppression and historical trauma, AI/AN communities possess longstanding traditions of resilience, adaptability, and collective strength that continue to sustain them today. Within higher education, this strength is evident: although AI/AN students remain the most underrepresented population in U.S. colleges and universities, they persist in the face of structural inequities, discrimination, and racialized assumptions that shape their academic journeys (Fish & Syed, 2018; Walters et al., 2019). For many AI/AN students, this persistence is rooted not only in individual determination but in responsibility to family, community, and future generations (Heavy Runner-Rioux et al., 2018; Peters, 2018). Yet, these strengths are frequently tested within academic environments that were not designed to center American Indian identities, histories, or ways of knowing, creating environments that often fail to recognize the cultural identities and lived experiences AI/AN students bring with them.

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Resilience, Coping, and American Indian Strengths

Despite ongoing exposure to microaggressions, American Indian students continue to demonstrate resilience grounded in cultural identity, family support, and community connection. American Indian teachings, spirituality, and collective responsibility have been identified as protective factors that help students navigate hostile academic environments (Hunt et al., 2020; Walters, 2019). Determination, persistence, and a commitment to honoring ancestors and future generations often motivate American Indian students to remain in higher education despite systemic barriers (Heavy Runner-Rioux et al., 2018).

However, while resilience is frequently acknowledged, far less attention has been given to how American Indian students actively interpret, resist, and respond to microaggressions as part of their academic journeys.

Racial Microaggressions in Higher Education

One persistent, yet often minimized, barrier within higher education is the presence of racial microaggressions. Racial microaggressions are subtle, often unintentional behaviors or statements that convey negative or stereotypical assumptions about marginalized groups (Sue et al., 2007). In college settings, microaggressions may occur through classroom interactions, curriculum content, advising relationships, faculty conduct, or peer exchanges. Although often framed as unintentional, their cumulative impact can undermine students' sense of belonging, academic confidence, and psychological well-being. For AI/AN students, microaggressions frequently intersect with historical erasure, cultural invalidation, and assumptions of academic inferiority, making their impact particularly harmful.

Studies across higher education contexts illustrate that microaggressions are frequently perpetrated by individuals in positions of authority, such as faculty, as well as by peers. Students have described faculty behaviors that include stereotyping, dismissing lived experiences, invalidating perspectives, and shutting down dialogue around race and identity (Davis & Mirick, 2021). In predominantly White institutions, first-generation and racially minoritized students have also reported microinvalidations, microinsults, and microassaults embedded within classroom discourse and campus culture (Ellis et al., 2019). Together, these findings highlight how microaggressions are woven into the everyday fabric of higher education.

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Distinguishing Microaggressions: Faculty, Curriculum, and Peers

Microaggressions in academic spaces are not experienced uniformly. Faculty and curriculum-based microaggressions often carry heightened consequences due to power differentials, grading authority, and institutional legitimacy. These forms may include culturally insensitive language, erasure of American Indian histories, or assumptions about academic ability. In contrast, peer-based microaggressions frequently manifest through social exclusion, racialized comments, or questioning of American Indian identity. Understanding these distinctions is essential, as the source and context of microaggressions may shape how students interpret harm and determine how or when they should respond.

Although existing literature documents these dynamics among racially minoritized students broadly, AI/AN students are often excluded from such analyses or grouped into pan-ethnic categories that obscure AI/AN-specific experiences. Quantitative and mixed-methods studies examining microaggressions among Hispanic, Asian, and Black students routinely omit AI/AN participants altogether, limiting understanding of how AI/AN students uniquely experience and interpret these encounters (Lui et al., 2020; Maiden, 2021).

American Indian & Alaska Native Students and the Absence of their Voices

When AI/AN students do appear in higher education research, their experiences are often reduced to generalized themes of racism or structural barriers, rather than explored in depth through American Indian perspectives. Qualitative studies have identified themes such as Eurocentrism, historical trauma, and barriers to education among AI/AN students, yet microaggressions are frequently treated as a secondary or peripheral finding rather than the central focus (Trammell, 2020). Moreover, the limited number of studies led by American Indian and Alaska Native scholars contributes to the continued marginalization of American Indian epistemologies and interpretive frameworks.

This absence is particularly concerning given evidence that microaggressions are associated with increased stress, depression, and diminished academic performance among students of color (Ackerman-Barger et al., 2020; Torres-Harding et al., 2020). Although one quantitative study has linked racial discrimination and microaggressions to health inequities among AI/AN college students, its scope was geographically limited and did not provide narrative insight into which experiences students found most harmful or why (Greenfield et al., 2021). As a

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result, the voices of AI/AN students themselves remain largely unheard in discussions about microaggressions in higher education.

Purpose of the Study

The existing literature reveals two critical gaps: AI/AN students are routinely excluded from microaggression research, and their own voices are rarely centered in identifying which aspects of these experiences are most harmful. Addressing these gaps requires qualitative inquiry that privileges AI/AN perspectives and lived experiences.

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to explore how American Indian post-secondary students understand and respond to racial microaggressions that challenge their academic ability and success. Using a national sample of American Indian students recruited through select social media groups, this study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do American Indian post-secondary students come to understand the racial microaggressions they experience that cast doubt on their academic success?
2. How do American Indian post-secondary students respond to these racial microaggressions while persisting toward academic success?

By centering American Indian voices, this study seeks to illuminate the nuanced ways microaggressions are experienced, interpreted, and resisted by American Indian students in higher education. Understanding these responses is critical for moving past deficit narratives and advancing institutional accountability and change.

METHODS

Study Design

This qualitative study explored racial microaggressions experienced by American Indian post-secondary students. Participants self-identified as American Indian and shared their tribal affiliation, participated in in-depth interviews, and some participated in focus groups. Data focused on experiences with microaggression, coping strategies, support systems, and desired campus resources. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, reviewed for accuracy, and analyzed while maintaining participant confidentiality and researcher reflexivity.

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Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

The primary researcher identified as American Indian and enrolled member of a Tribe. The primary researcher was enrolled in a doctoral program at the time of the study. The remaining members of the research committee (Chair, Content Expert, and Methodologist) did not identify as American Indian. To center participant voices and minimize researcher bias, reflexivity was actively practiced throughout the research process (Bengtsson, 2016; Jootun et al., 2009) and involved maintaining a reflective journal to document initial reactions, assumptions, and interpretations before and during data analysis. This process supported bracketing by increasing awareness of potential biases and encouraging intentional reflection on how the researcher's experiences could influence interpretation (Hsiung, 2008; Patnaik, 2013). Adherence to the approved IRB protocol further supported methodological rigor and reflexive practice.

Recruitment and Participants

Prior to data collection, site authorization and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval were obtained from Grand Canyon University (IRB-2023-5365). Participants were recruited through two private social media (Facebook) groups for Native/American Indian post-secondary students. One group had approximately 1,100 members and the other had approximately 958 members at the time of recruitment. A recruitment flyer was posted in both groups and included the researcher's contact information, study purpose, inclusion criteria, and compensation details. Participants received a $15 gift card for completing an individual interview and an additional $15 gift card for participating in the focus group.

Inclusion criteria required participants to (a) self-identify as American Indian, Native American, or First American; (b) be currently enrolled in a post-secondary institution (on campus, online, or hybrid); (c) be willing to participate in the study; and (d) have experienced racial microaggressions in an educational setting.

More than 70 individuals expressed interest in the study. Of those, 15 consented to participate. Due to scheduling conflicts and participant attrition, 10 participants completed individual interviews and were included in the final sample. All focus group participants were drawn from those who completed individual interviews.

Among the 10 interview participants, six (60%) identified as female and four (40%) identified as male. Most attended post-secondary education primarily on campus, and participants were drawn from eight states. Half of the participants (n = 5) reported having lived on a reservation

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at some point in their lives, while the other half had not. The focus group included six participants, four (67%) of whom identified as female and two (33%) identified as male.

Individual Interviews

The primary data source consisted of semi-structured, one-to-one interviews conducted by the primary researcher. Interview questions were designed to explore participants' experiences, interpretations, and responses to racial microaggressions, with particular attention to interactions involving individuals in positions of authority. Interview questions were field-tested with three individuals similar to the target population to ensure clarity and relevance.

Sample interview questions included: (a) "Describe a time when you experienced racial microaggressions from a person of authority while enrolled in college," (b) "How did you respond to or cope with these experiences?" and (c) "What support systems, if any, helped you navigate these experiences?" The complete interview guide is provided in Appendix A. Each primary question included follow-up prompts to encourage elaboration. All interview questions were open-ended to allow participants to fully describe their experiences.

Interviews were conducted via Zoom, and participants received a secure meeting link prior to the scheduled interview. Prior to providing consent, participants were asked to confirm their understanding of racial microaggressions. This definition was reviewed again at the start of each individual interview to ensure shared understanding. Participants then completed a brief demographic questionnaire that collected information on age, gender, level of post-secondary education, state of enrollment, Tribal affiliation, reservation experience, and instructional modality (on campus, online, or blended). Interviews lasted an average of 40 minutes.

Focus Group

Following completion of individual interviews, interview transcripts were reviewed to identify preliminary patterns and key topics. Based on these patterns, four to six thematic scenarios were developed to guide focus group discussion. This approach allowed focus group participants to collectively reflect on shared experiences rather than respond to individual interview questions.

Sample focus group questions included: (a) "Describe microaggressions you experienced from peers and how they made you feel," (b) "How important were support systems when you experienced microaggressions from faculty or peers?", and (c) "What campus resources would have positively impacted your experience as an American Indian student?" The focus group

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questions are provided in Appendix B. The focus group was conducted via Zoom after participants agreed on a mutually convenient date and time.

Procedures

All interviews and the focus group were audio recorded using a digital voice recording application and Zoom's recording feature. Recordings were transcribed using Otter.ai automated transcription software (Otter.ai, 2023) and reviewed while listening to the original recordings to ensure accuracy. Corrections were made as needed. Each participant was assigned an alphanumeric pseudonym (e.g., P1, P2) to maintain confidentiality.

Participants received their transcripts via email for member checking and were asked to confirm accuracy or suggest revisions within five business days. Nine interview participants confirmed transcript accuracy; one participant did not respond and was assumed to have no requested revisions. All focus group participants confirmed transcript accuracy.

Data Analysis

A single coder (the primary researcher) conducted the initial analysis, and the dissertation chair reviewed the resulting codes to support the trustworthiness of the analysis. Verified transcripts were uploaded into MAXQDA 2022 qualitative data analysis software (VERBI Software, 2022) and data from the individual interviews (n = 10) and focus group (n = 6) were analyzed together to identify patterns across participants. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis approach: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and report production. An inductive coding strategy was employed, allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than imposing a priori of categories (Thomas, 2006). Through this process, raw data were systematically transformed into codes, categories, and themes aligned with the study's research questions.

Coding System and Theme Development

First cycle coding generated an initial set of codes across transcripts. Codes were then reviewed and consolidated into a hierarchical code system consisting of parent codes and child codes. Parent codes represented broad conceptual categories (e.g., identity invalidation, stereotyping, faculty/authority interactions, peer interactions, boundary violations, emotional impact, sense of belonging, coping strategies, support systems, self-advocacy, and institutional

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resources). Each parent code included more specific child codes (e.g., under identity invalidation: misclassification as White, pressure to "choose" an identity; under faculty/authority interactions: dismissiveness, public singling out, inappropriate language). The code system was refined through iterative review as themes were developed.

To enhance credibility, coding decisions and theme boundaries were reviewed with the research committee. Differences in interpretation were discussed until agreement was reached on code definitions and final themes. Five themes were finalized; however, Theme 2 was split into two themes to clearly separate emotional impact from institutional gaps and resources, consistent with participants' accounts and reviewer feedback.

RESULTS

Findings are organized by theme, while noting whether themes reflected faculty/authority, peer, or broader campus contexts.

Theme 1: Naming and Recognizing Microaggressions in Academic Spaces

This theme reflects how participants identified and made meaning of microaggressions in their educational environments. Participants did not indicate that microaggressions were entirely unrecognized prior to the study; rather, many described a process of putting language to experiences that had previously been felt as discomfort, confusion, dismissal, or stereotyping.

Faculty- and authority-based microaggressions were commonly described as stereotyping, cultural invalidation, or disrespectful classroom interactions. For example, one participant described frustration with the way American Indian peoples were framed through deficit narratives and stereotypes, stating that American Indians were often seen as "drunks and lazy" and that coursework emphasized "the negative disparities" without historical context (Participant 1). Others described faculty actions that communicated disrespect toward American Indian culture (e.g., making fun of American Indian stories) or differential treatment in academic support, such as an instructor being "nicer to other people but not to me or my friend" (Participant 9).

Participants also described identity invalidation from faculty and staff. Some reported being categorized incorrectly (e.g., assumed to be White) or being pressured to "pick one" racial identity (Participant 2). Others described boundary violations, such as a faculty member touching

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a participant's hair without consent (Participant 2), or the use of offensive terms such as "Indian giver" (Participant 8).

Peer-based microaggressions were also present and often took the form of social dismissal or racialized comments. Focus group participants described being "scoffed at" by White peers (FGP1) and experiencing hurt when peers assumed they were White rather than American Indian (FGP2). Across sources of microaggressions, participants emphasized that these interactions communicated exclusion and devaluation within academic spaces.

Theme 2: Emotional and Academic Consequences of Microaggressions

Participants consistently described microaggressions as emotionally taxing and closely tied to their academic functioning. Many reported anxiety, anger, exhaustion, and decreased sense of belonging. These effects often accumulated over time, influencing participants' classroom engagement, motivation, and social participation. For example, participants described microaggressions as "draining" and emotionally exhausting, especially when they felt burdened with explaining American Indian identity or addressing racism while trying to focus on learning (Participant 2). Others described becoming increasingly upset when they recognized repeated exclusion or erasure, including classroom dynamics where racial groupings were discussed but American Indian identity was not acknowledged (Participant 2). Participants also described anger as a frequent response, sometimes choosing to speak up and other times disengaging to protect their emotional energy (Participant 8).

Feelings of not belonging were widespread. Several participants described withdrawing socially (Participants 3 and 4) and feeling as though they did not "fit in" academically or culturally. Taken together, these accounts illustrate how microaggressions functioned as chronic stressors that undermined emotional well-being and contributed to academic strain.

Theme 3: Multi-Level Support Systems Fostered Resilience and Persistence

Participants described resilience as supported by interconnected resources that can be grouped into individual, community, and cultural/spiritual supports. Individual supports included determination, self-talk, and selective engagement. One participant described having to "push myself mentally" to keep going (Participant 4). Others emphasized learning when to respond directly and when to preserve energy.

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Community supports included family, friends, peers, social media communities, and campus-based spaces. Several participants described validation and encouragement from others as critical, including receiving support after sharing experiences online (Participants 2 and 3). Participants also described campus-based American Indian spaces as protective environments for students who experienced microaggressions (Participant 7). For one participant, returning to college later felt more manageable because they were "more mature" and had stronger support (Participant 5).

Cultural/spiritual supports included drawing strength from ancestors, prayer, and American Indian/Tribal teachings. Participants described cultural grounding as a source of motivation and persistence, including thinking of ancestors to remain focused on long-term goals (Participant 3). These supports reinforced identity, belonging, and purpose. Overall, participants emphasized that support systems did not eliminate microaggressions, but they buffered harm, strengthened persistence, and helped students maintain academic momentum.

Theme 4: Self-Advocacy and Empowerment as Responses to Microaggressions

Participants frequently described microaggressions as catalysts for self-advocacy. Responses included confronting faculty, setting boundaries, seeking validation, educating others, and building supportive structures for American Indian students. For many, advocacy was connected to future-oriented responsibility by reducing harm for American Indian students "behind me" and creating space for those who would come next (Participant 2).

One participant described how gaining knowledge about microaggressions enabled them to speak up and reclaim power:

> I also felt more empowered having that knowledge… I know how to speak up against it now… If I didn't know what it was, I would have been just blind… Yeah, I got my power back when I stand up to people now about microaggressions. (Participant 2)

Participants also described empowerment through campus involvement, including supporting or creating American Indian student organizations (Participants 2 and 4) and using experiences as motivation to pursue further education or advocacy roles.

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Theme 5: Recommendations for Institutional Improvement and Coping Strategies

Participants identified strategies that helped them cope and offered recommendations for institutional change. Coping strategies included prayer, refocusing on goals, seeking validation, and grounding oneself in responsibility to future American Indian students (Participants 2, 3, 4, and 6). Participants also emphasized the importance of mentoring, increased American Indian faculty representation, and culturally responsive training for faculty and staff.

Participants recommended stronger partnerships between institutions and Tribal or American Indian organizations, expanded culturally relevant support services, and increased visibility of American Indian culture on campus. Focus group participants also encouraged future American Indian students to be courageous, speak up, seek support, and remember that their experiences are valid.

DISCUSSION

This study explored how American Indian post-secondary students understand and respond to racial microaggressions and how they may impact academic ability and success. Across individual interviews and the focus group, participants described various microaggressions occurring in academic spaces and explained how these experiences shaped emotional well-being, sense of belonging, and academic engagement. Findings also highlighted that students drew on layered support systems, individual determination, community support, and cultural or spiritual resources to maintain persistence. For many participants, microaggressions did not only produce harm; they also triggered self-advocacy, identity affirmation, and motivation to improve conditions for future American Indian students.

Microaggressions as Ongoing Academic Stressors

Participants consistently described microaggressions as negative experiences that affected both emotional wellness and academic functioning. Faculty and authority-based microaggressions often involved stereotyping, identity invalidation, or classroom interactions that left students feeling dismissed or singled out. Peer-based microaggressions frequently took the form of social disregard, questioning of American Indian/Tribal identity, or subtle exclusion. Regardless of source, participants described microaggressions as cumulative rather than isolated, contributing to stress, anxiety, anger, and feelings of not belonging. These emotional responses were closely tied

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to academic experiences, including decreased comfort participating in class, withdrawal from social or campus spaces, and the need to exert additional emotional labor to navigate interactions.

This finding aligns with existing literature on the cumulative and compounding nature of racial microaggressions. Masta's (2018) study of everyday experience among Native Americans similarly found that repeated, seaming minor incidents accumulated into a persistent sense of exhaustion rather than existing as isolated events. Torres-Harding et al. (2020) found that microaggressions predicted somatic symptoms among students of color through the meditating pathways of depression and perceived stress, reinforcing the connection between cumulative microaggressions and diminished wellness observed in this study. Similarly, John-Henderson et al. (2019) found that among American Indian college students, life stress and reduced sense of belonging were associated with poorer sleep outcomes, suggesting that the emotional toll of experiences like those described by participants can extend into physical and academic functioning. Douds and Hout (2020) further support the broader pattern identified here, noting that microaggressions in the United States often function cumulatively rather than as singular events, gradually shaping individuals' stress and well-being over time. Together, this literature affirms that the emotional and academic consequences described by participants in the current study reflect a well-documented pattern which repeated microaggressions, regardless of their source, accumulated into significant psychological and academic burden.

How Students Sustained Persistence: Support, Culture, and Community

Although participants described harm and frustration, they also emphasized resilience and persistence. Students relied on multiple sources of support, including family members, friends, American Indian student spaces, mentors, and online communities. Cultural and spiritual grounding, such as prayer, thinking of ancestors, and drawing on American Indian/Tribal teachings also served as a protective factor and source of motivation. These supports helped participants reframe negative experiences, reduce isolation, and reaffirm academic goals. Importantly, participants' narratives suggest that support systems are not simply "helpful"; they are often essential for maintaining well-being and staying engaged in academic environments where students experience ongoing racialized stress.

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From Harm to Action: Self-Advocacy and Empowerment

A key contribution of this study is its documentation of how participants responded to microaggressions through self-advocacy and empowerment. Some students described confronting harmful comments, speaking up in classroom spaces, or seeking validation and accountability through institutional or peer channels. Others engaged in advocacy by building community, supporting or creating American Indian student organizations, mentoring peers, or becoming more vocal about American Indian visibility on campus. Several participants described this advocacy as future oriented, emphasizing responsibility to reduce harm for American Indian students who would come after them. These responses demonstrate that American Indian students are not passive recipients of microaggressions; many actively resist, navigate, and transform hostile experiences into motivation for leadership and persistence.

Implications for Higher Education Practice

Participants' recommendations point to actionable strategies institutions can implement to reduce harm and improve American Indian students' academic experiences. Participants emphasized the need for training that addresses racial microaggressions, American Indian histories, and cultural humility in classroom interactions and advising relationships. They also highlighted the importance of greater American Indian representation among faculty and staff, which may improve belonging, reduce isolation, and increase culturally responsive support. Participants described the value of American Indian student spaces, mentoring opportunities, and collaborations with Tribal organizations including colleges and universities. Institutions can improve access to these resources and ensure they are visible and adequately supported. Finally, participants' narratives suggest a need for clear reporting and accountability pathways to report microaggressions and for institutional responses that prioritize student safety and learning climates.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study underscores the importance of continuing qualitative inquiry that centers American Indian voices. Future research should examine (a) differences in microaggressions by source (faculty/authority, peers, curriculum), (b) how students decide whether to respond directly, disengage, or seek support, and (c) which institutional supports are perceived as most effective for reducing harm. Additional work should also explore how experiences vary across institution types

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(e.g., Tribal colleges, predominantly White institutions, urban vs. rural campuses), geographic regions, and Tribal affiliations. Mixed-methods studies may be especially useful for combining the depth of qualitative narratives with broader assessments of prevalence and institutional predictors of microaggression exposure.

Study Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. The sample size was small and recruited through convenience sampling via social media. As is consistent with the goals of qualitative research, this study did not aim to produce generalizable findings; rather, the intent was to generate an in-depth contextualized understanding of participant's experiences. However, the recruitment method may have shaped who chose to participate, for example, individuals who were more comfortable discussing race-related experiences online, or who were already engaged with Native American Indian community spaces on social media, may be overrepresented. Transferability of findings may be most relevant to American Indian post-secondary students with similar backgrounds, institutional contexts, or experiences to those of the participants in this study.

Tribal representation and geographic concentration may have influenced the results. Several participants attended institutions in Arizona, which may reflect regional dynamics and local institutional climates. American Indian students represent diverse Tribal nations with distinct histories, cultures, and relationships to educational institutions; therefore, experiences of microaggressions and support systems may differ across Tribal affiliations and geographic regions.

The types of post-secondary institutions attended were varied and not analyzed as a distinguishing factor. Differences in campus size, mission, availability of American Indian resources, faculty diversity, and institutional commitment to equity may shape students' experiences of microaggressions. Additionally, the use of online and blended participation may have influenced how students experienced and interpreted academic interactions.

Finally, data relied on self-reported and retrospective accounts, which may be subject to recall bias and self-selection effects. Participants who chose to engage in the study may have had stronger experiences with microaggressions or greater comfort discussing these topics. Researcher positionality may also have influenced interpretation; however, reflexive journaling, member checking, and committee review were used to support credibility and minimize bias.

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CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study contributes to the limited literature on AI/AN post-secondary students by centering American Indian voices to examine how racial microaggressions are understood and navigated within higher education. Findings indicate that students recognized microaggressions through repeated academic interactions and described their emotional and academic impact. At the same time, participants demonstrated resilience by drawing on social, cultural, and spiritual support systems and by engaging in self-advocacy that fostered personal growth and academic persistence.

The findings underscore the need for institutional action to reduce racial microaggressions and better support AI/AN students. Participants emphasized the importance of culturally responsive faculty training, increased American Indian representation, mentorship opportunities, and accessible campus resources. Implementing these strategies may improve academic experiences, strengthen retention, and support successful degree completion for AI/AN students in higher education.

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APPENDIX A

Individual Interview Questions

1. Describe a time you believed you experienced racial microaggressions from a person of authority while enrolled. (Please explain).
   A. What was your initial reaction or understanding of the microaggression? Tell me about it.
   B. What did you do after you thought about it?
   C. What was the overall outcome of the experience for you?

2. Explain how racial microaggressions empowered or discouraged you while in class or on campus.
   A. If it discouraged you, what was your reflection of the experience and did it make you doubt your ability to academically successful?
   B. If it empowered you, what was your understanding of the event and did it encourage you to endure and become academically successful?

3. Explain how you believe you overcame racial microaggression experiences.
   A. In what ways did you respond or cope with the racial microaggression? (Example: Talk to someone about it? Did you meditate or exercise?)
   B. Do you believe your personal beliefs assisted with overcoming racial microaggressions? Please explain.
   C. What helped you the most? Please explain why.

4. Describe the support systems that you believe assisted you in overcoming racial microaggressions.
   A. Did the support come from school, peers, family, and friend? Please explain how the support assisted you.
   B. Did it help make you stronger? self-confident? more understanding of others? Explain how.

5. Explain how you perceive racial microaggression experiences influenced your overall college success and academic achievements.
   A. Do you believe it caused unnecessary feelings, thoughts, or actions? Please Explain.
   B. Do you believe it caused you to strive for success? Explain why or why not.
   C. Do you feel you had adequate resources on campus available to you in assisting with coping with racial microaggression? If so, please provide examples. If not, what type of resources were you seeking?
   D. What resources would you like to be implemented on campus to reduce racial microaggressions?

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APPENDIX B

Focus Group Interview Questions

1. Describe the microaggressions you experienced from peers. Explain how it made you feel?

2. Explain how you perceive microaggressions can influence another's student's college experiences.

3. Describe how your college experiences may have been different if you did not experience microaggressions from faculty or peers.

4. Explain how important it is to have a support system during the time you experienced microaggressions on campus from peers or faculty. What type of support systems helped you when you experienced microaggressions? Can you provide an example of how the support system helped you?

5. Describe some resources you would like to have on campus that may have a positive impact for Native American Indian students. Were any of these resources available to you? If so, explain how the resource helped you.

6. What advice would you provide for future Native American students who experience microaggressions?

7. What advice would you provide to those who are not aware of microaggressions?

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