## THROWING SHADE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF MICROINEQUITIES AND LEARNING ENGAGEMENT WITHIN HIGHER EDUCATION

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**Abstract**

Based on interview data from a qualitative study, this article highlights the perspectives of five students from an American institution of higher education to get a better understanding of the ways in which microinequities influence learning engagement. Three major themes emerged from the interview data: (1) feeling of disconnection, (2) surface learning, and (3) student-teacher relationship. Using a social constructivism framework, I argue for a greater understanding of microinequities in the social and situational context in which they occur, specifically within educational climates. Implications for educators will be discussed, including how to create inclusive, supportive, and democratic learning climates for all learners.

*Keywords*: students, bias communication, higher education, learning climates, learning engagement, microinequities

## Introduction

Microinequities occur in everyday lives (Brennan, 2016; Nadal, 2017; Rowe, 2008, Schnellmann & Gibbons, 1984), including the lives of students who attend colleges and universities in the United States. Rowe (2008) coined the term microinequity while conducting a 1973 study on inclusion within the workplace at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Rowe writes that microinequities are "apparently small events which are often ephemeral and hard-to-prove, events which are covert, often unintentional,

frequently unrecognized by the perpetrator, which occur wherever people are perceived to be different" (p. 1). Sandler and Hall (1986) refer to microinequities as "ways in which individuals are either *singled out*, or *overlooked*, *ignored*, or *otherwise discounted* on the basis of unchangeable characteristics such as sex, race, or age." (p. 3; emphasis in original). Sue et al. (2007) describe microinequities as "the pattern of being overlooked, underrespected, and devalued because of one's race or gender" (p. 273).

Literature shows that contemporary scholars (e.g., Brennan, 2016; Hutchison & Jenkins, 2013; Nadal, 2017; Saporu & Herbers, 2015) refer to Rowe's definition in their scholarship on microinequities in the workplace. Unfortunately, there is no precise definition of microinequities as they relate to learning climates in educational institutions. For this study, the original definition will suffice. Furthermore, contemporary terminology (e.g. bias communication, unconscious bias, hidden bias) will be used interchangeably with the term microinequity.

Based on interview analyses from a qualitative approach, this study highlights perceptions of microinequities to get a better understanding of ways in which these unconscious biases could influence learning engagement in the classroom. Using a social constructivism framework, I argue for a greater understanding of microinequities in the social and situational context in which they occur, specifically within classroom climates. I also argue for future areas of theory, research, and practice to potentially find ways to minimize the effects of microinequities in educational and vocational learning spaces. Implications will be provided for educators who are striving to create inclusive, supportive, and democratic learning climates, as well as increase retention in educational learning spaces.

## Research Problem

Rowe (2008) posits that microinequities do not require active intention on the part of the *perpetrator*; however, the accumulation of unconscious biases and prejudices can result in exclusion, impair workplace or classroom performance, and diminish self-esteem (Saporu and Herbers, 2015). Much of the existing literature on the cumulative effects of microinequities presents individuals' experiences within workplace learning spaces and focuses primarily on gender and race schemas (Brennan, 2016; Hutchinson & Jenkins, 2013; Nadal, 2017; Rowe 2008; Sandler & Hall, 1986; Saporu & Herbers, 2015; Young 2006) and is predominantly quantitative in nature. With respect to academic learning spaces, the relatively smaller and mostly dated literature on microinequities and their impacts on learning engagement focuses exclusively on gender, race, and sexual orientation schemas (Beagan, 2001; Cranston 1989; Sandler & Hall, 1986; Schnellmann & Gibbons, 1984). The literature also encompasses psychological orientations (Cranston & Leonard, 1990; Meadors & Murray, 2014). When compared to the research on microinequities within the workplace learning climates, research within academic learning climates is also predominately quantitative in nature. From a qualitative approach, we know relatively little about (1) how microinequities influence learning engagement in the classroom and (2) how student learners cope with their experiences of microinequities.

## Research Purpose

The purpose of this study was to qualitatively explore students' experiences of microinequities to get a better understanding of the ways in which microinequities

influence learning engagement. Two overarching research questions guided the investigation:

1. How do students' experiences of microinequities influence learning engagement in higher education?

2. In what ways do students cope with the experiences of microinequities in higher education?

## Literature Review

The following sections introduce and discuss the three specific areas: learning engagement in learning spaces, perception, and communication, as they relate to the understanding of microinequities in the classroom.

### Learning Engagement

Democracy and inclusion promote safe learning climates within adult and higher educational institutions (Andrews & Misawa, 2017; Williams, Woodson, & Wallace, 2016). Williams et al. (2016) assert that learning spaces that promote safe learning climates have the potential to foster engagement and exploration of creativity. Engagement, operationally speaking, is difficult to define; however, it is obvious both when present and when missing (Saeed & Zyngier, 2012). Engagement, Kuh (2009) states, is the quality of effort and participation which learners employ in realistic learning activities. Schlechty (2002, as cited in Saeed & Zyngier, 2012) adds:

Engagement is active. It requires the students to be attentive as well as in attendance; it requires the students to be committed to the task and find some inherent value in what he or she is being asked to do. The engaged student not only does the task assigned but also does the task with enthusiasm and diligence. (p. 255)

Unfortunately, when subtle effects of microinequities impede engagement within a learning setting, a learner could feel a sense of isolation, marginalization, and exclusion (Brennan, 2016; Nadal, 2017). The accumulation of disparaging comments, unintentional acts, or invalidations within learning spaces creates exclusion, impairs workplace or classroom performance, and diminishes self-esteem (Saporu & Herbers, 2015). When considering learning in any setting, the accumulations of bias communication can have psychological and physical effects, including sadness, loss of creativity and engagement, and low work performance (Nadal, 2017). Nadal adds that the effects of unconscious bias can also lead to high turnover, low morale, and decreased productivity within the workplace.

Kahu (2013) believes that understanding the magnitude of engagement and its impact on academics in higher education requires a psychological approach. She suggests that a teacher can frame learners' engagement by considering behavior, cognition, and emotional dimensions of learning. Kahu's psychological perspective on learning is not a new concept; however, it corroborates Forgas' (2000) philosophy that feeling and thinking are interconnected domains and cannot be separate from the learning process.  Kahu's psychological approach to engagement also supports Illeris' (2002) viewpoint that the learning encompasses the cognitive, affective, and social dimensions.  It should be noted that in later works Illeris changed these terms to *content, incentive,* and *environment*. However, his original terms have been maintained in this section because they are simple and relevant to the content of this article. Despite the change of terminology, Illeris (2017) maintains, in his second edition of *How We Learn: Learning and Non-Formal in School and*

*Beyond*, that "all learning involves these three dimensions, which must always be considered if an understanding or analysis of a learning situation is to be adequate" (p. 24).

**Perception**

Microinequities lie in the eyes of the beholder; therefore, the perceptions of microinequities make it hard to recognize or prove, especially when there are other reasonable explanations (Chun & Evan, 2015; Rowe, 2008). Because of the construction of reality, Chun and Evan (2015) claim that perceptions of microinequities allow the individual to become the expert on what constitutes a microinequity. Individuals who experienced, or perceived that they have experienced, microinequities in learning spaces described an ambiguous sense of disrespect, insult, or slight (Brennan, 2016; Hutchinson & Jenkins, 2013).

Although research indicates that perception is not an accurate reflection of reality, Schnellmann and Gibbons (1984) disagree. In 1984, these researchers conducted a quantitative study to determine whether women and other minority students perceived a less encouraging classroom climate than their white male counterparts. Schnellmann and Gibbons' findings indicate that an individual's perception of reality informs his or her beliefs and behaviors. Kiraly (2014) adds that individuals perceive and understand their reality through their own positionality within the social context. These statements emphasize (1) that reality is constructed through social interaction with one's environment, and (2) the experience of learning has an emotional aspect. Unintentional exclusionary practices, such as microinequities, can emotionally influence learners' attitudes and behaviors (Chun & Evan, 2015) toward learning, including lowering academic aspirations and achievements, decreasing self-efficacy, and decreasing motivation.

**Communication**

Communication, both verbal and non-verbal, is salient to any environment where learning experiences occur (e.g., Churches, 2010; Knapp, Hall, & Horgan, 2014). Literature on communication often cites earlier research from Alfred Mehrabian (1968), who maintains that communication is comprised of 93% non-verbal and 7% verbal. Verbal communication tends to place emphasis on the cognitive facets of interpersonal interactions (McCroskey, Richmond, & Bennett, 2006; Meadors & Murray, 2014;).

Unlike verbal communication, non-verbal communication plays a more emotional or affective role in sending and receiving messages (Knapp et al., 2014; McCroskey et al., 2006; Meadors & Murray, 2014). Churches (2010) posits that the emotional climate of the learning space influences learners just as much as the effectiveness of the curriculum. Morreale, Spitzberg, and Barge (2007) define non-verbal communication as any human behaviors, objects or characteristics that convey a message – other than words. Non-verbal communication includes facial expression, eye contact, body position, gesture, pitch and tone of voice, personal distance, attentive silence, and touch (Bambaeeroo & Shokrpour, 2017; Baron, 2009).

Non-verbal elements of communication can emphasize, distract from, or contradict a verbal message (DeLamater & Myers, 2011; Meadors & Murray, 2014). When there is a discrepancy between verbal and non-verbal communication, individuals will respond more frequently to the non-verbal communication (Churches, 2010; DeLamater & Myers, 2011; Meadors & Murray, 2014; Mehrabian, 2009). Okon (2011) contends if the incongruity is not resolved, it could possibly set the tone for the escalation of conflict. Lincoln (2002)

describes how conflict could occur when an individual perceives that the verbal message that is being delivered is not genuine or contradict the non-verbal behaviors.

Quantitative findings imply that there are correlations between teachers' verbal and non-verbal behaviors as well as students' achievement and good behavior and students' learning and motivation (Bambaeeroo & Shokrpour, 2017). In 1982, Hall and Sandler noted:

> [N]onverbal behaviors can signal inclusion or exclusion of group members; indicate interest and attention or the opposite; communicate expectations of student success or failure; and foster or impede students' confidence in their own abilities to learn specific tasks and procedures. (p. 6)

Over 35 years later, this statement continues to convey the importance of understanding non-verbal communication and adds credibility to the concept that if the non-verbal communication is perceived to be a hidden bias, then it could possibly have an adverse effect on a student's engagement within learning climates.

## Social Constructivism Framework

John Dewey (1916), perhaps one of the prominent educational scholars of the twentieth century, believed that education is not about telling but about doing. Dewey and many other social constructivists have researched, theorized, and practiced the concept that learning is constructed through social interaction and concluded that doing and knowing cannot be treated separately (Bandura, 1977, Beck & Kosnik, 2006; Bruner 1986; Burr, 2015; Vygotsky, 2012; Piaget, 2013). Social constructivism paradigm was chosen because of its epistemological assumptions about the nature of knowledge and how individuals within a specific social context can construct various realities.

Social constructivists acknowledge that learning processes occur internally in an individual; however, they consider it minuscule because the nature and content of learning processes are determined by social context, in which individuals understand and interpret their experiences in the world (Burr, 2015; Illeris, 2017). Perhaps one can conclude that vast interpretations of experiences beget multiple realities. Reality, as it relates to social constructivism, has multiple realities depending one's social and societal positions in the world (Jonassen, Myers, & McKillop, 1996). Multiple realties, based on culture and social facets, are perhaps among the most salient attributes of constructivists' paradigm (Kiraly, 2014).

## Researcher Reflection

As an African-American female graduate student in higher education, I have experienced or perceived that I had experienced some forms of microinequities within the classroom. Therefore, my knowledge of existing microinequities literature informed my preconceptions. At the inception of this qualitative investigation, I believed that (a) subtle forms of bias communication existed in the culture of higher education (b) adult learners interpreted their perceptions of microinequities in diverse ways, and (c) perceptions of microinequities could contribute to negative developmental, psychological, and social outcomes. I acknowledge that these perspectives likely influenced the methods that I used and my interpretation of the collected data. Considering my subjectivity as it relates to this research topic, I hope that my participation in this conversation will add a voice to understanding and combating microinequities in learning spaces.

## Research Design

To explore the concept of microinequities as they relate to students' learning

engagement, a qualitative approach was used to explore the experiences of five students

within an American institution of higher education. Bogdan and Biklen (2012) suggest that

a qualitative approach to research provides researchers with the opportunity to

understand ways in which people make sense of their lives. The authors also note that

qualitative researchers "seek to grasp the process by which people construct meaning and

to describe what those meanings are" (p. 48).

### Participants and Data Collection

Participants were recruited from the College of Education within the University of

PNY (pseudonym), a public university located in the Southeastern region of the United

States. The sample for this study consisted of five participants: Amy, Henry, Stacy, Luke,

and Nancy. The criteria for the study participants included (a) be 19 years of age or older,

(b) be an active student within the College of Education, and (c) demonstrate the

willingness and availability to participate.

### Data Collection and Analysis

In general, interviews are considered one of the most common research tools in

qualitative research that builds a holistic snapshot, analyzes words, and reports detailed

views of informants (Edward & Hollands, 2013). Spradley (2016) points out that

interviews are considered a series of friendly conversations. In order to set some

parameters for these friendly conversations, a semi-structured interview guide was used to

maximize flexibility during the interview process. Each participant voluntary participated

in a face-to-face audio-recorded interview session that lasted 45-70 minutes in length and

consisted of open-ended questions.

Prior to the beginning of the audio-recorded interview session, each participant was

provided an informed consent form that provided the study objectives, procedures,

duration, risks, benefits, confidentiality of records, contact information for any questions

regarding the research study. After the participants signed and consented to participate in

the research study, they were ensured of complete anonymity and confidentiality. In an

effort to provide anonymity and confidentiality, all identifying markers were removed from

the data collection and no information was quoted in a way that would lead to the

participants' identification. In an attempt to avoid inaccuracies or misrepresentations of

data, a face-to-face meeting was held with each participant to give him or her an

opportunity to member check his or her transcribed narrative.

After transcribing the interviews verbatim, I used a thematic analysis technique to

code, categorize, and theme patterns that were common to all participants (Guest,

MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). Initially, open coding was use to read and re-read participants'

words to generate codes of information. Open coding provided me the opportunity to

organize the data into "chunks" (Rossman & Rallis, 2016). Next, the codes were organized

into similar categories. Finally, the related categories were used to create themes, which

were used to provide descriptions of the students' experiences of microinequities and

coping strategies.

## Findings

Three major themes were identified using the thematic analysis process described

in the previous section: (1) feeling of disconnection, (2) surface learning, and (3) student-

teacher relationship. Each major theme is defined and explained in the following sections, along with quotes to demonstrate the meaning and significance of the findings.

**Feeling of Disconnection**

In this study, the feeling of disconnection is depicted as a way in which participants viewed their connection with both his or her instructor and learning process. A feeling of disconnection hinders a person's ability to actively engage in activities, such as those within a classroom. The inability to be actively engaged in activities is related to intrinsic motivation (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). These authors assert that when individuals are intrinsically motivated they explore and engage in academic activities. However, under certain conditions (e.g. the experiences of microinequities), the intrinsic motivation of active participation and engagement in an educational climate can be replaced with the experience of isolation and alienation (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

Henry described his feeling of disconnection as the lack of acknowledgment in the classroom. He expressed:

> I feel it's important that the teacher knows that person in his or her classroom, it shows care or concern that you're in their classroom. A person feels more obligated to learn if they feel 'okay, she's going to call on me, she's going to call my name.' If they show eye contact, know all of their students' names, call on all their students every once and awhile, it shows that possibly he cares, or she cares. It shows a relationship more so than we're just a number sitting over there…just another part of that furniture sitting in the classroom.

Henry continued to explain that his educator's verbal and non-verbal communication created an atmosphere that made him feel not only a disconnection but a sense of ambiguity. He stated:

> And you were always unsure about what this particular professor meant. The attitude in which she responded to me. It [attitude] made it very hard to pay attention or to listen and I was always wondering 'okay' is it me.

Scarlett (2015) states that students who feel a disconnection become isolated from

the learning process. The author continues to point out that the feeling of isolation

becomes a challenge because it inhibits many things (e.g., participation, collaboration,

motivation) that are salient for success in a learning setting, including active learning

engagement. The feeling of isolation can also create a less encouraging classroom climate

due to differential treatment (Scarlett, 2015; Schnellmann & Gibbons, 1984). Luke's feeling

of disconnection was related to his perceived experience of differential treatment. He

responded:

> She [the instructor] engaged more with a certain group in the class. She focused all
> her attention on them to the point to where it caused the rest of the class to
> disengage to a certain degree or to a lot of degree. People will disengage if they feel
> that their presence is not warranted. I have disengaged to a certain degree and
> when I did, it showed in my work.

Unfortunately, those students who experienced a sense of disconnection felt isolated and

alienated from the faculty, staff, institution, and peers (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Strayhorn,

2012). Disconnection can become problematic for students because it also encourages

disengagement and inhibits academic success.

The feeling of disconnection demonstrates the participants' desire to have a positive

interpersonal connection, specifically with the instructor. Literature implies that a positive

interpersonal connection builds a sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Kahu &

Nelson, 2018). The need for belonging is a basic human need (Kahu & Nelson, 2018;

Maslow, 1943; Strayhorn, 2012). Within an academic climate, the need of belonging is the

learner's connectedness to the institution, faculty and staff, as well as his or her peers

(Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Belonging, Strayhorn (2012) notes, is an

essential factor that contributes to what he describes as "*real consequences*" like academic success and student attrition (p. x; emphasis in original).

In 2017, the National Survey of Student Engagement conducted a study and revealed that students who participate in a classroom that practices inclusivity have a greater opportunity to (1) enhance their higher-order thinking, (2) engage in interactive learning, (3) and have positive perceptions of support (e.g., faculty, staff, peers). Empirical and theoretical studies give credibility to the ideologies that a sense of belonging within an inclusive learning environment increases academic self-efficacy, improves participation in the learning process, and increases intrinsic motivation (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2010).

## Surface Learning

The second theme to emerge from the study was surface learning. In this present research, participants perceived that the negative effects of bias communication of microinequities created surface learning, which is a superficial approach to learning that implies that a student memorizes facts and learns just enough to pass the course (Biggs, 2001; Everaert, Opdecam, & Maussen, 2017; Howie & Bagnall, 2013; Lucas, 2001). A surface learning approach is an attempt in which a student puts forth minimum effort to avoid academic failure, which often leads to lower academic performance. Furthermore, Everaert et al. (2017). conducted a study and concluded that there is a correlation between surface learning approach and negative academic performance. The study also revealed a relation between deep learning approach and positive academic performance.

Choosing the surface learning approach is not a learner's characteristic but a response to how a learner perceives the learning climate (Everaert et al., 2017; Lucas,

2001). Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005) add that some students engage in the surface

learning approach because of the social and situational context of the learning

environment. In this current study, Luke described his experiences of microinequities and

how these subtle biases impacted his perception of instructors and approach to learning.

Luke stated:

> I went to a private high school and I made good grades because teachers put in a lot of effort with their pupils at the time. Here at [University of PNY], the teachers do not value students' success. I started missing class. I felt like my presence was not missed. So, I would show up and just uh 'wing it.' I show up for just enough sessions to pass the class with, you know, with the bare minimal.

As previously mentioned, a student's perception of the learning environment (e.g.

social interaction, communication, sense of belonging) plays a significant role in his or her

approach to learning (DeLotell, Millam, & Reinhardt, 2010; Garrison & Cleveland-Innes,

2005; Lucas, 2001). In fact, DeLotell et al. (2010) imply that the educator is at the center of

the student's learning experience; therefore, the educator is in the position to foster a

positive or negative perception of the learning climate. An example of how an educator can

influence a student's perception is demonstrated through Nancy's learning experience. She

explained:

> Although I have an A in the class, her behavior and nonchalant attitude affects me because I still don't understand half of the things. So, I'm affected by the way she just brushes it off and I still have to get tutoring on the side. She is not going to stay after class and help with the material, sometimes she might but it depends on her…depending on what day it is.

Despite the lack of encouragement and support from the educator, Nancy

demonstrated a commitment to her academic success within the classroom by seeking

assistance for a tutor. In this instance, the student's perception of the learning environment

did not lower her academic performance but perhaps created a negative and unsupportive

relationship with the educator, which gives weight to prior research that implies learning is influenced by social interaction (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005; Illeris, 2017).

**Student-Teacher Relationship**

The thought that social and situational context of the learning environment influences certain aspects of learning encompasses the last theme: student-teacher relationship. In this present research, student-teacher relationship is defined "as the generalized interpersonal meaning students and teachers attach to their interactions with each other" (Wubbels et al., 2014, p. 364). Empirical and theoretical research indicate that the quality of teacher-student relationships has a major impact on learning acquisition and college completion (Hoffman, 2014), as well as engagement, student achievement, and student satisfaction (hook, 2003; Rowan & Grootenboer, 2017.) Scholars (e.g., hook; Rowan & Grootenboer) point out that the fundamental responsibilities of an educator are to create a learning climate that fosters mutual respect and to encourage the co-construction of knowledge between the student and the educator. In fact, a classroom should be "a place that is life-sustaining and mind-expanding, a place of liberating mutuality where teacher and student together work in partnership" (hook, 2003, p. xv).

Despite the implications of positive outcomes of these student-teacher relationships, negative student-teacher relationships have become more frequent in higher education, particularly when educators engage in harmful behaviors (Hoffman, 2014). When educators display microinequities within the learning space, a negative student-teacher relationship could ensue causing the student to become passive and less likely to actively participate in the learning process (Wentzel & Ramani, 2016). A negative

relationship can also cause the student to suffer psychological dilemmas, develop distrust,

and experience a loss of self-esteem (Sue et al., 2007).  In this current study, Amy candidly

spoke about her negative student-teacher relationship between her and her professor. She

indicated that her professor "*throws a lot of shade.*" "Throwing shade" is a colloquial

expression used to verbally insult or express contempt for someone (Huba & Kronberg,

2016). She explained:

> He "*throws a lot of shade.*" [and] you just don't want to be interactive with him. I
> don't feel comfortable asking him anything about the coursework because he laughs
> and makes jokes. He's joking around and laughing "girl gone on," "you'll get it" you
> know something like that. He's one of those, you just *write it down and just go head,*
> you know.

The social and situational contexts in which student-teacher interactions occur have

a noteworthy influence on the type of relationships that develops between the two parties

(Hoffman, 2014).  Hoffman (2014) suggests that negative relationships between students

and teachers, as demonstrated above, are detrimental to academic success because they

diminish self-esteem, cause disengagement from classroom activity, and contribute to the

failure of not finishing the course. Despite these disadvantageous effects of negative

interpersonal relationships, the vast literature on student-teacher connections shows that

positive interactions between students and teachers can increase student motivation and

academic success, as well as encourage college persistence (Hoffman, 2014; Rowan &

Grootenboer, 2017; Wubbels et al., 2014).

### Limitations

There are some limitations to this current study. The research inquiry focused

primarily on microinequities and its impacts on learning engagement in face-to-face

educational institutions. Due to this limitation, other learning spaces, such as workplace

and online learning, were excluded. The research also focused specifically on students

within the College of Education of an institution of higher learning in the United States.

Although the students' experiences in this current study cannot be generalized to other

Colleges of Education, their unique positions give a naturalistic generalization (Chenail,

2010; Stake, 2005).

## Discussion

This present study was designed to get a better understanding of the ways in which

bias communication could influence learning engagement in the classroom. A review of the

literature on microinequities found that the accumulation of these invalidations may create

a learning climate, where the student may feel "humiliation and social rejection" (Nadal,

2017, p. 681). In addition, a review of the literature indicates that microinequities could

impede a student's learning engagement in the classroom (Brennan, 2016), perception of

reality is constructed through an individual's positionality in their social context (Kiraly,

2014), and negative communication could have an adverse impact on the learner's feeling

of belonging, confidence, and achievement in the learning space (Bambaeeroo &

Shokrpour, 2017).

The purpose of this study was to qualitatively explore students' experiences of

microinequities to get a better understanding of the ways in which microinequities

influence learning engagement. This study revealed that (1) a feeling of disconnection, (2)

surface approach to learning, and (3) a negative student-to-teacher relationship are ways

in which microinequities influence learning engagement in higher education. These

findings also support the ideologies within the literature that the accumulation of

microinequities can create exclusion, impair performance in learning climates, increase the

feeling of discouragement, and perpetuate a sense of disrespect, insult, or slight (Brennan, 2016; Sandler & Hall, 1986).

Understanding microinequities and their impact on students' learning engagement showed that students used avoidance to cope with the experiences of microinequities. In this study, each participant used avoidance as a coping strategy. Scholars (e.g., Brennan, 2016; Hutchinson & Jenkins, 2013) point out that targets of microinequities do little when faced with the behaviors of microinequities because of the fear of retaliation, the lack of institutional support, and attributional ambiguity. With respect to the latter, Sue (2010) describes attributional ambiguity as a "motivational uncertainty in that the motives and meaning of a person's actions are unclear and hazy" (p. 17). The perceptions of microinequities make it hard to recognize or prove, especially when there are other reasonable explanations, which often leads the individual to dismiss the experience or self-blame (Chun & Evan, 2015; Rowe, 2008).

**Implications**

The minute nature of microinequities creates a challenge for educators who teach at institutions of higher learning (Nadal, 2017; Saporu & Herbers, 2015) because these behaviors are subtle, hard-to-prove, unintentional, and often have vague meanings. So, the question is how do educators and academic institutions move forward in order to minimize microinequities while creating more inclusive, supportive, and democratic learning climates that support academic success? The following sections highlight participating in direct communication, implementing organization policies and procedures, and attending/conducting civility training and workshops, and building student-teacher

relationships as pragmatic strategies to create safer, more democratic, and inclusive

learning environments.

**Direct Communication**

Direct communication is perhaps the most effective way to address microinequities

in the classroom (Rowe, 2008; Sue et al., 2007; Nadal, 2017). Sue et al. mention, make the

invisible visible and provide opportunity for educators to create a safe environment where

all learners can feel safe without having the fear of being excluded from the learning

process. To raise awareness about microinequities, faculty can communicate appropriate

social and interpersonal behavioral expectations during face-to-face conversations as well

as in their syllabus (Morrissette, 2001). To further reduce microinequities within the

academy, the institution can raise awareness of microinequities by developing and

executing a campus civility statement and civility initiatives (Freedman & Vreven, 2017).

**Implementation of class-level or organization policy/procedures**

It is salient that institutions of higher learning develop or revise programs and

policies to reduce and ultimately eliminate uncivil behaviors, such as microinequities (Reio

& Ghosh, 2009). The authors recommend that the development and implementation of

class-level and organization-level policies state and outline a clear and precise protocol for

confidential reporting of uncivil behaviors, and perhaps establish mild to severe penalties

for the perpetrators.

**Civility Training**

Another strategy to raise awareness of uncivil behaviors, such as microinequities,

on American college and universities campuses is civility training. To be effective, civility

training should address defining civility and why it is important (Freedman & Vreven,

2017). The authors add that civility training should also address politeness, diversity awareness, and cultural sensitivity (Wright & Hill, 2015). Wright and Hill conclude that civility training reinforces organizational policies on uncivil behaviors in academic classrooms and its consequences for faculty, students, and administrators.

**Building Student-Teacher Relationship**

In this current study, students' experiences demonstrate how bias communication, verbal and non-verbal, affects interpersonal interactions and the learner's engagement. Research indicates that acts of microinequities (e.g., ridicule, exclusion) exhibited by educators toward certain students can lead to a feeling of incompetence, a decrease in intrinsic motivation (Brennan, 2016; Nadal, 2017), and feeling of disconnection (Strayhorn, 2012). Perhaps one way of enhancing the student's academic success is fostering student connectedness through building a positive student-teacher relationship. In 2017, Brown and Starrett conducted an empirical study on students' perception of connectedness and its impact of their academic success. The study revealed three reasons why connectedness is salient to academic performance: (1) increases motivation, (2) improves retention, and (3) fosters self-efficacy.  Most importantly, the results revealed that 94% of students perceived that connectedness or a sense of belonging improved their educational performance.

## Conclusion

Microinequities are small, subtle, unintentional, and hard-to-prove insults or slights (Rowe, 2008) with devastating implications for a student's learning engagement and academic success in American higher education, including feeling of disconnected, participating in surface learning, and dealing with negative student-teacher relationships. Learning to effectively communicate with students, implementing class-level civility

policies, attending civility training, and developing positive student-teacher relationships

will help educators to promote a civility culture that is inclusive, supportive, and

democratic for all learners.

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