

# The frequency and psychological effects of name mispronunciation in an independent school

Divya Gordon<sup>1</sup>, Emily Adams<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Upper School Science, The Walker School, Marietta, Georgia

## SUMMARY

Names are a critical part of human identity. In our study, we wanted to observe the occurrence and psychological impact of microaggressions and name mispronunciation on high school student psychological well-being. Limited research in the area of microaggressions has demonstrated racial associations with name mispronunciation, and negative psychological effects of microaggressions in medical school and university level environments. We hypothesized that a minority of students would be unfamiliar with the term microaggression and more than 50% of students would have experienced a microaggression since the beginning of their first year of high school. We also hypothesized that non-white students would be more likely to experience racial and ethnic microaggressions, including having their names mispronounced. To test our hypothesis, we employed an electronic survey to assess the knowledge of microaggressions, frequency of microaggressions and name mispronunciation, and emotional response to microaggressions and name mispronunciation in high school students and faculty. Our results showed that non-white students were 2.55 times more likely to experience racial or ethnic microaggressions compared to white students. Students experiencing microaggressions most commonly reported feelings of exhaustion, embarrassment, and loss of sense of belonging. Future research with a larger sample size and greater representation among racial groups would be beneficial and would likely yield more statistically significant results. Our study can guide educational components for community members to increase awareness of the negative psychological effects of microaggressions and name mispronunciation.

## INTRODUCTION

Microaggressions can be defined as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional” (1). There is little to no research on the frequency and psychological effects of microaggressions in a secondary school environment, especially regarding the impact on general well-being when individuals feel marginalized. Research performed in a medical school environment suggested that underrepresented racial minority students were significantly more likely to report that microaggressions have contributed to feelings of burnout, which negatively affected their learning

(2). Most significantly, over one-third of medical school students reported that frequent microaggressions made them question their ability to become successful physicians or even made them question their decision to enter medical school (2). Additionally, medical school research also found that women were the most likely demographic to experience microaggressions in a medical school environment with 73% of females having experienced any kind of microaggression overall (3). Furthermore, research performed at a predominantly white college suggested that 86.5% of students reported being negatively affected by microaggressions in the classroom, 65% of students experiencing microaggressions reported negative academic outcomes, and 73% of students reported negative psychological impacts (4). Overall, students of color were found to be more negatively impacted than white students (4).

Our study was designed to observe students’ and teachers’ understanding of microaggressions, frequency of microaggressions, and psychological effects of microaggressions, with a special focus on the psychological effects of name mispronunciation in an independent high school environment. Our credence of name mispronunciation as a microaggression comes from a study conducted by Kohli, et al. which suggested that the racial implications of mispronouncing student’s names in educational settings is often downplayed within the broader context of historical and present-day racism (5).

We hypothesized that a minority of students would be unfamiliar with the term microaggression and that more than 50% of students would have experienced a microaggression since the beginning of their first year of high school. We also hypothesized that non-white students would be more likely to experience racial and ethnic microaggressions, including having their names mispronounced. Our study found that non-white students were 2.55 times more likely to experience racial or ethnic microaggressions compared to white students. Students experiencing microaggressions most commonly reported feelings of exhaustion, embarrassment, and loss of sense of belonging. In the future, we hope to use this research and perform further research to determine ways to better support students who are subject to frequent microaggressions, determine ways to mitigate the frequency of microaggressions in the learning environment, and provide educational strategies or interventions to teachers on ways they can have respectful and open discussions on microaggressions.

## RESULTS

To examine student experiences among 9th through 12th graders, we distributed a survey to all 339 high school students at a single suburban independent high school in

Race	Number of Respondents	Percent Respondents
Asian	7	25.9%
Black or African American	3	11.1%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	1	3.7%
American Indian or Alaska Native	0	0%
White	13	48.2%
Multi-racial	3	11.1%

**Table 1: Percent student survey respondents by race.** Table showing number of respondents by race and percent respondents by race.

the southeastern United States. Out of the 339 students, a total of 27 students completed the student survey: 13 white and 14 non-white students. Among the non-white students, seven identified as Asian, two identified as Black or African American, one identified as Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and three identified as multi-racial (**Table 1**). The majority of respondents identified as female, with eight students identifying as male and one student identifying as non-binary (**Table 2**). Ten respondents were freshmen, four respondents were sophomores, three respondents were juniors, and ten respondents were seniors (**Table 3**).

Of the students surveyed, 22 (81.5%) reported being familiar with racial and ethnic microaggressions. Out of the students who reported familiarity, 21 (95.0%) were able to correctly define the term in a free-response question based on the definition provided by the Merriam-Webster dictionary: “a comment or action that subtly and often unconsciously or unintentionally expresses a prejudiced attitude toward a member of a marginalized group (such as a racial minority)” (6). Based on the data collected, 15 (55.5%) reported experiencing a racial or ethnic microaggression during their high school experience. Of those students who have experienced racial or ethnic microaggressions, 13 (86.7%) reported some sort of negative psychological response (**Table 4**).

The risk ratio (RR) for the correlation between familiarity with microaggressions and being non-white was 1.34 (95% CI: 0.91-1.98). However, the 95% confidence interval includes 1.00, so the RR is not statistically significant. Non-white students were also 2.55 times as likely to experience racial or ethnic microaggressions as compared to white students (RR 2.55, 95% CI: 1.09-6.04) and 1.39 times as likely to report experiencing microaggressions sometimes, often, or always based on the Likert scale, which allows respondents to evaluate how much they agree or disagree with a particular statement (RR 1.39, 95% CI: 0.07-29.26). Additionally, non-white students were 2.79 times more likely to be unwillingly

Gender	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Male	8	29.6%
Female	18	66.7%
Non-binary	1	3.7%

**Table 2: Percent student survey responses by gender.** Table showing number of respondents by gender and percent respondents by gender.

given a nickname due to their racial or ethnic background compared to white students (RR 2.79, 95% CI: 0.33-23.52). Because both RRs have such wide confidence intervals skewed well over one, we speculate a larger sample size would strengthen our conclusion by clarifying the results. There was a trend towards non-white students being more likely to have their names mispronounced by their teachers (RR: 1.71, 95% CI: 0.38-7.78), and a trend towards students having their names mispronounced by their peers (RR of 2.57 95% CI: 0.31-21.59). However, neither result was statistically significant. Furthermore, there was some indication that non-white students were more likely to wish they had a different name (RR: 2.57, 95% CI: 0.31-21.59), but this result also lacked statistical significance.

Additionally, a different survey was distributed to high school faculty members, which we designed to understand potential faculty roles in student’s experiences with microaggressions and name mispronunciation in the classroom. A total of 23 faculty members responded to the faculty survey, all of them identifying as white. Of the 23 faculty members, 22 (95.7%) reported being familiar with the term microaggressions. Additionally, 8 (34.8%) reported experiencing some kind of racial or ethnic microaggression during their time in the high school; 19 (82.6%) reported having seen racial or ethnic microaggressions directed at high school students; and 20 (86.4%) faculty members reported having either intentionally or unintentionally carried out a microaggression at some point in time.

Additionally, faculty were asked to respond to free-response questions in the survey. Teachers were asked to share any specific tools/methods used to ensure they correctly pronounce their students’ names. The majority of teachers reported that the primary method they use to ensure they pronounce students’ names correctly is simply asking the student if they pronounced their names correctly, writing down a phonetic spelling, and apologizing when they make a mistake. One faculty member, however, noted that because their name is commonly mispronounced, it “has had an impact on how [they] approach pronouncing others’ names.” Thus, instead of trying to pronounce students’ names first in their classroom, this faculty member instead asks all students to go around and say their names how they would like to be referred to on the first day of class.

## DISCUSSION

Our study examined understanding of microaggressions, the frequency of microaggressions, and psychological effects of microaggressions, with a specific focus on the psychological

Grade level	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Freshman	10	37.0%
Sophomore	4	14.9%
Junior	3	11.1%
Senior	10	37.0%

**Table 3: Percent student survey responses by gender.** Table showing number of respondents by gender and percent respondents by gender.

effects of name mispronunciation in a southeastern suburban independent high school environment. We chose this topic due to the current lack of research on microaggressions and name mispronunciation in a secondary school environment, especially in regard to the impact on general well-being when individuals feel marginalized. Our hypothesis posited that the majority of students would be familiar with the term “microaggression.” Furthermore, we hypothesized that students of non-white backgrounds would exhibit a higher likelihood of experiencing racial and ethnic microaggressions, including name mispronunciation.

To observe this relationship, we created two surveys, one for high school students and one for high school faculty members. Our hypothesis was supported by the fact that 95% of students were able to correctly define microaggressions in the student survey, and our statistically significant result that non-white students were more likely to experience racial or ethnic microaggressions.

Although there has been little to no research on the psychological effects or frequency of microaggressions in a high school environment, prior research in a medical school environment showed that underrepresented minority students were significantly more likely to report microaggressions to have contributed to feelings of burnout and that it negatively affected their learning (1). Our study saw similar results as non-white students were 2.55 times more likely to experience microaggressions compared to non-white students, which can lead to devastating psychological effects (Table 4), and potentially affect academic performance and social well-being.

Prior research also showed a connection between the psychological effects of microaggressions and name mispronunciation. A study conducted by Kohli, et al. suggested that the racial undertones of mispronouncing names in schools can be compared to the racial undertones present in racial and ethnic microaggressions (5).

Our study also explored the occurrence of name mispronunciation by students’ peers versus their teachers. Our study found that non-white students were more likely to have their names mispronounced by their peers and more likely to have their names mispronounced by their teachers. This comes despite the fact that all teachers reported always or almost always making an effort to pronounce their students’ names correctly. We speculated that the cause of continued mispronunciation is either that teachers are unaware that they are mispronouncing their students’ names or students are not speaking up when their names are mispronounced. In one student’s survey response, the student noted that although their name was mispronounced, it is “really close to the actual pronunciation” and “most people do not know that they are

mispronouncing my name in the first place.”

Participation in our study was voluntary, and as a result, the sample size was small, with only 27 responses to the student survey. The results of this study relied heavily on the comparison of experiences among racial groups, which was limited due to the small sample size, lack of representation among some racial groups, and entirely no representation among students who identify as American Indian or Alaskan Native. The small sample size makes it only possible to draw preliminary conclusions. With a larger sample size, more students from different racial groups and more representation for several racial groups, we speculate that several results may become statistically significant and could be generalized to the population of the entire school.

Furthermore, because hundreds of students received an email about the study but only 27 responded, the selection bias likely formed a group of students who may have had outstanding experiences with microaggressions and name mispronunciation or who were more likely to be familiar with microaggressions. In addition, among the 23 faculty members that responded to the faculty survey, there were no identified racial differences which limited our ability to make comparisons between white and non-white faculty members. Further research should be performed in this area with larger sample sizes that include representation of all racial groups.

Further research would also benefit from the analysis of the role of intersectionality in the experience of microaggressions, especially in relation to gender. All students deserve the right to feel included in a classroom environment, and a better understanding of this area will help determine strategies to curb marginalization and social isolation of different groups of students. Based on this research, students and faculty may benefit from education in this area so that 100% of students are aware of what microaggressions are instead of just 81.5%. Sharing the various psychological effects of microaggressions and name mispronunciation with students and faculty can increase understanding for the impacts felt by several community members and help students and faculty understand the impact mispronouncing a student’s name can have on their self-perception.

Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage among students experiencing microaggressions
Anxiety	4	26.7%
Embarrassment	7	46.7%
Emotional withdrawal	2	13.3%
Exhaustion	6	40.0%
Indifference	5	33.3%
Loss of sense of belonging	7	46.7%
Marginalization	2	13.3%
Social isolation	3	20.0%
None of the above	2	13.3%

**Table 4: Student survey respondents’ psychological response to microaggressions.** Table showing the different survey options for psychological response to microaggressions, number of students reporting each response, and percentage among students experiencing microaggressions who reported each response.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Our research was conducted at The Walker School between August 2022 and December 2022. Our study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at The Walker School. Participation was voluntary and parents were given the opportunity to opt their students out of the study. Two different surveys with embedded informed consent statements, one for students (**Appendix A**) and one for faculty (**Appendix B**), were made using Google Forms. Both the student survey and faculty survey were sent via email to all high school students and faculty in a single correspondence.

Prior to survey completion, all students were required to review an informed consent statement. The survey collected quantitative and qualitative information about student demographics, their understanding of microaggressions, experience with microaggressions, and their names (**Appendix A**). Additionally, the separate survey sent to faculty surveyed their understanding of microaggressions, experience with microaggressions, and experience pronouncing their students' names (**Appendix B**). After the data was collected, participant responses were blinded by the research supervisor and all identities remained confidential. To assess statistical relationships, frequencies and risk ratios were calculated. Data collected from faculty members was analyzed using frequencies in Google Sheets. Frequencies were chosen for the faculty data due to the lack of racial diversity, which made it impossible to perform comparison among racial groups. Student data was analyzed by calculating RRs in the app OpenEpi 3.01 and student data was separated into two groups: non-white and white.

RRs are a way of quantifying the relationship between an exposure and an outcome. If the RR is greater than one, those with the exposure are more likely to experience the outcome than those without the exposure. If the risk ratio is less than one, those with the exposure are less likely to experience the outcome than those without the exposure. We calculated RRs on a 95% confidence interval using the equation:  $RR = [A/(A+B)]/[C/(C+D)]$ . The software OpenEpi 3.01 was used to calculate RRs in our study (7).

**Received:** March 10, 2023

**Accepted:** August 3, 2023

**Published:** February 19, 2024

## REFERENCES

1. Sue, Derald Wing, et al. "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice." *American Psychologist*, vol. 62, no. 4, 2007, pp. 271–286, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066x.62.4.271>.
2. Chisholm, Leah P., et al. "Evaluation of Racial Microaggressions Experienced during Medical School Training and the Effect on Medical Student Education and Burnout: A Validation Study." *Journal of the National Medical Association*, vol. 113, no. 3, 2021, pp. 310–314, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jnma.2020.11.009>.
3. Espaillat, Andre, et al. "An Exploratory Study on Microaggressions in Medical School: What Are They and Why Should We Care?" *Perspectives on Medical Education*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2019, pp. 143–151, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40037-019-0516-3>.
4. Cardoza, M, et al. "He didn't really say that, right?": The Impacts of Racial Microaggressions in Learning

Environments. St. Olaf College. [wp.stolaf.edu/sociology/files/2019/03/Microaggressions-Impacts-on-Students-Final-Paper.pdf](http://wp.stolaf.edu/sociology/files/2019/03/Microaggressions-Impacts-on-Students-Final-Paper.pdf).

5. Kohli, Rita, and Daniel G. Solórzano. "Teachers, Please Learn Our Names!: Racial Microaggressions and the K-12 Classroom." *Race Ethnicity and Education*, vol. 15, no. 4, 2012, pp. 441–462, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2012.674026>.
6. "Microaggression Definition & Meaning." Merriam-Webster, Merriam-Webster, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/microaggression](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/microaggression).
7. Dean, Andrew G, et al. OpenEpi, [www.openepi.com/Menu/OE\\_Menu.htm](http://www.openepi.com/Menu/OE_Menu.htm).

**Copyright:** © 2024 Gordon and Adams. All JEI articles are distributed under the attribution non-commercial, no derivative license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>). This means that anyone is free to share, copy and distribute an unaltered article for non-commercial purposes provided the original author and source is credited.



## Appendices

### *Appendix A - Student survey and informed consent*

Informed Consent: This is a study being conducted by Divya Gordon from The Walker School. This study is designed to analyze the frequency and experiences of name mispronunciation and other microaggressions in independent high school students. Participants are limited to Walker high school students and faculty, and by completing the survey, each participant acknowledges they have read the statement on informed consent and give their consent. The researcher supervisor - Mrs. Adams - will have sole access to responses until all potentially personally identifiable information has been removed. At that time, the participant's demographic information and responses will remain confidential and only be seen by the researchers for data analysis. The data will be used only for academic purposes.

The respondent should complete the survey to the best of their ability. There are no anticipated personal risks or benefits for participants in this study. Respondents who indicate willingness to participate in a 15-minute follow-up interview at the end of the survey acknowledge that by providing their email address at the end of the survey, they are also providing identifying information and their responses to the interview questions will not be anonymous to the researcher. However, it will remain confidential. Any interview data used in the final study will be aggregated and not individualized. Participation in any part of the study is voluntary, and all participants are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

The following questions ask about your demographic information.

1. What is your gender identity?
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Gender Non-Binary
  - d. Prefer not to answer
  - e. Other
2. What grade are you in?
  - a. Freshman
  - b. Sophomore
  - c. Junior
  - d. Senior
3. Race (Select all that apply)

- a. American Indian or Alaska Native
  - b. Asian
  - c. Black or African American
  - d. Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
  - e. White
4. Are you hispanic or latino?
- a. Yes
  - b. No

The following questions ask about microaggressions.

5. Are you familiar with the term microaggression?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
6. If you are familiar with the term, How do you define it?

The following questions ask about microaggressions.

7. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a microaggression as "a comment or action that subtly and often unconsciously or unintentionally expresses a prejudiced attitude toward a member of a marginalized group (such as a racial minority)." Based on the definition of microaggressions above, have you ever witnessed racial/ethnic microaggressions directed towards others during your time in the Walker Upper School?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
8. Based on the definition of microaggressions above, have you ever had a racial/ethnic microaggression directed towards you during your time in the Upper School at Walker?
- a. Yes
  - b. No

If you responded "No" to the previous question, you may skip the following questions in this section and move on to the next section.

9. How frequently are racial/ethnic microaggressions directed towards you?  
1 (never), 2 (rarely), 3 (sometimes), 4 (often), 5 (always)
10. If you have experienced a racial/ethnic microaggression(s), please indicate if any of the feelings below applied to your response(s) (select all that apply).
- a. Anxiety
  - b. Embarrassment
  - c. Emotional withdrawal

- d. Exhaustion
  - e. Indifference
  - f. Loss of sense of belonging
  - g. Marginalization
  - h. Social isolation
  - i. None of the above
  - j. Other:
11. My preferred name is not my given first name.
- a. True
  - b. False
12. Have you ever been unwillingly given a nickname because of your name's ancestry or ethnic origin?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
13. My name is mispronounced by my teachers.
- 1 (never), 2 (rarely), 3 (sometimes), 4 (often), 5 (always)
14. My teachers make an effort to pronounce my name.
- 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (neutral), 4 (agree), 5 (strongly agree)
15. My name is mispronounced by my peers.
- 1 (never), 2 (rarely), 3 (sometimes), 4 (often), 5 (always)
16. My peers make an effort to correctly pronounce my name.
- 1 (never), 2 (rarely), 3 (sometimes), 4 (often), 5 (always)
17. I wish I had a different name.
- 1 (never), 2 (rarely), 3 (sometimes), 4 (often), 5 (always)
18. Do you have any thoughts or concerns you'd like to share with the researcher?
19. If you would be willing to complete a 15 minute follow up interview, please leave your email address below.

*Appendix B - Faculty survey and informed consent*

Informed consent: This is a study being conducted by Divya Gordon from The Walker School. This study is designed to analyze the frequency and experiences of name mispronunciation and other microaggressions in independent high school students. Participants are limited to Walker high school students and faculty, and by completing the survey, each participant acknowledges they have read the statement on informed consent and give their consent. The researcher supervisor - Mrs. Adams - will have sole access to responses until all potentially personally identifiable information has been removed. At that time, the participant's demographic information and responses will remain confidential and only be seen by the researchers for data analysis. The data will be used only for academic purposes.

The respondent should complete the survey to the best of their ability. There are no anticipated personal risks or benefits for participants in this study. Respondents who indicate willingness to participate in a 15-minute follow-up interview at the end of the survey acknowledge that by providing their email address at the end of the survey, they are also providing identifying information and their responses to the interview questions will not be anonymous to the researcher. However, it will remain confidential. Any interview data used in the final study will be aggregated and not individualized. Participation in any part of the study is voluntary, and all participants are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

The following questions ask about your demographic information.

1. What is your gender identity?
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Gender Non-Binary
  - d. Prefer not to answer
  - e. Other
2. Race (Select all that apply)
  - a. American Indian or Alaska Native
  - b. Asian
  - c. Black or African American
  - d. Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
  - e. White
3. Are you hispanic or latino?



- a. Yes
- b. No

The following questions ask about microaggressions.

1. Are you familiar with the term microaggression?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
2. If you are familiar with the term, how do you define it?
3. Based on the definition of microaggressions above, have you ever had a racial/ethnic microaggression directed towards you during your time in the Walker Upper School?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
4. Based on the definition of microaggressions above, have you ever witnessed racial/ethnic microaggressions directed toward students during your time at Walker?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
5. If you have experienced a racial/ethnic microaggression(s), please indicate if any of the feelings below applied to your response(s) (select all that apply).
  - a. Anxiety
  - b. Embarrassment
  - c. Emotional withdrawal
  - d. Exhaustion
  - e. Indifference
  - f. Loss of sense of belonging
  - g. Marginalization
  - h. Social isolation
  - i. None of the above
  - j. Other:
6. Have you ever carried out, intentionally or unintentionally, a racial/ethnic microaggression?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
7. I make an effort to correctly pronounce all of my students' names.  
1 (never), 2 (rarely), 3 (sometimes), 4 (often), 5 (always)

8. If there are specific tools/methods you use to ensure you correctly pronounce students' names, please describe them below.
9. Do you have any thoughts or concerns you'd like to share with the researcher?