The Black Card: The Effectiveness of Content Warnings for Undergraduate Black Students

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Background

- The research on content warnings (CWs) aka trigger warnings and racial violence is very limited
- CWs are a very contentious topic within academia
- Not much prior academic research about content warnings and racial violence

Purpose

I sought to understand whether Black undergraduate students find CWs helpful in preparing them for depictions of racial violence in their classes.

Hypothesis

My hypothesis was that Black students would find content warnings effective and would want to see more of them implemented in their classes.
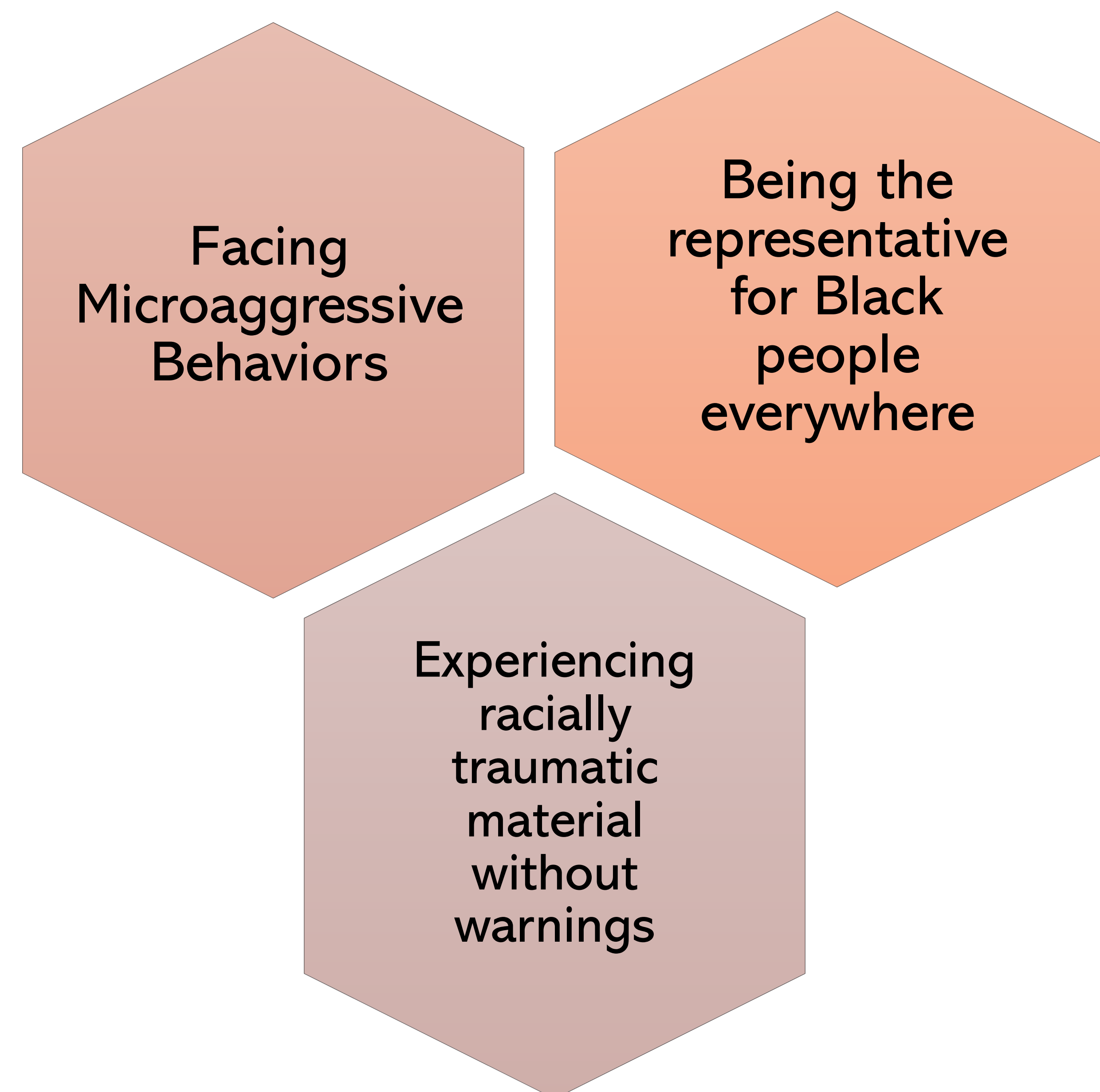
Methodology

Participants: 22 Undergraduate Black students from seven different universities and colleges.
Method: 30-50-minute semi-structured in-depth interviews with participants.
Coding: I coded inductively for students' specific encounters with CWs (or the lack thereof) and their overall classroom experience.

Analysis/Coding

What does the Black undergraduate experience look like in college classrooms?

Facing Microaggressive Behaviors

Being the representative for Black people everywhere

Experiencing racially traumatic material without warnings

Source: P. (2018, May 21). [Digital image]. Retrieved October 10, 2020, from https://nationalcenter.org/project21/2018/05/21/better-deal-for-black-college-students-make-schools-meet-minimum-graduation-rates-stop-tuition-inflation-and-end-campus-segregation/

References for Oral Presentation: "On Trigger Warnings | AAUP," August 2014. https://www.aaup.org/report/trigger-warnings.

Findings

A majority of the participants:
- believed that the content in their classes *did* impact them differently based on their race
- **59%** viewed content warnings *not* as a point of censorship, but as a way to offer and display compassion and empathy
- **73%** wanted to see more content warnings within their classes

Participants also highlighted and emphasized
- The importance of learning about the traumatic material and the desire to learn it (54%)
- The importance of meaningful discussions about the systems of oppression that may contribute to that trauma (36%)

What does a good content warning look like, according to Black students?

A good content warning:
1. Is **specific**: instead of having general "violent/graphic content" warnings, specifying the type of content (racial, sexual, physical, etc.)
2. **Explicitly states** that students have the option to opt-out and gives students the agency to decide

Conclusions

The findings of this project have major implications for our current understanding and use of CWs. Centering Black students in this discussion provides us with meaningful insight into their classroom experiences and could be one of the first steps towards centering Black voices on college campuses.