

City University of New York (CUNY)

## CUNY Academic Works

---

Publications and Research

John Jay College of Criminal Justice

---

2014

### The adverse impact of racial microaggressions on college students' self-esteem

Kevin L. Nadal  
*CUNY John Jay College*

Yinglee Wong  
*CUNY John Jay College*

Katie E. Griffin  
*CUNY John Jay College*

Kristin Davidoff  
*CUNY John Jay College*

Julie Sriken  
*CUNY John Jay College*

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/jj\\_pubs/199](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/jj_pubs/199)

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

---

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).  
Contact: [AcademicWorks@cuny.edu](mailto:AcademicWorks@cuny.edu)

# The Adverse Impact of Racial Microaggressions on College Students' Self-Esteem

Kevin L. Nadal   Yinglee Wong   Katie E. Griffin   Kristin Davidoff   Julie Sriken

*Racial microaggressions are subtle (often unintentional or unconscious) forms of racial discrimination that negatively affect victims' mental health. Utilizing an undergraduate student sample (N = 225), the current study examined the relationship between racial microaggressions and self-esteem. Results indicate that racial microaggressions negatively predict a lower self-esteem, and that microaggressions that occur in educational and workplace environments are particularly harmful to self-esteem. Finally, findings reveal that individuals of various racial and ethnic minority groups experience racial microaggressions differently. Implications for student development and recommendations for further research involving racial microaggressions and college students are discussed.*

Since the civil rights movement, there has been a push for equality and the end of racial discrimination in the United States. While many forms of racial discrimination (e.g., hate crimes, segregation, employment inequities) have been outlawed at the federal, state, and local levels (Foster, 2005), many researchers have noted that the legacy of overt discrimination is now found in subtle prejudiced behaviors (Foster, 2005; Nadal, 2011; Sue, 2010; Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007). Unlike overt discrimination, there is no legal recourse for victims of subtle discrimination (De Jesus-Torres, 2000; Foster, 2005), making it challenging for members of society to

recognize the possibility of victimization and injury to those who experience it (DeJesus-Torres, 2000; Foster, 2005; Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007). In recent years, there has been a growing amount of literature focusing on the negative impacts of this type of covert discrimination, otherwise known as "microaggressions." Racial microaggressions are "subtle statements and behaviors that unconsciously communicate denigrating messages to people of color" (Nadal, 2011, p. 470). The term was originally conceived as "subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are 'put downs'" (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Willis, 1978, p. 66), initially describing covert racial discrimination only toward African Americans. Over the past several years, microaggression research has been extended to include other target groups, including other people of color, women, persons with disabilities, ethnic and religious minority groups, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals (see Nadal, 2011, for a review).

Sue, Capodilupo, and colleagues (2007) identified three forms of microaggressions: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. A microassault is most similar to overt racial discrimination and consists of targeting a person of known or assumed racial differences with derogatory verbal or nonverbal behaviors such as name-calling, avoidant behavior, and purposeful discriminatory

---

*Kevin L. Nadal is Associate Professor of Psychology; Yinglee Wong and Katie E. Griffin are graduates of the Master's program in Forensic Psychology; Kristin Davidoff is a doctoral student in Clinical Psychology; and Julie Sriken is a Master's student in Forensic Psychology; each at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York.*

actions (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007). An example of a microassault includes the controversy in 2007 in which radio host Don Imus referred to the Rutgers University women's basketball team as "nappy-headed hoes." While he claims he was intending to be comical, he was conscious of the words that he chose. African Americans (and others) who heard his "joke" responded with an array of emotions including frustration, sadness, anger, and resentment. Thus, while his intention may not have been to appear racist, his actions clearly offended and hurt many people. Microinsults are exchanges that communicate an insensitive disregard for a person's racial heritage or identity (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007). For instance, telling an Asian American college student that "all Asians are good at math and sciences" would be an example of a microinsult. While this is seemingly a compliment, the underlying message is that all Asian American people are "model minorities" and do not have unique individual identities or experiences. Microinvalidations are interactions that "negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color" (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007). One instance may include a student rolling her or his eyes at a Latina classmate who criticizes the scarcity of Latino studies courses at their college. While the person may not be aware of her or his actions, a message that is communicated is that the Latina student is "complaining too much" or is preoccupied with racial issues.

There has been an array of qualitative research that has described the ways that racial microaggressions affect the lives of various people of color. Previous literature on Asian Americans (Nadal, Escobar, Prado, David, & Haynes, 2012; Sue, Bucceri, et al., 2007), Latinas/os (Nadal, Mazzula, Rivera, & Fujii-Doe, 2014; Rivera, Forquer, & Rangel, 2010), African Americans (Sue et al., 2008;

Watkins, LaBarrie, & Appio, 2010), and Multiracial people (Nadal, Wong, et al., 2011) have all described the emotional turmoil that people of color experience when they encounter microaggressions, as well as the negative impacts such incidents have on their mental health, psychological well-beings, and self-esteem. Studies involving women (e.g., Capodilupo et al., 2010) and LGBT people (e.g., Nadal, Issa, et al., 2011) have found similar consequences of microaggressions with other marginalized groups.

### Microaggressions and College Students

Microaggression studies focusing specifically on college students suggest that racial microaggressions do indeed occur on college campuses, resulting in students of color to feel distressed, which may in turn have an impact on their academic performance and mental health (McCabe, 2009; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009; Torres, Driscoll, & Burrow, 2010). One study involving African American college students found that participants encountered a range of microaggressions in classroom settings and in other campus settings by White peers, faculty members, administration, and staff (Watkins et al., 2010). Another study reported that Latina/o college students experienced an array of racial microaggressions in the forms of interpersonal microaggressions, institutional microaggressions, and racial jokes (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009). Some authors describe microaggressions experienced by international students attending U.S. institutions, which can be especially isolating for individuals who are away from their families and other support systems (Kim & Kim, 2010). One qualitative study involving African American male college students found that racial microaggressions and racist stereotypes

negatively influenced one's sense of self and perception of campus life at predominantly White institutions (Harper et al., 2011), while one quantitative study revealed that African American male college students experienced significantly high mundane, extreme, and environmental distress when they were victims of racial microaggressions (Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011). Finally, some authors describe how racially themed parties can be especially microaggressive, leading to an unsafe and harmful campus environment for students of color (Garcia, Johnston, & Garibay, 2011).

Franklin, Boyd-Franklin, and Kelly (2006) discuss how victims of microaggressions express a sense of being invisible—they may feel their unique characteristics and identities are not truly acknowledged when they are seen only as fitting preconceived stereotypes or as being extraordinary exceptions to stereotypes. Experiencing invisibility and feeling invalidated may have deleterious effects on self-esteem (Franklin et al., 2006). Furthermore, according to concept of the “looking glass self” (Cooley, 1902), the development of a person's self-concept is not merely an individual process, but it is also a social process where a person internalizes a self-concept that reflects the view that important others have of the person (Yeung & Martin, 2003). Thus, if a person perceives that others may view her or him as an inferior, a criminal, a perpetual foreigner, or any other stereotype, it is possible that she or he may internalize these impressions, which may then negatively influence her or his sense of self. This concept has often been referred to as stereotype threat or “a situational threat—a threat in the air—that, in general form, can affect the members of any group about whom a negative stereotype exist” (Steele, 1997, p. 614). For example, when African American male college students are negatively stereotyped as intellectually inferior or criminally deviant, they may feel a sense

of isolation on their college campuses, which may then negatively influence their ability to perform well academically (Smith et al., 2011).

### **Self-Esteem, People of Color, and College Students**

Self-esteem has been the focus of many inquiries over the past few decades, subsequently generating a significant amount of interest in many fields of research. It has been proposed that self-esteem may act through certain biological pathways to mediate the impact of stress on the development of disease (O'Donnell, Brydon, Wright, & Steptoe, 2008). If this is indeed true, then perhaps self-esteem (or lack thereof) may have an impact on the development or maintenance of mental illness. The belief that the self is worthy, competent, and capable may foster a positive internal sense of self, which in turn may augment the individual's ability to overcome difficult life events and stressors. For instance, one study found self-esteem to be a protective factor against suicide risk behaviors (Sharaf, Thompson, & Walsh, 2009). Meanwhile, higher levels of self-esteem were associated with lower levels of hopelessness and suicidal ideation, suggesting that the protective nature of self-esteem may act as a buffer against negative psychological experiences in more than one way (Chioqueta & Stiles, 2007).

While people of all backgrounds may be prone to develop a lower self-esteem, people from less privileged social statuses (e.g., people of color, women, LGBT people, etc.) are often the victims of discrimination, which may result in elevated levels of psychological stress (Aneshensel, 2009; Meyer, 2003). For people of color specifically, many studies have found that there is an inverse relationship between discrimination and self-esteem, indicating that the more discrimination is experienced, the less self-esteem a person possesses (Harris-Britt, Valrie, Kurtz-Costes, & Rowley, 2007;

Seaton, Caldwell, Sellers, & Jackson, 2010; Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2006). However, one limitation to these studies is that they focus on overt racism and do not explicitly measure microaggressions, resulting in a lack of information about the relationship between subtle discrimination and self-esteem.

For college students in particular, some studies suggest that distress based on marginalized identities may have a negative impact on the lives of students of color, particularly on their self-esteem. For instance, Latina/o and African American students reported feelings of self-doubt when faced with microaggressions in their academic environment (Solórzano et al., 2000; Yosso et al., 2009), while Black men and Latina women reported a sense of not belonging after being targeted by exclusionary microaggressions (McCabe, 2009). A study with Filipino American graduate students found that experiences with racial microaggressions, overt racism, and systemic racism often led to feelings of marginalization and disconnect from their institutions; furthermore, students reported feeling isolated and misunderstood because of their ethnicity (Nadal, Pituc, Johnston, & Esparrago, 2010). Given all of these, it is clear that students of color encounter discrimination, alienation, invisibility, and invalidation and that the cumulative nature of these experiences may all be harmful to their development and self-concept.

Finally, while previous research has supported that the stress of experiencing discrimination may lead to mental health disparities such as depression or anxiety (e.g., Romero & Roberts, 2003; Seaton et al., 2010), it is possible that self-esteem may act as a protective factor between discrimination and mental health. For example, one study with Latino adolescents found that despite the amount of racial discrimination experienced, increased levels of self-esteem were

associated with higher levels of mental health (Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2006). Therefore, while people who encounter discrimination may be more vulnerable to depression and other mental health issues, those who have higher self-esteem may also be less likely to develop such psychological problems and more highly capable of functioning well in their everyday lives.

## Purpose of the Study

Given these factors, it is crucial for student affairs professionals to foster healthy self-esteems in their students to promote optimal academic performance and mental health. Moreover, because racial microaggressions have been found to have an injurious impact on the lives of people of color of general, it is critical for researchers to further understand the harmful influence of racial microaggressions specifically toward students of color in the academy. Finally, because most studies on racial discrimination focus primarily on overt discrimination, it is vital to examine how individuals' encounters with racial microaggressions, or subtle forms of racial discrimination, may influence self-esteem, which in turn be a risk or protective factor to the educational outcomes and psychological welfares of students of color.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Due to the dearth of empirical literature examining racial microaggressions, as well as the lack of literature focusing specifically on subtle discrimination and self-esteem, the current study utilized a quantitative method to identify the relationship between racial microaggressions and self-esteem. The current research study addressed two exploratory questions:

1. Are racial microaggressions a predictor of lower self-esteem?

2. Are specific types of racial microaggressions predictors of lower self-esteem?
3. Do individuals of diverse racial groups experience racial microaggressions differently?

## METHOD

### Participants

A total of 225 participants were recruited for this study. Only current undergraduate students were included in the study, and all others were excluded from this analysis. There were 161 females (71.6%) and 64 males (28.4%). Participants ranged in age from 17 to 40 ( $M = 19.73$ ,  $SD = 3.242$ ). In all, 87 participants were Latinas/os (38.7%), followed by 44 Blacks/African Americans (19.6%), 43 Whites/European Americans (19.1%), 19 Multiracial persons (8.4%), 23 Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders (10.2%), and 9 who did not identify with any of these categories (4%). White participants were included in this study because of previous literature that has supported that White people do experience some microaggressions in their lives, although likely not as frequently as do people of color (Nadal, Griffin, et al., 2010; Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007).

Of the participants, 163 were born within the United States (72.4%) and 62 were born outside of the United States (27.6%). A majority of the participants self-identified as heterosexual ( $n = 190$ , 84.4%), while 12 identified as gay/lesbian (5.3%), 6 as bisexual (2.7%), and 17 as “other” or unreported (7.6%). The majority of the sample ( $n = 219$ , or 97.3%) identified as living in a northeastern state (e.g., New York, Massachusetts), while the remaining 5 lived in the West Coast or midwestern regions. Most of the participants ( $n = 189$ ) had a high school diploma (72.1%), and 36 had an associate’s degree (13.7%).

### Recruitment

After receiving approval from the researchers’ Institutional Review Board, participants were recruited in two ways: (a) through a Psychology 101 undergraduate pool and (b) through online listservs with college student organizations. Undergraduate students enrolled in introductory psychology classes from a large public Hispanic-serving institution in a northeastern metropolitan area were given research credit for their participation, which would be a portion of their overall grade. The majority of participants were recruited from this method. An additional sample was recruited by sending emails to various organizations and listservs (including college student organizations and multicultural fraternities and sororities). Also, a snowball sampling method was used, in that participants were encouraged to advertise the study to their support networks and appropriate organizations that met the eligibility criteria.

### Measures

*Demographic Questionnaire.* Participants completed an open-ended demographic form that was originally described in Nadal (2011), which allowed them to identify their gender, age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, occupation, highest educational level completed, place of birth, and years spent in the United States. A team of 3 researchers coded responses independently into appropriate categories (e.g., participants who listed their race as Hispanic, Latin, or Puerto Rican were coded into the Latino category, while participants who listed race as Asian, Pacific Islander, or Filipino were coded into the Asian category). Participants were allowed to self-identify with categories using their own words because forcing individuals to “choose a box” has been argued to be a microaggression in itself (Johnston & Nadal, 2010; Nadal, 2011). So while we recognize the limitations

to this process (e.g., we allow them to choose their own category before we assign them a category anyway), we believe that this is a culturally sensitive way of collecting effective quantitative data because participants are less likely to feel excluded while completing the survey (and perhaps even feel empowered in having the freedom to self-identify).

*Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS)*. The REMS is a 45-item scale consisting of statements regarding experiences with racial and ethnic microaggressions (Nadal, 2011). Participants reported if they had experienced each microaggression in the past 6 months (0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*). Certain items were reverse scored so that for all items, higher scores indicated a greater amount of experiences with microaggressions. The REMS (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .928$ ) has six subscales: Subscale 1: Assumptions of Inferiority ( $\alpha = .894$ ), Subscale 2: Second-Class Citizen and Assumptions of Criminality ( $\alpha = .883$ ), Subscale 3: Microinvalidations ( $\alpha = .888$ ), Subscale 4: Exoticization/ Assumptions of Similarity ( $\alpha = .852$ ), Subscale 5: Environmental Microaggressions ( $\alpha = .850$ ), and Subscale 6: Workplace/School Microaggressions ( $\alpha = .850$ ). Example items include "Someone assumed that I would not be educated because of my race" (Subscale (1); "I observed people of my race in prominent positions at my workplace or school" (Subscale (5); "Someone assumed that my work would be inferior to people of other racial groups" (Subscale (6); and "My opinion was overlooked in a group discussion because of my race" (Subscale (6). The REMS has been reported to have a moderate positive correlation with the Racism and Life Experiences Scale–Brief Version ( $r = .464$ ,  $n = 376$ ,  $p < .001$ , two-tailed) and a strong positive correlation with the Daily Life Experiences–Frequency Scale ( $r = .746$ ,  $n = 253$ ,  $p < .001$ , two-tailed; Nadal, 2011).

*Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SES)*. The SES is a 10-item scale consisting of statements regarding an individual's general feeling of worth and value toward oneself. Participants are asked to report on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 4 (*strongly disagree*) the extent to which they agree with each statement. Example statements include "I feel that I have a number of good qualities" and "I feel I do not have much to be proud of." Certain items were reverse scored so that for all items, higher scores indicated lower self-esteem. Rosenberg (1965) reported reliabilities ranging from .85 to .88 for college samples.

## Procedure

The measures in this study were administered online through the website [www.SurveyMonkey.com](http://www.SurveyMonkey.com). First, participants were presented with an informed consent form and indicated their understanding of the form and consent to participate by continuing on to the next page of the survey. Next, participants filled out a demographic questionnaire, followed by the REMS and the SES. Each research session lasted 30 minutes, and participants were presented with a debriefing statement after completing their session.

## RESULTS

To first examine the relationship between racial microaggressions and self-esteem, a correlation was run between the REMS average score and the SES average score. Results indicate that there was a significant negative correlation between REMS average and SES average scores ( $r = -.142$ ,  $n = 225$ ,  $p = .05$ , two-tailed). Two of the six REMS subscales were negatively correlated with SES average scores; these include a significant negative correlation between SES average and Subscale 2: Second-Class Citizen and Assumptions of Criminality ( $r = -.144$ ,  $n = 225$ ,  $p = .05$ ,

two-tailed) and Subscale 6: Workplace/School Microaggressions ( $r = -.163$ ,  $n = 252$ ,  $p = .01$ , two-tailed). While these scores are statistically significant, they are also weak, with  $r$  scores ranging from  $-.144$  to  $-.163$ .

ANOVAs were conducted to determine if race influenced differences in REMS average scores. Results indicate that there were significant differences between groups in REMS average scores,  $F(5, 218) = 3.76$ ,  $p < .003$ ,  $\eta^2 = .06$ . Significant differences were found between White and Black participants ( $p = .01$ ), White and Asian participants ( $p = .02$ ), White and Latino/a participants ( $p = .001$ ), and White and Multiracial participants ( $p = .02$ ). In reviewing mean scores of all of these groups, it was found that White participants experience significantly less frequent racial microaggressions than Black, Asian, Latina/o, and Multiracial participants.

In terms of differences in REMS subscales, four of the six subscales yielded significant differences between groups. There were significant differences between groups in Subscale 1: Assumptions of Inferiority average scores,  $F(5, 218) = 6.883$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .12$ . Employing the Bonferroni-corrected post hoc  $t$  test with an alpha level of  $p < .001$ , significant differences were found between Black and White participants ( $p = .001$ ) and Latino/a and White participants ( $p = .001$ ). In reviewing mean scores, we found that both Black and Latina/o participants report more inferiority microaggressions than White participants. Furthermore, there were significant differences on Subscale 2: Second-Class Citizen and Assumptions of Criminality average scores,  $F(5, 218) = 6.216$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .11$ , specifically between Black and Asian participants ( $p = .001$ ), Black and Latino/a participants ( $p < .001$ ), and Black and White participants ( $p < .001$ ). When analyzing mean scores, we found that Black participants reported more second-class citizen

and criminality microaggressions than did White, Asian, and Latina/o participants.

Subscale 4: Exoticization/Assumptions of Similarity yielded significant differences,  $F(5, 218) = 7.29$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .12$ , particularly between Black and Latino/a participants ( $p < .001$ ) and White and Latino/a participants ( $p < .001$ ). Further analyses reveal that Latinas/os experience significantly more exoticization microaggressions than do Black and White participants, but not more than Multiracial or Asian American participants. Meanwhile, there were significant differences between groups in Subscale 5: Environmental Microaggressions average scores,  $F(5, 218) = 2.30$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .28$ , particularly between Black and Asian participants ( $p = .002$ ), Asian and White participants ( $p < .001$ ), Latino/a and White participants ( $p = .004$ ), and White and Multiracial participants ( $p = .008$ ). When reviewing mean scores, we discovered that Asian participants report more environmental microaggressions than do Black and White participants, while White participants experienced significantly fewer environmental microaggressions than Latina/o and Multiracial participants. Finally, we discovered there were no significant differences between groups regarding Subscale 3: Microinvalidations or Subscale 6: Workplace/School Microaggressions average scores.

To examine whether or not racial microaggressions predict self-esteem, a regression was conducted with REMS as the independent variable and the SES as the dependent variable. Using the enter method, results indicate that REMS average is a predictor of self-esteem:  $F(1, 221) = 4.72$ ,  $p < .05$ . However, while this was a significant finding, this accounted for only 1.6% of this variance. Finally, to explore whether specific types of microaggressions affected self-esteem, a stepwise method of regression was utilized examining all six REMS subscales as predictor variables and self-esteem

as an outcome variable. A significant model emerged for Subscale 6: Workplace/School Microaggressions,  $F(1, 221) = 6.06, p < .01$ , which accounted for 2.7% of the variance.

## DISCUSSION

The current study aimed to investigate the relationship between racial microaggressions and self-esteem, with a sample of undergraduate college students. Results indicate that there is a significant negative correlation between the two constructs, suggesting that the more racial microaggressions one experiences, the lower one's reported self-esteem. However, given that the correlation was weak, it is likely that there are other mediating variables that may contribute to the relationship between the two. Furthermore, results from the study demonstrated that self-esteem was negatively correlated with two of the six REMS subscales, suggesting that people are more likely to exhibit lower self-esteem when they concurrently experience (a) microaggressions where they were treated like second-class citizens or criminals and (b) microaggressions that occur in school and workplace settings.

Results also showed that when individuals encounter a greater amount of racial microaggressions, the total accumulation of these experiences may have a negative impact on their self-esteem. Specifically, it was found that microaggressions in educational or workplace environments have a negative influence on self-esteem; in other words, when individuals encounter microaggressions in work and educational settings, they will likely experience lower self-esteem. This suggests that while all microaggressions are harmful, microaggressions that occur in educational settings (i.e., by professors or other students) or work settings (i.e., by employers or coworkers) may particularly hurt individuals' self-worth.

Participants of various racial groups

reported differences in the amounts of racial microaggressions they experienced. Black, Latina/o, and Multiracial participants experienced significantly more microaggressions than did White participants, and there were no differences in microaggressions among Black, Latina/o, Multiracial, and Asian American participants. Thus, this study suggests that while it is possible that White people may experience microaggressions in their everyday lives, the amounts of microaggressions that they experience are significantly less than people of color. Similarly, there were not any substantial differences in the total amount of microaggressions that are experienced by individuals of various racial minority groups, suggesting that African Americans, Latinas/os, Asian Americans, and Multiracial people experience a similar total amount of microaggressions in their everyday lives.

Furthermore, differences in subscale scores emerged between the various racial groups, indicating that people of color may experience, and be differentially affected by, a spectrum of racial microaggressions. Black and Latina/o participants reported significantly more experiences where they were treated as inferiors than Asian and White participants. This finding supports previous qualitative microaggression literature that supports that African Americans and Latinas/os are often treated as intellectual inferiors or are assumed to be of lower social classes (Rivera et al., 2010; Sue, Nadal, et al., 2008). Black participants reported more experiences of being treated as a second-class citizen or criminal than Asian, Latina/o, and White participants, which has also been found in qualitative research (Sue, Nadal, et al., 2008; Watkins et al., 2010). While the qualitative literature finds that Asian Americans and Latinas/os also experience microaggressions where they are treated as second-class citizens (Nadal et al., 2012; Rivera et al., 2010; Sue, Bucci, et al., 2007), perhaps

African Americans reported higher scores on this subscale because they also encounter microaggressions where they are assumed to be criminals. Latina/o participants reported more experiences of being exoticized than Black and White participants, which aligns with previous qualitative research that reveals that Latinas/os often are exoticized because of their race, ethnicity, immigration status, language, and accents (Rivera et al., 2010). Finally, Asian American participants experienced more environmental microaggressions than did Black, Latina/o, and White participants, supporting previous qualitative literature that suggests that Asian Americans often feel invisible because of the absence of their race in the media, government, and other systems (Nadal et al., 2012; Sue, Bucceri, et al., 2007).

## IMPLICATIONS FOR COLLEGE STUDENT DEVELOPMENT

Because this study involved undergraduate college students, there are many implications that can be made for the field of college student development. First, because it was found that microaggressions that take place in educational or workplace environments may have a negative impact on the self-esteem of these participants, it would be crucial for student affairs practitioners to be aware of the types of microaggressions that their students experience in the classroom and in their work environments to prevent detrimental impacts to their students' self-efficacy. Second, because college is a time when many students learn to develop their self-concepts and identities, it may be important for practitioners to guide their students in developing effective coping strategies when encountering microaggressions. In doing so, students may be more able to protect themselves from developing lower self-esteem when these types of experiences occur. Discussions about microaggressions

with students can also help to normalize their experiences, which can promote healthier senses of self while preventing students from feeling isolated or alone.

Furthermore, aligning with the aforementioned "looking glass self" (Yeung & Martin, 2003) and "stereotype threat" (Steele, 1997), it is vital for student affairs professionals to be aware that the microaggressions that they commit toward students of color (whether conscious, intentional, or not) may have a harmful impact on the ways that student views themselves, which in turn may affect their self-esteem, mental health, and academic achievement. For example, if students are stereotyped to be intellectually inferior or exotic, they may internalize feelings of "otherness," which may negatively influence their ability to contribute to the campus community, perform well academically, or feel included in an environment where they feel like they are the "only one." As a result, administrators and student affairs practitioners must ensure that they combat stereotypes that are placed on their students of color, while providing positive affirmations to promote their self-concepts and self-worth. Because it is the role of student affairs professionals to educate "the whole student" and be mindful of their development both inside and outside of the classroom environment, such interventions are required to ensure that all students are being served and provided with equal opportunities for success. Moreover, because aforementioned literature has indicated that self-esteem is often a protective factor for suicide and other psychological disorders (Chioqueta & Stiles, 2007; Sharaf et al., 2009; Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2006), it is even more vital for student affairs practitioners to ensure that their students maintain higher levels of self-worth, particularly given the increasing prevalence of suicide among various racial and ethnic minority groups (see Leong & Leach, 2007, for a review).

Moreover, in utilizing the findings from this study, student affairs professionals may create a more inclusive campus climate by demonstrating multicultural competence. The term *cultural competence* was first introduced to the field of student affairs by Pope and Reynolds (1997) and described three different elements: cultural knowledge, awareness, and skills. Presently, cultural competence in student affairs tends to concentrate less on the students and campus programs and instead on “the student affairs professionals who interact with those students and who design, fund, and implement those initiatives” (Pope, Mueller, & Reynolds, 2009, p. 645). Thus, it is necessary for student affairs practitioners to be culturally competent when working directly with students, as well for administrators who aim to create institutions that support cultural diversity initiatives. For example, practitioners may display their multicultural knowledge by fully recognizing that microaggressions do exist, cause distress for their students, and manifest in different forms for individuals of diverse groups. They may exhibit their multicultural awareness by recognizing that microaggressions may occur in various types of relationships (e.g., between administrators and students, supervisors and supervisees, etc.) and may be influenced by an individual’s own biases, worldviews, and experiences. They may show their multicultural skills by demonstrating their comfort in dealing with microaggressions when students experience them, by addressing microaggressions when they occur, and by empowering students to develop coping mechanisms to handle racial microaggressions in their everyday lives.

Concurrently, to have a direct impact on campus climate as a whole, practitioners need to competently address microaggressions on institutional levels. For example, there are numerous studies that describe the benefits associated with campus climates that facilitate

cross-racial engagement and result in a number of educational, social, and personal gains for students during and after their college careers (see Harper & Hurtado, 2007, for a review). Thus, it is necessary for institutions to create safe spaces and programs for students to engage in such interactions to promote more inclusion and harmony. Specific to this study, it may be important for institutions to integrate teachings about microaggressions into various levels of the academy. For instance, perhaps first year experience programs or mandatory educational programs involving microaggressions in residence life can serve as opportunities for students to learn about microaggressions, as well as the harmful impact these interactions may have on self-esteem and other variables. Thus, students may be more cautious in avoiding such behaviors and may be better equipped in addressing such conflicts when they do occur. In addition, perhaps faculty, staff, and administrators may undergo some diversity trainings (e.g., upon first hire or as continuing education initiatives) in which they learn about the negative impact of microaggressions, as well as effective ways of handling them when they are presented in any element of student life. In taking steps like these, the institution would be demonstrating a commitment to combating microaggressions, while protecting the self-esteems and social, personal, and psychological development of students.

Furthermore, because the study found that different types of microaggressions occur with individuals of varying racial groups, student affairs professionals must be cognizant of the spectrum of microaggressions that are experienced by diverse students, while also being aware of how intersectional identities (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, social class, ability, and religion) may affect their students’ everyday lives. The intersectionality framework advocates for the understanding of individuals’

worldviews based on their multiple identities (see Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009) and can be applied to working with students of various social identities. For example, in a study examining Black college students and social comfort with Whites, results indicate that social comfort was a predictor of academic concerns for Black men (but not for women) and a predictor of psychological well-being for Black women (but not for men; Cole & Yip, 2008). Perhaps the types of microaggressions experienced by students of color may differ based on gender, sexual orientation, and other identities, which in turn may have a negative influence on self-esteem and other outcome variables. Moreover, individuals who belong to multiple oppressed groups (e.g., women of color, LGBT people of color, people of color with disabilities) may be prone to a greater amount of microaggressions, which may then negatively affect their self-worth. Thus, student affairs professionals must take extra care to ensure that students with multiple oppressed identities are able to cope with microaggressions to protect their self-esteem and promote their optimal mental health.

Finally, given that the majority of the participants were recruited from a Hispanic-serving institution (HSI), there are many implications for college student development. First, regardless of attending school in an environment in which a majority of students come from historic racial and ethnic minority groups, students of color may still experience microaggressions that negatively influence their self-esteem and mental health. Perhaps one explanation for microaggressions in such an environment is the dearth of culturally competent faculty, staff, or administrators to work with a majority student of color population. For instance, one study surveyed the presidents, chancellors, and chief executive officers of a large number of HSIs in the United States, finding that one of the major

barriers to success was faculty (de los Santos & Cuamea, 2010); respondents shared that it was particularly difficult to recruit and retain “diverse faculty who understand and are willing to address the needs of underserved students” (p. 101). Thus, while students may not feel like “minorities” because there are others who are of the same racial or ethnic backgrounds as they are, perhaps they may still feel discouraged because their faculty members are not encouraging or culturally competent. As a result, it would be crucial to increase the number of faculty and administrators of color at minority-serving institutions, for students of color to gain the self-esteem they need to achieve optimal academic success. Students of color need have access to role models of color (e.g., professors, deans, etc.) who can demonstrate that it is possible to be a successful, while maintaining a healthy identity and sense of self. Concurrently, these students of color also need White allies (in these same roles) to acknowledge that microaggressions do occur, even in minority-serving institutions, and to provide the support all students need to succeed in their college careers and beyond.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

There are some limitations to the current study. First, because a majority of participants reported living in the Northeast and in an urban environment and attended a minority-serving institution, the sample may not be generalizable to all college students across the continental United States or to students in a predominantly White institution. Second because both the REMS and SES are self-report instruments that involve individuals’ perceptions of racial microaggressions and self-esteem, these measures may not accurately reflect participants’ true lived experiences. Finally, because participants

completed the online survey with all of the measures in the same order, there is the potential of a priming effect of the first measure (REMS) on the second measure (SES).

There is a myriad of future research directions that may emerge from this study. First, because this is one of the first known studies to quantitatively examine the relationship between racial microaggressions and self-esteem, future studies can investigate how racial microaggressions negatively influence other aspects of college students' experiences and identity development. Second, it may be helpful to understand which outcome variables may mediate the relationship between racial microaggressions and self-esteem. For example, perhaps factors such as racial identity, ethnic identity, and social support may serve as protective factors that may prevent racial microaggressions from harming individuals' self-esteems (which may then harm their mental health). Furthermore, because of the previous literature that has found that self-esteem may serve as a protective factor between overt racial discrimination and mental health symptoms (O'Donnell et al., 2008; Sharaf et al., 2009), future researchers may

be interested in examining the relationship between racial microaggressions, or subtle forms of discrimination on mental health (e.g., depressive symptoms, anxiety, trauma, self-injurious behaviors, substance abuse, and even suicidal ideation). Furthermore, because there were major differences found between the various racial minority groups, future research may be interested in investigating each group separately. Perhaps within groups, there are differences based on ethnicity, gender, or social class that may affect the types of racial microaggressions that people of color experience, as well as a diverse amount of ways that college students cope with microaggressions when they occur. Results from any of these potential studies would be instrumental for practitioners to better understand how microaggressions may manifest in college students' lives, which may then lead to campus programs and trainings to promote students' self-esteem and academic success.

---

*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Kevin Nadal, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York, 524 W. 59th St., New York, NY 10019; knadal@jjay.cuny.edu*

## REFERENCES

- Aneshensel, C. S. (2009). Toward explaining mental health disparities. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 50*, 377-394.
- Capodilupo, C. M., Nadal, K. L., Corman, L., Hamit, S., Lyons, O., & Weinberg, A. (2010). The manifestation of gender microaggressions. In D. W. Sue (Ed.), *Microaggressions and marginality: Manifestation, dynamics, and impact* (pp. 193-216). New York, NY: John Wiley.
- Chioqueta, A. P., & Stiles, T. C. (2007). The relationship between psychological buffers, hopelessness, and suicidal ideation: identification of protective factors. *Crisis, 28*(2), 67-73.
- Cole, E. R., & Yip, T. (2008). Using outgroup comfort to predict Black students' college experiences. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 14*(1), 57-66.
- Cooley, C. H. (1902). *Human Nature and the Social Order*, New York, NY: Scribner's.
- de los Santos, A. G., & Cuamea, K. M. (2010). Challenges facing Hispanic-serving institutions in the first decade of the 21st century. *Journal of Latinos and Education, 9*(2), 90-107.
- DeJesus-Torres, M. (2000). Microaggressions in the criminal justice system at discretionary stages and its impact on Latinos/Hispanics. *Justice Professional, 13*, 69-89.
- Foster, K. M. (2005). Diet of disparagement: the racial experiences of Black students in a predominantly White university. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 18*(4), 489-505. doi:10.1080/09518390500137659
- Franklin, A. J., Boyd-Franklin, N., & Kelly, S. (2006). Racism and invisibility: Race-related stress, emotional abuse and psychological trauma for people of color. *Journal of Emotional Abuse, 6*(2/3), 9-30.
- Garcia, G. A., Johnston, M. P., & Garibay, J. C. (2011). When Parties become racialized: Deconstructing racially themed parties. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, 48*(1), 5-21.
- Harper, S. R., Davis, R. J., Jones, D. E., McGowan, B. L., Ingram, T. N., & Platt, C. S. (2011). Race and racism in the experiences of Black male resident assistants at predominantly White universities. *Journal of College Student Development, 52*, 180-200.
- Harper, S. R., & Hurtado, S. (2007). Nine themes in campus racial climates and implications for institutional transformation. *New Directions for Student Services, 120*, 7-24.
- Harris-Britt, A., Valrie, C. R., Kurtz-Costes, B., & Rowley, S. J. (2007). Perceived racial discrimination and self-esteem in African American youth: Racial socialization as a protective factor. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 17*, 669-682.
- Johnston, M. P., & Nadal, K. L. (2010). Multiracial microaggressions: Exposing monoracism in everyday life and clinical practice. In D. W. Sue (Ed.), *Microaggressions and marginality: Manifestation, dynamics, and impact* (pp. 123-144). New York, NY: John Wiley.
- Kim, S., & Kim, R. H. (2010). Microaggressions experienced by international students attending U. S. institutions of higher education. In D. W. Sue (Ed.), *Microaggressions and marginality: Manifestation, dynamics, and impact* (pp. 171-191). New York, NY: John Wiley.
- Leong, F. T. L., & Leach, M. M. (Eds.). (2007). *Suicide among racial and ethnic minority groups: Theory, research, and practice*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- McCabe, J. (2009). Racial and gender microaggressions on a predominantly-White campus: Experiences of Black, Latina/o and White undergraduates. *Race, Gender & Class, 16*(1-2), 133-151.
- Meyer, I. H. (2003). Prejudice, social stress, and mental health in lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations: Conceptual issues and research evidence. *Psychological Bulletin, 129*(5), 674-697. doi:10.1037/0033-2909.129.5.674
- Nadal, K. L. (2011). The Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS): Construction, reliability, and validity. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 58*, 470-480.
- Nadal, K. L., Griffin, K., Vargas, V., Issa, M., Lyons, O., & Tobio, M. (2010). Processes and struggles with racial microaggressions from the White American perspective: Recommendations for workplace settings. In M. Paludi, E. DeSouza, & C. Paludi, Jr. (Eds.), *The Praeger handbook on understanding and preventing workplace discrimination: Legal, management, and social science perspectives* (pp. 155-180). Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Nadal, K. L., Escobar, K. M., Prado, G., David, E. J. R., & Haynes, K. (2012). Racial microaggressions and the Filipino American experience: Recommendations for counseling and development. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 40*, 156-173.
- Nadal, K. L., Issa, M., Leon, J., Meterko, V., Wideman, M., & Wong, Y. (2011). Sexual orientation microaggressions: "Death by a thousand cuts" for lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth. *Journal of LGBT Youth, 8*(3), 1-26.
- Nadal, K. L., Mazzula, S. L., Rivera, D. P., & Fujii-Doe, W. (2014). Microaggressions and Latina/o Americans: An analysis of nativity, gender, and ethnicity. *Journal of Latina/o Psychology, 2*(2), 67-78.
- Nadal, K. L., Pituc, S. T., Johnston, M. P., & Esparrago, T. (2010). Overcoming the model minority myth: Experiences of Filipino American graduate students. *Journal of College Student Development, 51*, 1-13.
- Nadal, K. L., Wong, Y., Griffin, K., Sriken, J., Vargas, V., Wideman, M., & Kolawole, A. (2011). Microaggressions and the multiracial experience. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 1*(7), 36-44.
- O'Donnell, K., Brydon, L., Wright, D. P., & Steptoe, A. (2008). Self-esteem levels and cardiovascular and inflammatory responses to acute stress. *Brain, Behavior, and Immunity, 22*, 1241-1247.
- Pierce, C., Carew, J., Pierce-Gonzalez, D., & Willis, D. (1978). An experiment in racism: TV commercials. In C. Pierce (Ed.), *Television and education* (pp. 62-88). Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE.
- Pope, R. L., Mueller, J. A., & Reynolds, A. L. (2009). Looking back and moving forward: Future Directions for Diversity Research in Student Affairs. *Journal of College Student Development, 50*, 640-658.
- Pope, R. L., & Reynolds, A. L. (1997). Student affairs core competencies: Integrating multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skills. *Journal of College Student Development, 38*, 266-277.
- Rivera, D. P., Forquer, E. E., & Rangel, R. (2010). Microaggressions and the life experience of Latina/o Americans. In D. W. Sue (Ed.), *Microaggressions and marginality: Manifestation, dynamics, and impact* (pp. 59-84). New York, NY: John Wiley.

- Romero, A. J., & Roberts, R. E. (2003). Stress within a bicultural context for adolescents of Mexican descent. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 9*(2), 171-184.
- Rosenberg, M. (1965). *Society and the adolescent self-image*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Seaton, E. K., Caldwell, C. H., Sellers, R. M., & Jackson, J. S. (2010). An intersectional approach for understanding perceived discrimination and psychological well-being among African American and Caribbean Black youth. *Developmental Psychology, 46*(5), 1372-1379.
- Sharaf, A. Y., Thompson, E. A., & Walsh, E. (2009). Protective effects of self-esteem and family support on suicide risk behaviors among at-risk adolescents. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing, 22*(3), 160-168.
- Smith, W. A., Hung, M., & Franklin, J. D. (2011). Racial battle fatigue and the "Mis"education of Black men: Racial microaggressions, societal problems, and environmental stress. *Journal of Negro Education, 80*(1), 63-82.
- Solórzano, D., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students. *Journal of Negro Education, 69*(1/2), 60-73.
- Steele, C. M. (1997). A threat in the air: How stereotypes shape intellectual identity and performance. *American Psychologist, 52*(6), 613-629.
- Sue, D. W. (2010). *Microaggressions in everyday life: Race, gender, and sexual orientation*. New York, NY: John Wiley.
- Sue, D. W., Bucceri, J., Lin, A. I., Nadal, K. L., & Torino, G. C. (2007). Racial microaggressions and the Asian American experience. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 13*(1), 72-81.
- Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A. M. B., Nadal, K. L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice. *American Psychologist, 62*(4), 271-286. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.62.4.271
- Sue, D. W., Lin, A. I., Torino, G. C., Capodilupo, C. M., & Rivera, D. P. (2009). Racial microaggressions in the classroom. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 15*, 183-190. doi:10.1037/a0014191
- Sue, D. W., Nadal, K. L., Capodilupo, C. M., Lin, A. I., Rivera, D. P., & Torino, G. C. (2008). Racial microaggressions against Black Americans: Implications for counseling. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 86*, 330-338.
- Torres, L., Driscoll, M. W., & Burrow, A. L. (2010). Racial microaggressions and psychological functioning among highly achieving African Americans: A mixed-methods approach. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 29*, 1074-1099.
- Torres, V., Jones, S. R., & Renn, K. A. (2009). Identity development theories in student affairs: Origins, current status, and new approaches. *Journal of College Student Development, 50*, 577-596.
- Umaña-Taylor, A. J., & Updegraff, K. A. (2006). Latino adolescents' mental health: Exploring the interrelations among discrimination, ethnic identity, cultural orientation, self-esteem, and depressive symptoms. *Journal of Adolescence, 30*, 549-567.
- Watkins, N. L., LaBarrie, T. L., & Appio, L. M. (2010). Black undergraduates' experience with perceived racial microaggressions in predominantly White colleges and universities. In D. W. Sue (Ed.), *Microaggressions and marginality: Manifestation, dynamics, and impact* (pp. 25-58). New York, NY: John Wiley.
- Yeung, K.-T., & Martin, J. L. (2003). The looking glass self: An empirical test and elaboration forces. *Social Forces, 81*(3), 843-879.
- Yosso, T. J., Smith, W. A., Ceja, M., & Solórzano, D. G. (2009). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate for Latina/o undergraduates. *Harvard Educational Review, 79*, 659-691.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.