



Does More Marginalization Equal More Distress? Microaggressions and Psychological Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

Microaggressions (MAs) are subtle forms of discrimination targeted toward minority groups (e.g. people of color, queer people) that are often used subconsciously by their perpetrators (Sue et al., 2010). Those who experience MAs are more vulnerable to negative psychological outcomes (Nadal et al., 2014). Individuals with multiple marginalized identities (e.g. queer people of color) are susceptible to greater psychological distress as a result of MAs targeting more identities (Sutter & Perrin, 2016). We studied survey results from a secondary data set of 66 queer university students to determine the effect of racial-ethnic and queer MAs on psychological outcomes (levels of happiness, depression, stress, and self-esteem). We hypothesized that students who experienced more MAs would exhibit more psychological distress, and that queer students of color would experience more psychological distress in response to MAs than white queer students. While there was no large difference in psychological distress between white students and students of color, students who experienced more MAs showed significantly higher levels of depression and stress.

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INTRODUCTION

- MAs are subtle forms of discrimination (Sue et al., 2010)
- People who perceive more LGBTQ MAs typically report higher levels of stress, lower levels of self-esteem, and more difficulty accepting their sexuality (Nadal et al., 2011; Wright & Wegner, 2012).
- People of color (PoC) who perceive more racial-ethnic MAs experience higher levels of depression and anxiety (Nadal et al., 2014).
- Queer PoC are more vulnerable to the psychological effects of MAs due to their membership in multiple marginalized communities (Sutter & Perrin, 2016).
- Most research concerning queer discrimination and MAs was conducted with fairly racially non-diverse samples; with our study, we intend to bring more PoC voices into the research.
- Our first hypothesis was that the more MAs participants perceived, the more psychological distress they would experience.
- Our second hypothesis was that queer POC would experience more psychological distress than white queer participants.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

- We used a secondary data set from a study conducted during the 2015/16 school year at a West Coast university.
- The research team for the aforementioned study recruited university students to--over the course of a year--take multiple surveys about their experiences with MAs and report microaggressions they would witness or experience via smartphone app.
- We used data from the second survey and only looked at data from queer-identified students (see Figure 1).
- To measure perceived MAs, we used the Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS) and the LGBTQ Microaggressions Scale (LGBQMS).
- To measure psychological distress, we used the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE), the Center for Epidemiological Studies–Depression Scale (CESD), and the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ).

TABLES

Table 1. This table shows the demographics information of the 66 participants drawn from the data. To allow a large enough sample for data analysis, non-White races were combined into a single PoC group.

Features	N	%
Male	8	71.2
Female	47	12.1
Other	11	16.7
White	22	33.3
Person of Color	44	66.7
Homosexual	7	10.6
Bisexual	34	51.5
Other	25	37.9

Table 2. This table shows the number of participants who had scores recorded for each measure, as well as the mean and standard deviation of their recorded scores.

Measure	n	\bar{x}	σ
CESD	62	40.21	6.96
OHQ	62	33.44	6.96
RSE	63	3.01	0.57
PSS	63	2.38	0.53
REMS	65	2.07	0.62
LGBQMS	50	2.29	1.13

Table 3. This table shows the correlations between measures. We found significant positive relationships between both racial-ethnic MAs and levels of stress and depression. The same was found for LGBTQ MAs.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
CESD	—					
OHQ	-0.27*	—				
RSE	-0.31*	0.48**	—			
PSS	0.41**	-0.24	-0.52**	—		
REMS	0.33**	0.00	-0.09	0.33**	—	
LGBQMS	0.42**	-0.19	-0.20	0.32*	0.58**	—

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

- Regarding our first hypothesis, please refer to Tables 2 and 3.
- Regarding our second hypothesis, there was no significant difference found between how white students and students of color were affected by either racial-ethnic or LGBTQ microaggressions.
- Our study was conducted in part to give queer people of color a greater presence in MA research; we succeeded in finding a racially diverse sample.
- With a more diverse sample, higher levels of stress and depression were predicted by more perceived MAs of both types, thereby supporting prior research conducted with less diverse samples.
- In addition, while unrelated to our hypotheses, we found a strong positive relationship between racial-ethnic and LGBTQ MAs, showing a link between race and queerness in the perception of MAs.
- No significant difference was found between how queer white people and queer PoC perceived MAs, though a small sample size may be to blame for that.
- In addition, the sample was heavily skewed toward female participants; a pitfall future studies should avoid.
- MA research is still a burgeoning field, so this study is hopefully the first of many to include more PoC in queer discrimination and MA research.

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