

# A Thousand Cuts: Racial Microaggressions Lower Self-Image Over Time

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## Abstract

This longitudinal study is one of the first to show that experiencing racial microaggressions is related to college student outcomes over time. College students completed surveys and used a mobile app to report their experiences with microaggressions, which were negatively associated with self-esteem and feelings of competence about six months later.

## Introduction

Microaggressions are a subtle form of discrimination that can be verbal or non-verbal, intentional or unintentional (Sue, 2010). Racial microaggressions occur frequently on college campuses and are associated with psychological distress and poor performance in college students (e.g., Blume, Lovato, Thyken, & Denny, 2012).

The existing literature is limited by a lack of longitudinal work (Wong, Derthick, David, Saw, & Okazaki, 2014) and an emphasis on survey measures that ask participants to retrospectively estimate the frequency of microaggressions. The current study addresses these limitations by studying participants over time and by using multiple measures of microaggressions: a traditional survey and a mobile app.

## Hypotheses

1. Students of color will report more racial microaggressions than White students
2. The number of reports submitted on the app will be significantly correlated with the survey measure of racial microaggressions
3. Students who report more microaggressions on the app will have significantly lower self-esteem and competence at Time 2
4. Survey reports of microaggressions at Time 1 will be associated with significantly lower self-esteem and competence at Time 2

## Participants

- 211 college students from a West Coast university
- Between the ages of 19 and 33 (M<sub>age</sub> = 19.82, SD = 2.21)
- 73% women
- 27.1% Asian/Asian American, 29% Hispanic/Latino, 27.1% White

## Measures

- Racial/Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (Nadal, 2011)
- Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965)
- Competence subscale of Basic Psychological Needs Scale (Gagne, 2003)
- Used the MicroReport app, created for this study, to report experiences of microaggressions
- On average 168.36 days (SD = 14.00) between Time 1 and Time 2

## Analysis

The analysis was conducted using t-tests and a linear regression.

## Results

Hypothesis 1 was **confirmed**: Students of color reported significantly more racial microaggressions compared to White students ( $t(132.08) = 3.31, p = .002$ )

Hypothesis 2 was **not confirmed**: The total number of reports participants submitted on the app was not correlated with the racial microaggressions they reported at Time 2 ( $r = -0.15, p = .838$ )

Hypothesis 3 was **not confirmed**: The number of reports through the app was not significantly related to self-esteem ( $B = -0.005, p = .543$ ) or self-competence ( $B = -.006, p = .766$ )

Hypothesis 4 was **confirmed**: Survey reports of racial microaggressions were negatively related to self-esteem ( $B = -0.175, p < .001$ ) and self-competence ( $B = -0.239, p = .028$ )

Variable	Total Mean (SD)	Students of Color Mean (SD)	White Mean (SD)	T (df)
Racial Microaggressions (Time 1)	2.24 (0.63)	2.31 (0.66)	2.05 (0.48)	3.31 (132.08), $p = .002$
Number of App Reports (Time 2)	1.73 (3.23)	1.56 (3.17)	2.20 (3.39)	-1.256 (209), $p = .211$
Self-esteem (Time 2)	2.93 (0.61)	2.94 (0.61)	2.90 (0.65)	0.382 (189), $p = .70$
Self-competence (Time 2)	4.87 (1.13)	4.83 (1.15)	4.96 (1.11)	-0.661 (182), $p = .51$

Predictor	Self-Esteem			Competence		
	B	SE	p	B	SE	p
Intercept	.227	.485	.640	.796	1.112	.475
Time 1 Outcome	.711	.048	.000	.639	.063	.000
Days Between	.001	.002	.480	.002	.005	.600
White	-.161	.071	.024	.051	.031	.097
Age	.033	.013	.013	-.145	.162	.372
Social Class	.069	.028	.015	.080	.065	.217
Woman	-.041	.064	.530	-.426	.149	.005
Racial Microaggressions	-.175	.047	<.001	-.239	.108	.028
Number of App Reports	-.005	.009	.543	-.006	.021	.766