Take a Deep Breath: Coping and the Cognitive Consequences of Racial Microaggression

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Introduction

Microaggression:
- Subtle verbal, behavioral, or environmental insults that are often unintentional and directed towards individuals holding marginalized identities (Sue, 2010)
- Black women have unique experiences with microaggression given the intersection of their racial and gender identity, and this group reports engagement in coping mechanisms to manage the effects of microaggression (Lewis et al., 2013)
- Associated Consequences
  - Negative psychological (Donovan et al., 2013; Nadal et al., 2014) and physiological (Zeiders et al., 2018) effects
  - Decreased socialization with peers, faculty, and staff (Johnson et al., 2014)
  - Diminished academic performance (Murphy et al., 2012)
  - Diminished cognitive performance (Banks & Cicciarelli, 2019; Murphy et al., 2012)
- Few studies have used lab-based examination to study consequences, and few have focused on the cognitive impacts, which have implications for how individuals perform in academic spaces.

Research Questions:
- Does exposure to racial microaggression (i.e., subtle insults based on stereotypes) impact cognitive depletion among Black college women?
- Does coping mitigate the relation between exposure to microaggression and cognitive depletion?

Hypotheses
- Exposition to microaggressions in a lab-based setting would deplete the cognitive resources of college-age Black women.
- Engagement in a deep breathing exercise would mitigate the depleting of cognitive resources among Black women, such that their performance would be similar to those who did not experience microaggressions in the lab.

Methods

Participants:
- 61 Black college women at a Midwestern PWI
- Age: 18-30 years old (M = 20.36, SD = 2.26)
- Year: 19 freshman, 11 sophomore, 14 junior, 9 senior, 8 grad
- Race: 53 Black or 8 biracial (i.e., Black & another race)
- Sexual orientation: 52 Straight, 9 LGBTQ

Independent Variables:
- Condition
  - Race and Gender
- Microaggressive script
- Microaggression study materials

Dependent Variable:
- Stroop (1935) color-naming task

Procedures:
- University mass email recruitment of Black women
- Administered 1-on-1 in research lab with one of two trained RAs (white women about 25 years old)
- Stroop (1935) task pre-test
- Exposure to (1) microaggression or not, and (2) prompted to cope or wait

- Stroop (1935) task post-test
- Demographic items and manipulation check

Example Script

This is really random, but I feel like you might understand. I just left class and we were talking about racial issues. I just feel like some of the students were aggressive and argumentative. I mean most of the white people in the class who were sharing were women, and as a woman I feel like I get what’s it’s like to be a minority. I probably shouldn’t be bothering you with this, so never mind. Anyway, I feel like these studies are so formal sometimes. I didn’t even ask anything about you. What year are you? [pause for participant response] Wait, do you play a sport? [pause for participant response] Oh OK. I was just wondering. Let’s go ahead and get back on task.

Results

• Analysis of Variance
  - No significant differences between the 4 conditions, F(3, 57) = 2.54, p = .07, η2 = .12.
- Simple effect analyses:
  - Microaggression no coping condition significantly more depleted than control coping (p = .02) and control no coping (p = .03) conditions.
- No significant differences identified for microaggressions with coping and control conditions

Discussion

• Exposure to microaggressions produced more cognitive depletion in Black college women as compared to exposure to no microaggressions.
• Engagement in a deep breathing exercise mitigated the effects of microaggressions.
• Findings must not be generalized to other populations (e.g., sexuality, religion) and other measures of cognition should be considered in the future.
• Future research should consider individual difference variables and how microaggression impact other individuals holding marginalized identities.

Contact Brea Banks (bmbanks@ilstu.edu) with questions or for references.