The Association Between Racial Microaggressions and Depressive Symptoms: A Cross-Sectional Analysis

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ABSTRACT. The present study investigated whether racial microaggressions, specifically assumptions of inferiority, assumptions of criminality/second class citizenship, and microinvalidations had a relationship with depressive symptoms, and whether this relationship varied by age group (adults vs. adolescents) and race (Black and Latinx). This cross-sectional study compared 194 undergraduate college students who were all over the age of 18 to 168 high school juniors and seniors. All participants identified as either African American/Black or Latinx/Hispanic. The results indicated that respondents identifying as Black/African American, regardless of age, experience higher levels of assumptions of criminality/second class citizenship compared to Latinx respondents, $F(2, 350) = 0.82, p = .442, \eta_p^2 = .004$. Results also indicated that, among Black/African American college students, but not high school students nor Latinx participants, higher levels of assumptions of inferiority were associated with depressive symptoms ($b = .34, SE = 0.07, p < .001$). Assumptions of criminality/second class citizenship, on the other hand, were not related with depressive symptoms ($b = .06, SE = 0.08, p = .433$). Lastly, regardless of race, high school students experienced more microinvalidations than college students, $F(2, 350) = 3.97, p = .047, \eta_p^2 = .013$. These results underscore developmental changes in how students of color experience race and racism as they transition from adolescence into adulthood.

Keywords: microaggressions, depression, racism, discrimination

ABSTRACTO. El estudio presente investigó si las microagresiones raciales, específicamente los supuestos de inferioridad, los supuestos de criminalidad/ciudadanía de segunda clase y las microinvalidaciones tenían relación con los síntomas depresivos, y si esta relación variaba según el grupo de edad (adultos vs adolescentes) y la raza (negros y latinos). Este estudio transversal comparó a 194 estudiantes universitarios mayores de 18 años con 168 estudiantes de tercero y cuarto año de secundaria. Todos los participantes se identificaron como afroamericanos/negros o latinx/hispanx. Los resultados indicaron que los encuestados que se identifican como negros/afroamericanos, independientemente de la edad, experimentan niveles más altos de supuestos de criminalidad/ciudadanía de segunda clase en comparación con los encuestados latinx, $F(2, 350) = 0.82, p = .442, \eta_p^2 = .004$. Los resultados también indicaron que entre los estudiantes universitarios negros/afroamericanos, pero no los estudiantes de secundaria ni los participantes latinx, los niveles más altos de suposiciones de inferioridad se asociaron con síntomas depresivos ($b = .34, SE = 0.07, p < .001$). Supuestos de criminalidad/ciudadanía de segunda clase, por otro lado, no se relacionaron con síntomas depresivos.
According to critical race theorists, the post-civil rights era ushered in a period of “color blind” ideology that continues to dominate race relations in the United States (Pérez, 2017). This ideology is manifested in Americans’ reluctance to engage in overt racial discourse for fear of being labeled as racist (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). However, social science research has confirmed that, rather than disappear altogether, racism has simply taken a new and more insidious form, often expressed through subtle microslights and behaviors, referred to as microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007) or through coded language (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). The current study examined the role that microaggressions play in the lives of students of color who are either in high school (adolescents) or college (adults). Specifically, we explored whether there is a correlation between the perception of three kinds of racial microaggressions: assumptions of mental inferiority, assumptions of criminality/second class citizenship, and microinvalidations and depressive symptoms among Latinx and African American respondents. The study also took a life-course perspective (Gee et al., 2012) by examining whether these associations are different for college (i.e., adults) versus high school students (i.e., adolescents).

What Is Racism?
Racism is a system of dominance in which members of the racial dominant group(s) create or accept their societal privileges through hierarchical structures and ideology (Harrell, 2000). Racialized systems are created and maintained through both societal and cognitive structures that affect both interpersonal relations and institutions that shape living conditions in the United States (Harrell, 2000). As such, racism is manifested as beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and institutional and cultural conditions that serve to maintain the racial status quo (Hardeman et al., 2016). In research situations, interpersonal displays of racism can be difficult to capture due to social desirability (Pérez, 2017). Dovidio and Gaertner (2000) found that, among White participants, self-reported racial prejudice was significantly lower in 1999 than it was in 1989. However, when these authors set up a simulated hiring task in which the same participants had the opportunity to discriminate against Black applicants without being obvious about their racism, they found that rates of discrimination had not actually changed over the course of the decade (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000). These subtle racist attitudes and beliefs are also found in the implicit association test literature, which find that many Americans are quicker to connect Black or darker faces with words associated with criminality and danger compared to lighter skinned photographs (Oswald et al., 2013).

Consequently, more recent measures of racism have shifted toward measuring microaggressions, or “daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory and insults toward people of color” (Sue et al., 2007). Microaggressions are expressed in multiple domains: assumptions of inferiority, assumptions of criminality/second class citizenship, microinvalidations, assumptions of similarity, environmental and workforce and school microaggressions (Nadal, 2011). The current study only focused on three of these (assumptions of criminality/second class citizenship, inferiority, and invalidations). Assumptions of inferiority occur when an individual feels like others treat them as intellectually inferior, by assuming they lack an education or work ethic. Assumptions of criminality/second class citizenship are experienced when a person of color feels like others assume them to be dangerous or deviant. Finally, microinvalidations

Por último, independientemente de la raza, los estudiantes de secundaria experimentaron más microinvalidaciones que los universitarios, $F(2, 350) = 3.97, p = .047, \eta_p^2 = .013$. Estos resultados subrayan los cambios de desarrollo en la forma en que los estudiantes de color experimentan la raza y el racismo a transición que pasan de la adolescencia a la edad adulta.

**Palabras clave:** microagresiones, depresión, racismo, discriminación
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occur when an individual feels like their experience with racism is dismissed as not real, or is accused of “making everything about race.”

Extant research has unequivocally shown that people of color in the United States experience daily microhassles related to their race. For instance, African Americans reported higher levels of microaggressions than Asians and Whites (Cokley et al., 2017; O’Keefe et al., 2015). A study by Bennett et al. (2017) also found that African Americans reported higher levels of assumptions of criminality/second class citizenship compared to other racial groups. In one qualitative study, African American participants described assumptions of criminality in particular on their college campus. One participant told the story of being harassed by campus police while hanging around a university building late at night because they did not believe she was “in graduate school or studying at 2:30 am on a Saturday night in the Engineering School” (Torres et al., 2010). These experiences also extend to Latinx college students; Hwang and Goto (2008) found that Latinx college students were more likely to experience being labeled as criminals or cheaters compared to their Asian counterparts, at a predominantly White university. The same study also found that Latinx college students reported feeling that these racist accusations were personally stressful. In terms of assumptions of inferiority, Nadal et al. (2014) found that African Americans and Latinx students reported the highest levels of inferiority microaggressions compared to other racial groups. To date, little research exists about the experience of microinvalidations among people of color. However, a recent review found that so-called “color blindness” has a negative effect on interracial relations, and reduces sensitivity to racism and discrimination (Plaut et al., 2018). In other words, the belief that race is irrelevant and that racism no longer exists does little to help alleviate racism-related stress among people of color.

Racism and Mental Health Outcomes

The general racism literature has confirmed that racism is a chronic and persistent threat to the mental and physical health of ethnic minority groups in the United States (Brondolo et al., 2008; Clark et al., 1999). Stressful environmental stimuli, such as discrimination and racism, result in exaggerated psychological and physiological stress responses (Clark et al., 1999), which influence psychological and physical health outcomes. One of the negative impacts of racism is that it contributes to negative mood. Several studies have found an association between discrimination and lower mood and depression among Latinx and African American college students (Cokley et al., 2017; Hwang & Goto, 2008; Nadimpalli et al., 2015; Torres & Takint, 2015). Similar findings have emerged in research using microaggressions as a predictor. Torres et al. (2010) found that assumptions of inferiority among African American doctoral students and graduates of doctoral programs were associated with more depressive symptoms. Similarly, Lilly et al. (2018) found that both assumptions of inferiority and assumptions of criminality/second class citizenship increase the odds of depression for undergraduate college students. Two other studies found a positive relation between assumptions of criminality/second class citizenship, assumptions of inferiority and suicidality among college students (Hollingsworth et al., 2017; O’Keefe et al., 2015). Interestingly, few studies to date have looked at mental health correlates of microinvalidations. However, research has suggested that the dismissal of race and racism is perceived as a form of racism by people of color, as it is seen as an attempt to maintain the racial status quo and can lead to mistrust (Plaut et al., 2018).

Developmental Changes

Developmental theories have posited that, to understand the impact of racism in the lives of people of color, it is important to take a life-course perspective, which emphasizes change in the nature, intensity, and salience of racism across various age groups (Gee et al., 2012). Specifically, Gee et al. (2012) proposed a theoretical model in which both maturational and environmental changes shape exposure and reaction to racist events as individuals mature. As such, there is both theoretical and empirical justification for focusing on racism in adolescence and how these experiences compare to those of adults. Gee et al. (2012) argued that, as individuals age, they are exposed to different contexts with varying levels of exposure to racism, and that as individuals mature both socially and cognitively, they go through sensitive periods during which exposure to racism is particularly harmful due to increased plasticity (Gee et al., 2012).

One such developmental sensitive period is adolescence (12–18), during which youth become acutely aware of racism due to rapid cognitive and psychosocial changes (Quintana & McKown, 2012). This increased awareness is partially driven by one’s search for ethnic or racial identity (Phinney, 1992), which increases the salience of discrimination
Changes to youths' social context drive some of the increase in exposure to racism in adolescence. School-based discrimination among youth of color is a common experience among both high school and middle school students (Griffin et al., 2017), and Black 8th graders report being treated and punished more harshly than their White counterparts by teachers and administrators (Cogburn et al., 2011). Discrimination from peers also increases both in- and outside of school, and occurs regularly on social media (Jones et al., 2020; Tynes et al., 2019). At the institutional level, Black and Latinx youth are more cognizant of the link between racism and poverty compared to their younger counterparts (Seider et al., 2019). Finally, recent events, such as the killing of Black teenagers by the police (e.g., Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, and others), and scientific studies, demonstrate that Black teens in particular become the target of a racist juvenile justice system as they undergo pubertal changes (Guthrie et al., 2012). Importantly, it is also during the adolescent years that the negative mental health impacts of racism begin to emerge. For instance, there is a documented rise in Black male teen suicide during adolescence (Price & Khubchandani, 2019), and racism is associated with increased self-harm among adolescents (Caldwell et al., 2004). The American Academy of Pediatrics warns that racism is a major factor in poor health outcomes among youth of color (Trent et al., 2019). These changes in teens’ lived experiences combined with increased cognitive awareness, reinforce the need to study microaggressions among Black and Latinx adolescents, especially as they compare to their more mature counterparts.

In terms of changes between adolescence and adulthood, the transition into adulthood (ages 19+) is associated with increased exposure to new social contexts and roles that are shaped by race and racism, such as higher education and employment (Gee et al., 2012). Young adults who are enrolled in college, for example, must navigate financial barriers to their education, which have been both historically and contemporaneously shaped by race (Comeaux et al., 2020), as well as more frequent conversations about race in the college classroom, both formally and informally (Eccles et al., 2003). Similarly, adults are more likely to be exposed to racism related to employment and housing opportunities than adolescents (Jones et al., 2020). In general, adults’ lives take place in a wider variety of contexts (compared to adolescents), thereby increasing potential exposure to racism. Despite this increased exposure, adults may have a better idea of how to successfully cope with racism, simply based on cumulative experiences. Although little research has explored developmental changes in the efficacy of coping techniques, one study did find that strategies improve between adolescence and emerging adulthood (Vannucci et al., 2018). Specifically, Vannucci et al. (2018) found that emerging adults were more likely to engage in active coping and emotional support seeking than adolescents, and that these coping strategies were associated with lower levels of depressive symptoms. In sum, research has yet to directly examine differences in racial experiences between adolescents and adults, but extant data does point to underlying differences that may manifest in unique experiences for each age group.

**Current Study**

Studies have shown that there are negative mental health consequences to experiencing racial microaggressions. Microinsults such as assumptions of inferiority and assumptions of criminality/second class citizenship have been demonstrated to increase depressive symptoms. However, there is limited research on the mental health correlates of microinvalidations. Furthermore, much of the previous research has used either adult or college samples to test these associations. The current study is unique in that it included both adults who are enrolled in college and adolescents who are attending high school. Additionally, the current investigation compared data from both Black/African American and Latinx participants. Although both groups have been exposed to racism in the United States (Nadal et al., 2014), they have also had very different histories and therefore should be explored separately.

In terms of outcomes, the current study focused
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on the association between microaggression and depressive symptoms, because of the widespread prevalence of depression (W.H.O., 2018). It is especially important to examine factors associated with depressive symptoms in college students and adolescents, given the especially high rates of depression among both of these populations (Furr et al., 2001). Both data and theory indicated that the risk of depression rises rapidly after puberty (Thapar et al., 2012). Thus, it is critical to examine factors that might contribute or be associated with depressive symptoms in this particular age group.

The current study explored the following two hypotheses: First, that higher levels of microinvalidation, assumptions of criminality/second class citizenship and assumptions of inferiority would be associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms. This hypothesis was tested separately for Black/African American and Latinx participants, to see if any differences exist between the groups. The second hypothesis was that the association between microaggressions and depressive symptoms would be stronger for high school students than it is for college students. This prediction was borne out of the developmental literature suggesting that adolescents are relatively new to being aware of racism and its implications (Jones et al., 2020), and that general coping strategies become more efficacious with age (Vannucci et al., 2018).

**Method**

**Participants**

Two separate samples were used in the current study: one collected on undergraduate college students, and the other collected on high school students. Demographic information for both samples is presented in Table 1. The college sample consisted of 264 students enrolled in an introductory psychology class at a public university located in a large urban center in the United States. This data was collected in fall 2019. The sample consisted of 208 respondents who were primarily identified as women or female adolescents (78.8%). In terms of race/ethnicity, 117 (44.32%) identified as Latinx, 74 as African American or Black (28%), and the remaining 73 (27.65%) identified as either Asian, European American or White, other, Middle Eastern, and biracial. Because no individual group was large enough to be analyzed separately, these individuals were not included in the analyses. Thus, the final college sample consisted of a total of 191 participants (117 Latinx and 74 African American/Black). All participants in the college sample had to be over the age of 18 to participate, but precise age information was not collected. The college campus where data were collected is designated as a Hispanic Serving Institution, and the overall student body is comprised of 33% Hispanic and 30% Black (consistent with the sample) students and is predominantly women (68%). The campus is unique in its large number of continuing education and nontraditional students. Only 8% of the student body are first-year students and more than 60% of matriculated students received an associate’s degree from a local community college prior to enrollment, making them older than traditional college students. Overall, 31% of students on campus are under the age of 22, and 14% are over the age of 35 (City University of New York College, 2018).

The high school sample consisted of 303 high school juniors and seniors attending public high schools in the same neighborhood as the college. Participants were enrolled in college-level courses at the first author’s university campus. These students voluntarily signed up for a college preparedness program designed for “middle of the pack” high school students. All participating students were required to be enrolled in public high schools within city limits to be eligible, and there was no minimum GPA requirement, therefore high school students in this sample came from various high schools which are part of the local Department of Education. According to the program director, the average high school GPA for students in this program is 80 (out of 100). In terms of race, participants were categorized in the same three racial categories described above, because of the low number of students identifying as anything other than African American or Latinx. There were 88 African American or Black students in the sample (29%), 91 Latinx (30%), and the rest were classified as “other” (n = 124 or 41%). The “other” category consisted of those who identified as European American or White (n = 31), Asian (n = 43) and simply as other and non-Latino (n = 50). Of the latter group, most identified as Arab or Middle Eastern in a qualitative follow-up question. Again, those not identifying as either African American or Latinx were dropped from the final analyses, due to their small sample size. The final high school sample consisted of a total of 179 participants (88 African American/Black and 91 Latinx). The high school sample was primarily male adolescents (65%). The sample had an average age of M = 17.29 (SD = 1.31). The department of education for the city in which data were collected reports that 41% of students in the
city are Hispanic and 26% are Black or African American, also consistent with the sample (New York City Department of Education, n.d.).

Measures
Racial Microaggressions
The Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS) was created by Nadal et al. (2011) to measure individuals’ perceptions of their experiences with racial microaggressions. For the current study, we only used three subscales from the measure. First, Second-Class Citizen and Assumptions of Criminality consisted of items such as “Someone assumed I would physically hurt them because of my race” and “I received substandard service in stores compared to customers of other racial groups.” Second, Assumptions of Inferiority consisted of items including “Someone assumed that I would have a lower education because of my race” and “Someone assumed that I would not be intelligent because of my race.” Third, Microinvalidations consisted of items including “I was told I should not complain about race” and “Someone told me that he or she was color blind.” All items were measured on a scale of 0 (“I did not experience this event at all in the past 6 months”) to 5 (“I experienced this event 5 or more times in the past 6 months”). In our study, the REMS demonstrated a good internal consistency for Assumptions of Inferiority, $\alpha = .89$. For Second-Class Citizen/Assumptions of Criminality, acceptable internal consistency was $\alpha = .82$. The internal reliability for the Microinvalidations subscale was $\alpha = .87$.

Depressive Symptoms
Depressive symptoms were measured using the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977). The scale consists of 20 items, assessing perceptions of depressive symptoms. Example of the scale includes statements such as “I was bothered by things that usually don’t bother me” and “I thought my life had been a failure.” All items were measured on a scale of 0 (Rarely or none of the time—less than 1 day) to 3 (Most or all of the time, 5–7 days). The CES-D demonstrated high internal consistency, $\alpha = .90$.

Procedure
Institutional review board approval was received prior to data collection from City University of New York as well as the New York City Department of Education.

College Sample
Participants were recruited from an Introductory Psychology course. The researchers went to each section of the course and spoke to students about the current study. Students were informed that the study would examine experiences with racial discrimination and overall psychological well-being, and that participation was voluntary and confidential. Those students who were interested were required to write down their emails on the piece of paper that the researchers handed out to the classes. Then, those students were sent a link of the survey by email. Data were collected online through the use of Qualtrics survey software. Participants were given course research credit for doing the survey. All college data were collected during fall 2019.

High School Sample
High school students were recruited through college-level classes that meet either after the regular school day or during lunch period. The students in the program were all junior seniors at local public high schools, and took the classes voluntarily and for free. Those who pass the class are eligible to receive college credit once they are accepted into university. Students in these classes were approached by one of the authors during class time. The classes listened to a 10-minute presentation about the project and were then given parental consent forms to have signed by their legal guardian. The students were told that the study would be about racial discrimination and psychological well-being and would consist of an anonymous online survey. Those who received permission were sent a secure and anonymous survey link to complete the study using Qualtrics. The survey took approximately 30 minutes to complete and participants received $10 gift certificates to Dunkin Donuts for their participation. Data on high school students were collected during the 2017–18 academic year.

Results
Preliminary Analyses
Preliminary analyses, consisting of chi-squared and $t$ tests were conducted to determine whether there was any difference between the high school and college sample on any of the demographic characteristics and key study variables. Results of these analyses and the demographic makeup of the two samples and are presented in Table 1. The high school sample had significantly more male participants compared to the
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In terms of key study variables, an independent samples t test revealed significant sex differences in depressive symptoms, $t(348) = 7.07, p = .007, d = 0.31$, with Black/African Americans reporting significantly lower levels of depressive symptoms ($M = 1.66, SD = 0.54$) than Latinx participants ($M = 1.83, SD = 0.63$). There was also a significant difference in depressive symptoms based on age, $t(348) = 2.70, p = .001, d = 0.62$, with college students reporting significantly higher levels of depressive symptoms ($M = 1.96, SD = 0.59$) than high school students ($M = 1.53, SD = 0.61$).

Next, a $3 \times 2 \times 2$ mixed-method analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to determine whether certain microaggressions were more common than others (within-subjects factor) and whether this varied by race/age (between-subjects factor). The ANOVA is presented in Table 2 along with effect sizes and observed power. There was a significant main effect of the within-subjects factor, $F(2, 350) = 28.17, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.076$. Reports of microinvalidations ($M = 0.85, SD = 0.92$) and inferiority ($M = 0.82, SD = 1.10$) were significantly more common than reports of assumptions of criminality/second class citizenship ($M = 0.53, SD = 0.83$), across the board. There was a significant interaction between the within-subjects factor and age, $F(2, 350) = 3.97, p = .047, \eta^2_p = 0.013$. This interaction is presented in Figure 1. High school students reported significantly more microinvalidations than college students. There was also a significant interaction between the within-subjects factor and race, $F(2, 350) = 6.52, p = .002, \eta^2_p = 0.013$, presented in Figure 2. Black/African American respondents reported significantly more assumptions of criminality/second class citizenship and microinvalidations than Latinx participants. The three way interaction was not significant, $F(2, 350) = 0.82, p = .442$.

### Table 1

**Demographic Information by Age**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>College (n = 194)</th>
<th>High School (n = 168)</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>29 (15%)</td>
<td>51 (30%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>158 (81%)</td>
<td>115 (69%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/did not report</td>
<td>7 (4%)</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>73 (38%)</td>
<td>80 (48%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latinx</td>
<td>121 (62%)</td>
<td>88 (52%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother’s highest level of education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>32.70</td>
<td>&lt;.001**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College or above</td>
<td>37 (19%)</td>
<td>29 (17%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>45 (23%)</td>
<td>29 (17%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school or equivalent</td>
<td>52 (27%)</td>
<td>35 (21%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than high school</td>
<td>53 (27%)</td>
<td>34 (20%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know/missing</td>
<td>5 (4%)</td>
<td>41 (24%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father’s highest level of education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>46.85</td>
<td>&lt;.001**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College or above</td>
<td>28 (14%)</td>
<td>13 (8%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>40 (21%)</td>
<td>25 (15%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school or equivalent</td>
<td>43 (22%)</td>
<td>32 (19%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than high school</td>
<td>53 (27%)</td>
<td>22 (13%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know/missing</td>
<td>30 (15%)</td>
<td>76 (45%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Native English speaker</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Not collected</td>
<td>114 (67%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>18+ (exact age information not collected)</td>
<td>M = 17.32 (1.45)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: “p < .01,” “p < .05.”

### Table 2

**Mixed Method ANOVA for Microaggressions (Within-Subjects) by Age and Race (Between-Subjects)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>$\eta^2_p$</th>
<th>Observed power</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between-subjects effects</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>(1,350) = 4.10</td>
<td>.016</td>
<td>.016</td>
<td>.726</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>(1,350) = 2.21</td>
<td>.137</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td>.318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within-subjects effects</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microaggression type</td>
<td>(2,350) = 28.17</td>
<td>&lt;.001**</td>
<td>.076</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microaggression x Age</td>
<td>(2,350) = 3.97</td>
<td>.047</td>
<td>.013</td>
<td>.913</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microaggression x Race</td>
<td>(2,350) = 6.52</td>
<td>.002**</td>
<td>.017</td>
<td>.754</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microaggression x Age x Race</td>
<td>(2,350) = 0.82</td>
<td>.442</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td>.316</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: “p < .01,” “p < .05.”
Bivariate correlations between the key study variables revealed that assumptions of inferiority ($r = .22, p < .001$), assumptions of criminality/second class citizenship ($r = .16, p < .001$) and invalidations ($r = .21, p < .001$) were all positively correlated with depressive symptoms. In addition, there was a positive association between invalidations and both assumptions of criminality/second class citizenship ($r = .58, p < .001$) and assumptions of inferiority ($r = .63, p < .001$).

**Primary Analyses**

Primary analyses were conducted to address Hypotheses 1 and 2. We regressed depressive symptoms on the three types of microaggressions and their interaction with age, separately for each racial group (1 equation for Black/African American and 1 for Latinx participants). The regressions included the following three blocks: Block 1 included participants’ sex and their parents’ educational status; Block 2 included the three types of microaggressions: criminality, inferiority and invalidation, and age (dichotomized as either college (0) or high school (1)); Block 3 included three interaction terms: each type of microaggression and its interaction with age (college versus high school). To assess Hypothesis 1, we examined the results from the second block of the regression, which tested the main effects of each type of microaggressions on depressive symptoms. To assess Hypothesis 2, we assessed the third block of the regression, and probed any significant interactions. The third block tested whether the association between the three types of microaggressions and depressive symptoms varies by age. The results for the regression are presented in Table 4.

**Hypothesis 1**

The first hypothesis predicted that for both racial groups, higher levels of microaggressions would be associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms. To assess this prediction, we examined the second block of the regressions. Among Black/African American participants, higher levels of perceived inferiority were associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms. There were no significant main effects of assumptions of criminality/second class citizenship or invalidations on depressive symptoms. Among Latinx participants, there was no significant main effect of any of the microaggressions on depressive symptoms.

**Hypothesis 2**

The second hypothesis predicted that the association between microaggressions and depressive symptoms would be stronger for high school students than for college students. To assess this hypothesis, we examined the third block of the regression equations. Among Black/African Americans, there was a significant interaction between inferiority and age. A probe of this interaction indicates that, among
Black/African American college students, higher levels of perceived inferiority were associated with more depressive symptoms (β = .34, SE = 0.07, p < .001), but the same was not true for Black/African American high school students (β = .06, SE = 0.08, p = .43). This effect is plotted in Figure 3. Among Latinx participants, there were no significant interactions between any of the microaggressions and age.

Discussion

The current study examined the relationship between racial microaggressions and depressive symptoms, and whether this association varied by age group (adolescents vs. college students) and race (Black and Latinx). The results indicate that Black/African American students experienced higher levels of assumptions of criminality/second class citizenship and microinvalidations than their Latinx counterparts, among both high school and college students. Furthermore, those identifying as Black/African Americans experienced a positive association between experiences of inferiority and depressive symptoms, but this association was only significant among the college sample. Interestingly, experiences with assumptions of criminality/second class citizenship were not associated with depressive symptoms. Finally, the study also found that high school students reported higher levels of microinvalidations than college students, across all races.

The finding that Black/African American students reported significantly higher assumptions of criminality/second class citizenship is consistent with previous literature (Nadal et al., 2014; Sue et al., 2007). African Americans are no strangers to being cast as intellectually inferior and violent. Blacks in the United States have endured centuries of subjugation and false accusations of misconduct, race-based lynching, and the denial of basic human rights. Although much of the codification of racism into the lawbooks has been formally removed, research confirms that these underlying beliefs about the nature of African Americans have not changed. There is mounting evidence, including the current study, that people of color, especially Black Americans, continue to experience these stereotypes through microaggressions and other subtle forms of racism (Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000). As a stark example of these underlying beliefs, Williams and Williams-Morris (2000) found that, among White respondents, 29% viewed Blacks as unintelligent, 44% believed Blacks were lazy, and 51% believed Blacks were prone to violence. These assumptions have real world implications, such as the disproportionate cases of police brutality against African Americans compared to Whites (Alang, et al., 2017). Interestingly, an analysis of news reports from the southern United States found that Latinos, and in particular Mexican-Americans, are also overwhelmingly conveyed in the negative and criminal light by the media (Brown et al., 2018). However, it is possible that regional differences exist throughout the United States, especially given the politicization of the southern U.S. border in the recent years (Andrade et al., 2020).

### TABLE 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>African American</th>
<th>Latinx</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b (SE)</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>p</td>
<td>b (SE)</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>p</td>
<td>b (SE)</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>p</td>
<td>b (SE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block 1:</td>
<td>ΔR² = .03, p = .308</td>
<td>ΔR² = .02, p = .539</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-.07 (0.05) -.10</td>
<td>.173</td>
<td>-.11 (0.11) -.07</td>
<td>.345</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother’s education</td>
<td>.03 (0.02) .15</td>
<td>.097</td>
<td>.01 (0.02) .05</td>
<td>.513</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Father’s education</td>
<td>-.01 (0.02) -.06</td>
<td>.474</td>
<td>-.01 (0.02) -.07</td>
<td>.395</td>
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<tr>
<td>Block 2:</td>
<td>ΔR² = .40, p &lt; .001**</td>
<td>ΔR² = .15, p &lt; .001**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Insecurity</td>
<td>.33 (0.06) .68</td>
<td>&lt;.001**</td>
<td>.02 (0.08) .04</td>
<td>.760</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Criminality</td>
<td>-.11 (0.09) -.19</td>
<td>.250</td>
<td>.10 (0.11) .10</td>
<td>.380</td>
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<tr>
<td>Invalidations</td>
<td>.14 (0.06) .28</td>
<td>.073</td>
<td>.16 (0.08) .22</td>
<td>.707</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.34 (0.11) -.33</td>
<td>.003**</td>
<td>-.27 (0.12) -.21</td>
<td>.030</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Block 3:</td>
<td>ΔR² = .04, p = .026</td>
<td>ΔR² = .003, p = .074</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insecurity x Age</td>
<td>-.28 (0.11) -.54</td>
<td>.010</td>
<td>-.05 (0.13) -.22</td>
<td>.709</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Criminality x Age</td>
<td>.20 (0.12) -.33</td>
<td>.100</td>
<td>.05 (0.13) -.05</td>
<td>.767</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invalidations x Age</td>
<td>-.04 (0.11) -.07</td>
<td>.714</td>
<td>-.06 (0.14) -.06</td>
<td>.681</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Total R²</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>.17</td>
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</table>

Note. *p < .01, p < .05.
Interestingly, the current study also found that Latinx participants reported feeling assumptions of inferiority as much as Black/African American respondents. Although the history of Latinx discrimination in the United States is more recent, Latinos are no strangers to discrimination and negative sentiments in mainstream American discourse. In fact, anti-Latinx hostility, largely spoken of through the lens of immigration, has become a major political wedge issue in recent years (Andrade et al., 2020). Other studies have confirmed that Latinx college students report higher levels of microaggressions (Torres & Taknint, 2015; Torres, et al., 2010), and research has suggested that as many as 80% of Latinx-Americans have experienced racial discrimination (Arellano-Morales et al., 2015). Despite the growing evidence of discrimination, Latinx-Americans remain a relatively understudied group in the racism literature. This study along with previous investigations highlight the continually evolving structure of the racial hierarchy, and the need to pay attention to how sociopolitical forces shape the beliefs and behaviors of individuals.

In terms of age differences, the current results indicate that high school students, regardless of race, perceived more microinvalidations than adult college students. This means high school students were more likely to hear from others that race and racism does not matter. One possible explanation for this finding is simple immaturity or relative lack of knowledge of race relations among younger respondents. College students and adults more generally have a more developed sense of ethnic identity than adolescents (Syed & Azmitia, 2010), and presumably hold more formal knowledge of politics and history. Research has suggested that attending college is a consciousness raising experience (Eccles et al., 2003). One could also argue that because adolescents are in the midst of their identity development stage (Erikson, 1968), they are too consumed by their search for a sense of self in other domains (such as sexuality and career) to pay attention to race. It is also possible that invalidations are a form of denial coping that is used by younger individuals who are not yet equipped or emotionally ready to face racial injustice head on. Whatever the reason, this finding has important implications for high school students who are experiencing discrimination because it suggests it might be more difficult for individuals in this age group to get much needed social support.

Finally, the current study revealed another age-related finding, that Black/African American college students who reported higher levels of inferiority also reported higher levels of depressive symptoms, but the same was not true for their younger or Latinx counterparts. Previous research has shown that African Americans and Latinx participants who experience more discrimination are also likely to report higher levels of depression (Cokley et al., 2017; Torres & Taknint, 2015; Torres, et al., 2010). Furthermore, extant literature does indicate that assumptions of intellectual inferiority should represent a negative experience for both groups (Sanchez et al., 2018). Interestingly, in our sample, both groups perceived an equal level of assumptions of inferiority, thus, one cannot argue that African Americans were more affected because they experienced more discrimination in this domain. In addition, we did not find that assumptions of inferiority were associated with depressive symptoms among African American high school students, which was inconsistent with our hypothesis. It is possible that both these findings are explained by the unique position in which African American college students find themselves. Although racial disparities do exist in high school graduation rates, they are even more pronounced at the college level (Sablich, 2016). Thus, African American students who make it to the college level, may simply be more sensitive than their younger counterparts. In terms of why we did not find a similar effect for the Latinx college students, this may be a product of the unique campus environment in which the data were collected. The college sample was collected at a federally designated Hispanic Serving Institution, where African Americans students are the numerical minority. Therefore, it is possible that the African American students felt particularly ostracized by these experiences, compared to their Latinx counterparts. For example, one study found that among Asian American students, those attending a predominantly non-Asian school experienced higher levels of internalized racism and depression compared to their counterparts attending a predominant Asian school (Atkin et al., 2018).

Limitations

There are some limitations to the current study. First, the cross-sectional design does not allow for drawing conclusions about the directionality of the association between the variables. Based on the current data, it is impossible to determine whether depressive symptoms cause individuals to perceive higher levels of microaggressions, or whether microaggressions contribute to depressive symptoms. Further research
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should utilize experimental strategies to determine if microaggressions, specifically assumptions of inferiority and assumptions of criminality/second class citizenship causes depression.

Another limitation is related to the makeup of the current sample(s). Due to the relatively small sample size, we were unable to conduct more nuanced analyses of the various Latinx groups in our sample. For example, the experience of individuals with a Dominican background may be very different from that of individuals from a Puerto Rican background. Related to this, the New York City Department of Education did not allow us to ask questions about immigration status of the high school students due to privacy concerns. Again, immigration status may also play an important role in racialized experiences. We were also unable to analyze the data separately by gender, which is a limitation because prior research has indicated that the experience of African American men is particularly unique when it comes to experiencing assumptions of criminality/second class citizenship. Also noteworthy is the fact that we did not collect age information on the college sample, so we cannot be absolutely confident the college sample was much older than the high school one. However, we do address these concerns indirectly, by providing data on the college from which the sample was drawn, which tends to skew older and more nontraditional in its student body.

Finally, there were relevant, pre-existing demographic differences between the high school and college samples that could have impacted the results. For example, we found that the college sample came from significantly less educated households, which could explain why the college students who experienced inferiority were more negatively affected than the high school students. Similarly, the college sample consisted of significantly more Latinx participants, whereas the high school sample was much more likely to be classified as “other.” This is important, because it could indicate that the high school setting was more racially diverse, which could impact the expression and prevalence of racism. In addition, the college sample had significantly more women compared to the high school one, which is problematic, given that depressive symptoms are higher among women than they are among men.

Conclusion

Despite its limitations, the current study has important implications. The findings reinforce the growing consensus that subtle and unconscious racism and discrimination continue to shape the lives of people of color in the United States. More specifically, the findings here confirm that African Americans unfairly and disproportionately continue to be treated as dangerous and criminal. The ramifications of these beliefs are clearly reflected in racially disparate criminal justice outcomes. Not only that, but we continue to see that the underlying association between Black faces and violence can lead to negative and dangerous police interactions for African Americans. Unfortunately, the subtle nature of microaggressions makes it difficult for victims to fight back when injustice occurs and for perpetrators to acknowledge that their actions are wrong or are driven by bias. This is related to the other important finding of the current research, which links experiences of microaggressions with depressive symptoms among African American college students. Although microaggressions may be difficult to spot as they occur, they take a toll on their victims. Overall, the current study found that African Americans are more prone to assumptions of criminality/second class citizenship than any other racial/ethnic group. It was also found that there is a positive relationship between inferiority and depressive symptoms among African American college students. This research is helpful for clinicians to understand that clients who are African Americans and Latinx who have depression symptoms can be contributed to discrimination. Then, clinicians are able to provide the ideal coping mechanism and therapy for clients who experience discrimination.

In terms of future directions, more research should be conducted to explore more in depth the impact of microinvalidations, for several reasons. The United States is at a critical crossroads in its reckoning with historical and contemporary race relations. On the one hand, Black Lives Matter and other movements, which are highlighting and actively fighting against racial inequality, have gained in popularity, especially among young people (Parker et al., 2020). On the other hand, former President Trump signed an executive order banning federal agencies from conducting racial sensitivity trainings, as the Trump administration contended that any teachings emphasizing racial inequality are divisive and harmful in nature (Cineas, 2020). Importantly, the current data along with other recent social science research indicate that adolescents of color do perceive this color-blind ideology at even higher levels than they do.
microconsults, such as assumptions of criminality and inferiority (Pérez, 2017). Although there is a dearth of research on the mental correlates of this form of racism, a small body of studies have suggested that, despite its name, adopting a racially blind ideology, leads to more interracial distrust, not less (Plaut et al., 2018). As such, the current study raises future questions that should be explored in subsequent studies, for example examining the sources of invalidation messages on youth of color. To date, the literature on invalidations has focused on messages perpetuated by White Americans (see Plaut et al., 2018; Pérez, 2017). The current data suggests that it is American African high school students who were most likely to hear dismissing messages about race and racism, and it would be useful to understand whether it is peers, family, or outsiders who are sending these messages to youth who are simultaneously experiencing the highest levels of assumptions of both criminality and inferiority. In other words, it is useful to know whether messages of color blindness are internalized by people of color, and whether these messages have negative consequences in terms of coping with more traditional forms of prejudice.

References


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