

Chapter #1

RACIAL-ETHNIC MICROAGGRESSIONS, DAILY HASSLES, AND MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS AMONG STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Racial-ethnic microaggressions have been described as statements, actions, or symbols that insult or put down people because of groups differences based on race and ethnicity. Some have characterized racial-ethnic microaggressions as similar to daily hassles, commonly experienced everyday stressors. However, the relationship of microaggressions with daily hassles has not been examined empirically. In addition, the relationships of these two constructs with certain mental health outcomes has not been examined simultaneously. The study discussed in this chapter examined the relationship of racial-ethnic microaggressions with daily hassles experienced by racial-ethnic minority college students ($n = 244$), and then examined the relationships of those stressors with symptoms of anxiety and alcohol related consequences. Racial-ethnic microaggressions were significantly associated with daily hassles among minority college students, although the association suggested an unexpectedly modest relationship ($r = .22, p < .005$). In addition, both microaggressions and daily hassles were significantly associated with anxiety symptoms ($R^2 = .24, p < .001$), but only binge alcohol use and daily hassles were found to be significantly associated with alcohol related consequences ($R^2 = .18, p < .001$). The chapter concludes by discussing the significance of the study results for racial-ethnic minority students and the universities they attend.

Keywords: microaggressions, daily hassles, anxiety, alcohol, minorities.

1. INTRODUCTION

College students often face many stressors as they strive to complete their education, and sometimes those stressors contribute to unhealthy behaviors and poor outcomes. For example, alcohol abuse and anxiety are common experiences on college campuses and have been linked to negative health outcomes (American College Health Association, 2013; Thompson, Davis-MacNevin, Teehan, & Stewart, 2017) as well as negative academic outcomes (El Ansari, Stock, & Mills, 2013; Seipp, 1991). Racial-ethnic minority college students often face additional stressors, many associated with anxiety and alcohol use, and those stressors may be compounded if the university is majority White (Blume, Lovato, Thyken, & Denny, 2012; Fisher & Hartmann, 1995; Lopez, 2005; Suarez-Balcazar, Orellana-Damacela, Portillo, Rowan, & Andrews-Guillen, 2003). Since racial-ethnic students are particularly at risk for not finishing college, special consideration for potential barriers such as these is important when considering university student retention strategies (Schmaling, Blume, Engstrom, Paulos, & De Fina, 2017).

Daily hassles are common, every day, nagging stressors that are experienced as personally annoying (e.g., a traffic jam) and differentiated from major life events (e.g., death of a loved one) (Kanner, Coyne, Schaefer, & Lazarus, 1981). Since they happen routinely, daily hassles are a chronic source of stress for people. Interestingly, the effect of stress from daily hassles can be extremely aversive and sometimes associated with worse

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health and mental health outcomes than the experience of major life events (DeLongis, Coyne, Dakof, Folkman, & Lazarus, 1982; Vinkers et al., 2014). There is evidence that daily alcohol use for college students may often be a function of the experience of stress on that particular day (Park, Armeli, & Tennen, 2004), suggesting that daily hassles may be especially relevant to the drinking behaviors of students.

Some have suggested that the experience of prejudice and discrimination is akin to the experience of daily hassles (e.g., DuBois, Burk-Braxton, Swenson, Tevendale, & Hardesty, 2002; Lay & Safdar, 2003). Certainly prejudice and discrimination have been linked to poor health and mental health outcomes among racial and ethnic minorities (Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009; Williams & Mohammed, 2009; Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2003). But whether the consequences of prejudice and discrimination may be associated with mental health risks among racial and ethnic minorities in a way that is similar to the consequences of daily hassles has not previously been investigated.

2. BACKGROUND

Racial and ethnic microaggressions are commonly experienced acts of prejudice and discrimination that occur as a result of biased attitudes and stereotypes toward racial and ethnic minorities. Racial and ethnic microaggressions may be verbal or non-verbal (Sue, 2010; Sue et al., 2007). Verbal microaggressions can range from slurs and insults to stereotyped assumptions. Non-verbal microaggressions can range from behavior that isolates or excludes to environmental symbols that convey stereotyped assumptions and group based insults. Greater numbers of microaggressions have been associated with a variety of mental health concerns including anxiety, depression, and substance abuse (Blume et al., 2012; Donovan, Galban, Grace, Bennett, & Felicié, 2013; Nadal, Griffin, Wong, Hamit, & Rasmus, 2014; Torres & Taknint, 2015). Microaggressions are considered to be more subtle and covert than overt acts of racism such as hate crimes. Because microaggressions tend to be more subtle, they may leave the victim in a state of great confusion and ambiguity about the intentionality and motive of the transgression (Sue et al., 2007). Unfortunately, racial and ethnic microaggressions have been found to be common experiences on campuses in the US (Blume et al., 2012; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). Because of the regular and chronic frequency of their occurrences, and with the nagging subtlety in which they frequently occur, one might assume that a microaggression would likely be similar in potential impact to a daily hassle rather than a discriminatory hate crime (arguably a major life event). Therefore, microaggressions would be an excellent construct to examine in order to test whether more covert acts of prejudice may have similarities to daily hassles.

In addition, little is known about the cumulative impact, if any, of daily hassles and microaggressions among racial-ethnic minority college students. Since racial-ethnic minority students tend to be greatly underrepresented in historically White universities in the US and prone to leaving universities prior to graduation (Schmaling et al., 2017), the cumulative burden of these stressors may be important to understand. As far as is known, the relationship of daily hassles and microaggressions have never been examined simultaneously as two potential stressors associated with student mental health risks.

3. METHOD

3.1. Participants

The present study included 244 self-identified racial and ethnic minority students that attended a historically White university and were enrolled in Introductory Psychology courses that included the option of research participation for partial course credit. First year students were heavily represented in the sample (48%), followed by sophomores (28%), juniors (16%), and seniors (8%). The predominant group represented in the sample was African American (57%), followed by Asian American (23%), Latinx (17%), and American Indian and Alaska Native (3%). Five participants identified with more than one ethnic group. A majority of the sample was female (70%) and the mean age of participants was found to be 20.5 years.

3.2. Measures

Participants completed a number of measures related to mental health concerns, daily hassles, and microaggressions. In this particular examination, the mental health measures of interest included the Daily Drinking Questionnaire (DDQ; Collins, Parks, & Marlatt, 1985), a widely used assessment of alcohol consumption among college students; the Rutgers Alcohol Problem Index (RAPI; White & Labouvie, 1989), a widely used 23-item (possible range of scores 0-69) assessment of alcohol related consequences specific to the university experience; the Beck Anxiety Inventory (Beck, Epstein, Brown, & Steer, 1988), a widely used 21-item (possible range of scores 0-63) clinical assessment of anxiety symptoms; and the Inventory of College Students' Recent Life Experiences (ICSRLE; Kohn, Lafreniere, & Gurevich, 1990), a 49-item measure (possible range of scores 0-147) used to assess daily hassles specific to college students. The microaggressions scale assessed the frequency of occurrence of 51 different types of microaggressions commonly experienced on college campuses as perceived by the participant (Blume et al., 2012). Greater details about the measure and its development are provided in the aforementioned article. Total scores from the RAPI, BAI, ICSRLE, and microaggressions measure were calculated and used for subsequent analyses. Total binge drinking events were calculated for the two week period immediately preceding the assessment from the DDQ using the commonly used definition of binge drinking in the U.S. (five drinks per drinking occasion for males and four drinks per drinking occasion for females; Wechsler, Dowdall, Davenport, & Rimm, 1995).

3.3. Procedure

After providing informed consent, participants completed an assessment battery online that included self-reported demographic data and the measures of interest for this study. Students were compensated with partial course related credit. Assessment occurred at one point of time. Institutional IRB (ethics board) approval was obtained prior to recruitment for the study, with protections in place to prevent risks to participants and to ensure confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained prior to study participation.

3.4. Results

The internal consistency for the study measures was excellent with $\alpha = .926$ for the BAI, $\alpha = .945$ for the ICSRLE, $\alpha = .917$ for the RAPI, and $\alpha = .914$ for the racial-ethnic microaggressions measure. Using the US commonly accepted definition for binge drinking events described in the measures section above (Wechsler et al., 1995), the study sample reported a mean of 2.952 binge drinking events as assessed DDQ binge drinking events during previous month ($SD = 4.324$). The mean total RAPI alcohol related consequences

scores were 13.632 ($SD = 12.417$), indicating that the sample was experiencing some alcohol related consequences that might be impacting their education. The study sample had a mean BAI Anxiety Symptoms score of 11.377 ($SD = 10.228$), corresponding to a mild range of anxiety (Beck & Steer, 1993). With the ICSRLE daily hassles scores, the sample was found to have a mean of 97.82 ($SD = 24.25$) that would be classified in the upper range of possible scores. Finally, the students reported experiencing a mean of 8.132 microaggressions per day over the last month or approximately 1 racial-ethnic microaggression every 3 hours.

Data from the ICSRLE and microaggressions measure underwent square root transformations to normalize distribution of scores prior to analyses. The first analysis was used to test whether there was evidence that racial-ethnic microaggressions and daily hassles may be similar constructs. In order to test this relationship, a Pearson product moment correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship of total transformed racial-ethnic microaggression scores and total transformed ICSRLE daily hassle scores. The analysis found a very modest but statistically significant relationship between the two variables ($r = .22$; $p < .005$).

Two multifactorial linear regression analyses were conducted to examine the relationships of microaggressions and daily hassles (simultaneously entered as a block) with the mental health variables of interest. In the first of these analyses, the relationship of the transformed racial-ethnic microaggressions and daily hassles scores with anxiety symptoms were examined. The full model was found to be statistically significant ($R^2 = .24$, $p < .001$; see Table 1), and both racial-ethnic microaggressions and daily hassles scores were found to be significantly associated with total number of anxiety symptoms as assessed by the BAI. In the second of these analyses, the number of binge alcohol events over the previous month, the transformed racial-ethnic microaggressions scores, and the transformed ICSRLE daily hassles scores were examined with the RAPI alcohol related consequences scores. The full model was found to be statistically significant ($R^2 = .18$, $p < .001$; see Table 2), with binge drinking events and daily hassles found to be significantly associated with total number of alcohol related consequences. However, a significant association between racial-ethnic microaggressions with RAPI consequences scores was not found in the analysis.

Table 1.
Regression model of Beck Anxiety Inventory scores (N = 195).

<u>Predictor Variable(s):</u>	<u>Beta</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>95% C. I.</u>
Microaggressions last month	.132	2.044*	0.003 to 0.191
Daily hassles last month	.445	6.903**	2.463 to 4.433

Table 1 Notes: Microaggressions and Daily Hassles = square root transformation of total raw scores. $R^2 = .24$; $F(2, 192) = 30.48$; $p < .001$ for the full model. Betas, t values, and 95% confidence intervals for each regression coefficient listed are for the full model. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$
VIF = 1.05 and 1.05 respectively.

Table 2.
Regression model of total Rutgers Alcohol Problem Index consequences scores (N = 152).

<u>Predictor Variable(s):</u>	<u>Beta</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>95% C. I.</u>
Total binge drinking events last month	.265	3.547**	1.061 to 3.731
Microaggressions over last month	.090	1.125	-.085 to .308
Daily Hassles over last month	.271	3.389**	1.078 to 4.094

Table 2 Notes: Microaggressions and daily hassles = square root transformation of total raw scores. $R^2 = .18$; $F(3, 148) = 10.79$; $p < .001$ for the full model. Betas, t values, and 95% confidence intervals for each regression coefficient listed are for the full model. ** $p < .01$
VIF = 1.010, 1.146, and 1.153 respectively.

4. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Developing campus interventions to educate the student body and potentially reduce the number of microaggressions would be helpful, as would understanding the compounded burden that students experience related to both the daily hassles of university life and the commonly experienced microaggressions on and off campus. Sometimes microaggressions may be addressed appropriately on campus by faculty and administrators, but improvements are sorely needed (Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009). Although there may be programmatic means currently in place to address the needs of racial-ethnic college students in the face of these threats, as discussed in the Conclusion/Discussion section that follows, much more research is needed to better address the dual threats of daily hassles and microaggressions in order to enhance the health, well-being, and academic success of our students. New campus interventions will need to be developed and tested, not only to support students who experience racial-ethnic microaggressions, but also to transform the very nature of campus cultures to be more welcoming of diverse students.

5. CONCLUSION/DISCUSSION

The measures of the study all demonstrated excellent internal consistency, increasing confidence in study results. The significant correlation of microaggressions with daily hassles suggests that microaggressions and daily hassles may have some commonality but the relationship appears to be very modest. The modest relationship could indicate that microaggressions and daily hassles are more different than similar. The multiple regression analyses found relationships that were perhaps more robust for anxiety symptoms than for alcohol use behavior. Microaggressions and daily hassles were independently associated with anxiety symptoms (Table 1), suggesting that both are independent sources of anxiety for racial-ethnic college students. Binge drinking events and daily hassles were significantly associated with alcohol related consequences (Table 2), suggesting that daily hassles may have different relationships with alcohol use behavior than microaggressions for racial-ethnic students. It is plausible that heavy or risky drinking was a response to

microaggressions as found in a previous study (Blume et al., 2012). Perhaps the drinking was carried out with greater vigilance due to the context of the microaggressions, placing students on alert to risks and therefore minimizing the likelihood of consequences. However, this is a highly speculative and experimental research will be needed to test this particular hypothesis under controlled conditions. However, victims of microaggressions tend to have more guarded and cautious social interactions under conditions where they feel they are in the minority and therefore vulnerable (Sue, 2010).

Limitations of the study include a cross-sectional quasi-experimental design, a non-randomly selected sample, and the use of one assessment per construct. The study also was bound by the strengths and limitations of online survey research. However, the study includes several strengths despite the limitations. Strengths include the first examination of the relationship of microaggressions with daily hassles, and the examination of both constructs in concert with mental health variables known to be problematic for promoting a positive campus climate (Harwood, Hunt, Mendenhall, & Lewis, 2012; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000), therefore a threat to student persistence. In subsequent studies, investigators may wish to account for both constructs when examining mental health outcomes among racial-ethnic minority college students at historically White universities. Further examination of this relationship seems warranted. Both microaggressions and daily hassles were significantly associated with mental health variables, although the patterns of results appear to be different for each construct.

When considering clinical interventions in universities, the results suggest that campus microaggressions and daily school related hassles may be largely independent sources of student stress for racial and ethnic minority students. Effective interventions designed to improve student outcomes and persistence to graduation may need to include strategies to empower racial-ethnic minority students to cope skillfully with both microaggressions and daily hassles. In particular, there is evidence that racial socialization that accentuates cultural pride and prepares students for the experience of bias can be helpful (Brown & Tylka, 2011; Hughes et al., 2006). In addition, creating the circumstances to make racial-ethnic students feel that they belong and are welcomed in the university community may support racial-ethnic student persistence (Cohen & Garcia, 2007; Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002). Finally, as mentioned, efforts to change academic culture to be more welcoming while providing support networks to counter the potential stressful impacts of prejudice (including microaggressions) hold great promise (Lee & Barnes, 2015). Novel interventions that incorporate these elements and include skills training that address the specific experiences of microaggressions and daily hassles are needed to improve retention rates of racial-ethnic minority students.

In the US, many more racial-ethnic minority students are enrolling in universities in recent years, with many matriculating in universities that have historically served a White majority student body. Improving the persistence to graduation of those students is an important institutional goal to appropriately meet the needs of these students (Schmaling et al., 2017). Creating a safe academic climate that minimizes the experiences of racial-ethnic microaggressions and simultaneously provide students with the tools to succeed in coping with microaggressions and daily hassles will greatly improve the retention of racial-ethnic minority university students in the future.

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KEY TERMS & DEFINITIONS

Daily hassles: routine and annoying stressors that emerge from every day experiences, to be contrasted with major life events.

Racial-ethnic microaggressions: common acts of verbal or non-verbal prejudice toward racial and ethnic minorities that emerge from stereotyped beliefs that tend to be more subtle and ambiguous in expression than overt acts of hate, but still contribute to significant psychological distress to the detriment of health and well-being.

Stereotyped beliefs: specifically for this article, these are often schemas of thoughts and attitudes that contribute to individuals assigning vast and prejudiced generalizations about the attributes of members of racial-ethnic minority groups.

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