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The Impact of Microaggression Exposure on Emotional Reactivity and Distress Following an Emotionally Provocative Movie Scene

Gwendolyn Jefferson
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

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Gwendolyn Melinda Michelle Jefferson

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2025

Abstract

The Impact of Microaggression Exposure on Emotional Reactivity and Distress

Following an Emotionally Provocative Movie Scene

by

Gwendolyn Melinda Michelle Jefferson

MBA, American Intercontinental University, 2007

BS, Florida Agricultural & Mechanical University, 2003

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

Walden University

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Abstract

This quantitative study explored how past experiences with racial microaggressions affect emotional reactions to racially charged media and whether factors like age and gender influence that response. Using Minority Stress Theory as a guide, 183 African American adults completed the Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale and the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory before and after watching a racially provocative film clip. The first analysis found no direct link between microaggression exposure and emotional change. However, further testing with analysis of variance showed that people with higher exposure reported much stronger emotional distress than those with lower exposure, $F(1,180) = 38.12, p < .001, \eta^2 = .175$. When demographic factors were added in a hierarchical regression, the model became significant, $F(7,175) = 2.06, p = .036, R^2 = .076$, showing that age ($\beta = .086, p = .009$) and gender ($\beta = 1.505, p = .039$) influenced emotional responses. Thus, older African American women showed the strongest distress, suggesting that the combined effects of race, gender, and age increase vulnerability to racial stress. These findings support the idea that racial trauma is complex and shaped by overlapping social identities. The study highlights the need for culturally sensitive mental health support, inclusive media portrayals, and greater awareness of generational and caregiving stress among African American women. By showing how overlapping identities shape emotional well-being, this research advances social change through empathy, reduced stigma, and institutional accountability, encouraging equity-driven practices that foster racial healing, fairness, and psychological resilience across communities.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my amazing husband, Da'rius Jefferson, Sr. He saw something in me that I never even knew was there. It was through his inspiration to pursue a doctoral degree that I set out to achieve this goal. Thank you for your love, support, encouragement and all the late nights you stayed up with me. I also dedicate this to the next generations of my family, I did it, so you can too!

I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to my friends and family, especially those who covered this challenging journey in prayer. I could not have done this without the love, support and prayers that held me down when I didn't see the light at the end of a very long tunnel. Lastly, I want to dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Juanita Evans, and my late father, Marvin Evans, who instilled in me the confidence to know that I can do anything I set my mind to do.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

In the 21st century, post-civil rights, American society still exemplifies discriminatory behavior and laws toward marginalized groups. This results in marginalized groups being disproportionately affected in economics, education, prisons, and health. Specifically, this discrimination affects the Black community, who are marginalized more disproportionately than other ethnic groups (Cigna, 2020; Kochhar & Fry, 2014; Rudd, 2014; NAACP, 2019). Many studies have sought to determine ways to reduce discrimination, particularly toward the Black community. While application of various theories of exposure have shown reduction in prejudiced attitudes towards marginalized groups (Flores et al., 2018), they have not reflected a long-lasting effect (Erba et al., 2019) or changes in attitudes toward policies or rights (laws) for marginalized groups (Flores et. al., 2018; Ramasubramanian, 2015).

The impact of long-lasting effects on reducing discrimination through reducing microaggressions has the potential for positive social change. The psychological impact of microaggressions is cumulative for marginalized communities. Reduction or elimination of microaggressions could improve mental and emotional well-being which could lead to lower stress, anxiety, and depression among people of color. This research could also impact social change in areas of interracial relationships, greater workplace equity and productivity, educational advancement and student success, legal and policy changes, enhanced media representations and cultural narratives, and the reduction in racial tensions and societal polarization. It may also encourage authorities to train those shaping narratives beyond basic diversity training, emphasizing cultural differences,

geographic context, and the nuanced delivery of information while actively avoiding bias, discriminatory language, and stereotypes.

This chapter introduces the research topic by situating the identified gap within the context of existing literature. First, the problem is identified so that the purpose, research questions and approach can inform how the problem will be addressed. This chapter will also explain the significance of addressing the problem while outlining the assumptions, delimitations, and limitations of the proposed study.

Background

Racial microaggressions, subtle and often unintentional discriminatory remarks or behaviors, have been broadly documented as sources of psychological distress for marginalized groups, particularly Black individuals (Perez Huber & Solorzano, 2015). Research has established that these occurrences contribute to long-term mental health disparities, including heightened anxiety, depression, and emotional dysregulation (Knighton et al., 2022; Kogan et al., 2022). Although the cumulative effects of microaggressions are well established, less is known about how acute exposure to emotionally provocative stimuli may interact with prior experiences of racial microaggressions to influence distress responses. This study seeks to address this gap by analyzing how prior exposure to microaggressions affects emotional reactivity to an emotionally provocative movie scene.

Existing literature highlights the frequency of microaggressions in various societal contexts, including education, employment, and interpersonal interactions (Curran et al., 2023; DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2023). Seiler (2023) found that Black

individuals identify greater levels of racial discrimination and microaggressions in multiple institutional settings, which impacts psychological stress significantly. Similarly, McKenna et al. (2023) identified a link between maternal adversity due to racial discrimination and heightened emotional reactivity in offspring, indicating that the effects of microaggressions may extend beyond immediate psychological distress to intergenerational impacts.

Media plays a critical role in shaping racial views and reinforcing micro aggressive behaviors (Venegas et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2023). Studies have shown that racial bias in media representation contributes to societal stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes, which can further exacerbate the psychological drain of microaggressions. The way that racial issues are framed in the news (Shrikant & Sambaraju, 2021), the underrepresentation of Black individuals in leadership roles within media organizations (Richardson, 2022), and the portrayal of racial justice protests (Graber et al., 2020) mutually influence public perceptions and individual experiences of discrimination.

Furthermore, exposure to racially charged media content has been connected to heightened psychological distress among Black individuals. Zhou et al. (2022) determined that media coverage of racial disparities during the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to heightened posttraumatic stress symptoms among racial minorities. Similarly, Crowe et al. (2023) found that sports media coverage of athlete activism and racial representation significantly influenced perceptions of systemic racism. These findings suggest that exposure to emotionally provocative media, particularly in individuals with a history of experiencing microaggressions, may trigger deepened

emotional reactions.

The current study should add to this body of research by investigating the interaction between chronic microaggression exposure and acute emotional reactivity. By using an experimental design that measured distress levels before and after participants viewed an emotionally provocative movie scene, this study sought to determine whether individuals with greater prior exposure to microaggressions exhibited heightened emotional distress in response to racially charged media stimuli. Findings from this research could contribute to a deeper understanding of how racial discrimination controls emotional processing and informs interventions aimed at mitigating the psychological impact of microaggressions.

Problem Statement

The persistent impact of racial microaggressions on the emotional and psychological well-being of marginalized communities has been well-documented in psychological and social research (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2023; Knighton et al., 2022; Kogan et al., 2022). While extensive literature has examined the chronic effects of racial microaggressions—such as increased anxiety, depression, and stress-related health disparities (Seiler, 2023; Sosoo et al., 2020)—less is known about the immediate emotional responses individuals exhibit when exposed to racially charged provocations in controlled settings, particularly through media. The current study aims to address this gap by analyzing whether prior exposure to racial microaggressions influences changes in distress levels when participants view an emotionally provocative movie scene.

Research has established that racial microaggression have an impact on minority

stress, which is a framework that describes the cumulative burden of discrimination, social invalidation, and systemic oppression on racial and ethnic minorities (Meyer, 1995; Seiler, 2023). Given that microaggressions often occur in subtle, everyday exchanges (Pérez Huber & Solórzano, 2015), their psychological impact may not always be instantaneous or consciously recognized. Yet studies suggest that microaggressions can prime individuals for heightened emotional reactivity in later encounters with racialized content (Venegas et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2023). This study builds on these findings by examining whether exposure to microaggressions expands distress in response to emotionally charged racialized media.

Furthermore, the intersection of racial discrimination, stress responses, and mental health disparities suggests a critical need for research on emotional reactivity to racially significant stimuli (Moody et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2022). Previous studies imply that racism-related stressors are not only linked to immediate psychological distress but can also contribute to long-term physiological and psychological harm (Guerrero et al., 2023; McKenna et al., 2023). Recognizing how acute emotional distress shows in response to racially charged media could inform interventions aimed at mitigating the harmful effects of microaggressions on mental health.

This study is essential in widening the dialogue on racial microaggressions by shifting the focus from chronic, cumulative effects to immediate, acute emotional responses. By assessing changes in distress levels before and after exposure to an emotionally provocative movie scene, the research seeks to uncover whether individuals with greater exposure to racial microaggressions exhibit heightened emotional reactivity.

This knowledge could have significant implications for clinical psychology, media representation, and policies addressing racial discrimination in everyday interactions.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine how chronic exposure to racial microaggressions influences acute emotional reactions to racially charged media representations. Rooted in minority stress theory (MST), this study fills a gap in the literature by examining how ongoing exposure to racial microaggressions affects emotional responses to provocative movie scenes. This study amplifies the existing research that highlights the psychological distress caused by racial discrimination, such as the work of Seiler (2023), which demonstrated that racial microaggressions are significant contributors to minority stress and harmful mental health outcomes among Black individuals. This study examines how media portrayals and cultural competence contribute to the emotional and psychological impact of racial microaggressions, aiming to clarify their link to psychological distress and inform mitigation strategies (Seiler, 2023). To assess this, a quantitative approach was chosen to measure changes in distress levels among participants after viewing an emotionally provocative movie scene, considering prior exposure to racial microaggressions. Specifically, the study's purpose was to evaluate how African Americans levels of distress are influenced by emotional reactivity. The overarching hypothesis is prior exposure to microaggressions would predict greater emotional reactivity to an emotionally provocative movie scene. The following research questions are designed to systematically examine the overarching hypothesis.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study are as follows:

Research Question 1: Does prior exposure to microaggressions predict greater emotional reactivity to an emotionally laden movie scene?

H₀1: Prior exposure to microaggressions does not predict greater emotional reactivity to an emotionally provocative movie scene.

H₁1: Prior exposure to microaggressions predicts greater emotional reactivity to an emotionally provocative movie scene.

Research Question 2: Are individuals with higher microaggression exposure more likely to report greater changes in distress levels compared to those with lower exposure?

H₀2: Individuals with higher microaggression exposure are not more likely to report greater changes in distress levels compared to those with lower exposure.

H₁2: Individuals with higher microaggression exposure are more likely to report greater changes in distress levels compared to those with lower exposure.

Research Question 3: Do demographic factors (e.g., age, gender, marital status, household income, basic education, and employment status) moderate the relationship between microaggression exposure and changes in distress?

H₀3: Demographic factors (e.g., age, gender, marital status, household income, basic education, and employment status) do not moderate the relationship between microaggression exposure and changes in distress.

H₁3: Demographic factors (e.g., age, gender, marital status, household income, basic education, and employment status) do moderate the relationship between

microaggression exposure and changes in distress.

For RQ 1, a simple linear regression was conducted to test whether microaggressions predict greater emotional reactivity to emotionally laden movie scenes. For RQ 2, an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was planned to examine group differences, determining whether individuals experiencing high versus low levels of microaggressions exhibit greater emotional changes after viewing the movie scenes. Finally, for RQ 3, a hierarchical multiple linear regression was performed as a moderation analysis to assess whether the impact of microaggressions depends on demographic factors. These analyses, along with the statistical assumption tests to verify and validate the data, will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in MST, which was originally established by Meyer (2003). The theory posits that individuals from marginalized groups experience unique, chronic stressors—such as discrimination and microaggressions—that have a negative impact on their well-being and mental health. MST proposes that these stressors are compiled on top of general life stress and therefore contribute to harmful psychological outcomes, including amplified emotional reactivity and distress (Meyer, 2003).

In the context of this study, microaggressions represent a form of chronic minority stress that may increase an individual's susceptibility to acute emotional distress when exposed to an emotionally charged stimulus, such as an emotionally provocative movie scene. Previous research has shown that exposure to repeated racial and ethnic microaggressions can lead to aggregate stress, intensifying emotional vulnerability and

increasing the risk of mental health challenges, specifically anxiety, depression, and worsened distress responses (Nadal et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2018).

MST also highlights three key mechanisms through which minority stressors use their impact: distal stressors (e.g., overt discrimination), proximal stressors (e.g., internalized stigma, vigilance, and rumination), and coping resources (e.g., resilience, social support; Meyer, 2003). This study particularly focuses on proximal stress responses, theorizing that individuals who have experienced a higher frequency of microaggressions may evaluate subsequent stressors—including emotionally provocative stimuli—as more threatening or distressing. This also aligns with stress appraisal theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which posits that an individual's prior experiences shape their interpretation of new stressors, which further compounds emotional responses.

By using MST for this research, prior exposure to microaggressions were investigated as a predictor of increased emotional distress following an emotionally provocative movie scene. This theoretical lens justifies the study's focus on the cumulative effects of microaggressions and their influence on real-time emotional reactivity, offering a framework to interpret the projected findings.

Nature of Study

This study examined whether prior exposure to microaggressions affected changes in distress levels when participants view an emotionally provocative movie scene. The analysis included descriptive statistics, paired *t* test, regression analysis and moderation analysis. The independent variable is the self-reported exposure to microaggressions measured by the Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS)

(Nadal, 2011). The dependent variables are the scores on the Six Item State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI-6; Marteau & Bekker, 1992). The study sample consisted of African American participants aged 18 years and older.

Participants were selected by purposive sampling for African Americans. I used the REMS to determine how often participants were exposed to microaggressions. The STAI-6 measured distress levels. The movies were selected based on the age of the movie, racial themes, and provocative emotional scenes. Inferential statistics within the category of hypothesis testing and predictive modeling were used to analyze data from racial microaggressions and distress levels. The power analysis for this inferential statistics design using G*Power 4.0 analysis (Faul et al., 2007) estimated the sample size needed is 150 participants when estimated statistical power is set at .80, an effect size of .10 (medium effect size), and alpha at .05. To adjust for attrition, an additional 15% will be added to the sample size for a total of 173. This study aligns with the problem statement by examining the relationship between prior exposure to microaggressions and distress levels in response to films about Black experiences. The objective was to assess the potential of this area as a promising avenue for future research on prejudice reduction.

Definitions

Distress: A negative emotional state indicated by feelings of sorrow, pain, or anxiety that can be a result of adverse life events or psychological strain (Lazarus, 1993).

Microaggression: Subtle verbal, behavioral, or environmental slights, often unintentional that communicate offensive or negative messages to individuals due to their marginalized group membership (Sue, 2007).

Assumptions

One of the assumptions made in this study is that participants recruited would have not seen the movies selected for the study. This assumption was formed because the movies selected were released prior to 2007, and the youngest participants would have just been born. However, I made an exception for one movie released in 2016 due to its cultural significance to race relations in America. I believed the scene selected was emotionally provocative enough that regardless of having watched it previously, it would illicit the necessary results. I also assumed the participants would be honest and candid on the surveys that measured microaggressions and distress levels.

Scope and Delimitations

The current study focused on exploring whether prior exposure to microaggressions influenced changes in distress levels in response to an emotionally provocative movie scene. The study's scope was shaped by a critical gap highlighted in the existent body of literature. Based on the review of evidence, limited research considered how prior exposure to racial microaggressions affects emotional reactivity. So, the scope of this study would include the measuring of distress and emotional reactivity of African Americans with exposure to racial microaggressions. A delimitation of the study was it only included African Americans. This delimitation ensured that the participants fell into the demographics proposed by the research. The study did not include individuals under the age of 18.

Limitations

One possible challenge was in selecting movies that participants might not be

familiar with that were significantly emotionally jarring to activate distress in them. The Walden librarians were a good resource to help in the search. Another possible challenge was getting the number of participants needed to meet the requirements for statistical power. Brainstorming among the dissertation committee and myself was used to identify possible locations for recruitment of participants such as social media groups that catered to film goers/critics, websites for film enthusiasts, students at local colleges that major in film, or utilizing a research recruitment agency. If during the study participant recruitment problems arose, additional strategies would have been necessary and identified and sent to the institutional review board (IRB) for approval. Yet another challenge was that the instruments proposed to measure the variables required permission and licensing fees, which added to the overall difficulty. A limitation of the study was that participants' emotional responses were elicited by a movie scene rather than real-life experiences, which may not fully reflect the complexity and nuance of genuine distress reactions. A possible statistical limitation was that, although regression analysis was used to predict changes in emotional distress levels, not all potential confounding variables related to emotional reactivity may have been accounted for. Collectively, these challenges and limitations defined the study's boundaries to ensure a focused yet ethically responsible examination into the relationship between emotional distress and microaggressions.

Significance

The gap in existing literature showed how prior exposure to microaggressions influences distress levels. Research has explored a range of strategies and interventions

aimed at reducing the psychological impact of microaggressions. Therefore, this study sought to add insight to the existing literature into how chronic exposure to microaggressions influenced acute emotional responses to external stressors. The findings of the study can provide insight and add perspective to debates surrounding race relations and cultural competence in America. It should facilitate access to funding for marginalized individuals to have the opportunity to move about their lives without constantly being reminded of their skin tone.

Summary

In this chapter, existing literature was explored as evidence for the research problem and the gap in research findings. The issues of the distress levels of African Americans who have prior exposure to microaggressions was identified and three research questions guided the study on the research problem acknowledged. The chapter also described how the research was approached as well as the significance, assumptions, delimitation, and limitations that are associated with the proposed study. The information presented in this chapter will be elaborated on in the succeeding chapters. Chapter 2 reviews the existing literature that relates to the focus of this research including the theoretical foundation to determine the current research position on microaggressions and emotional reactivity the gap that is present in the literature.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Negative racial attitudes have affected American society, creating disparities in mental health, public safety, and policy support that sustain inequality. Research has shown that microaggressions and racial discrimination are not only harmful to the mental health of marginalized groups but are contributory to larger social issues. For example, Kogan et al. (2022) discovered that consistent experiences of racial microaggressions and discrimination significantly increase symptoms of anxiety among Black Canadians, highlighting that purposeful racism causes psychological harm that can affect productivity and community health. Similarly, Unnever et al.(2023) revealed how negative racial attitudes can instigate tensions and intensify violence. These studies illustrate how racial bias, and resentments institute a climate of fear, reduced well-being, and disparity in policy outcomes which ultimately fracture social unity and weaken the foundation of an inclusive society.

In order to address racial disparities and create more inclusive communities, especially in areas like mental health, criminal justice, and media representation, cultural competence is essential. Studies reveal that awareness of cultural dynamics and systemic racism can significantly improve outcomes for both individuals and society at large. Research has shown that White Americans perceive welfare recipients as lazy, or underserving. However, Cooley et al. (2021) conducted a study to determine if White Americans would have more support for welfare policies when they feel like they have a lower status than their White counterparts versus those in an outgroup. It revealed that perceived status threats among privileged groups shape their attitudes toward welfare

policies. This highlights the importance of policymakers understanding the cultural and racial biases underlying public opinion and policy preferences. Similarly, Venegas et al. (2021) explored how portrayals of college life can be analyzed through popular movies to enhance cultural competence among students. Primary themes that emerged from the study were recognition of stereotypes, sharing personal experiences, and the need for critical media literacy. The study showcased the value of cultural competence in media, demonstrating that an awareness of racial representation and bias can shift how audiences understand social issues and empower marginalized voices. By promoting cultural competence, systemic issues can be better addressed, diverse communities can be better supported, and harm from entrenched racial biases can be mitigated.

In the current study, I examined the gap in literature at the intersection of chronic exposure to microaggressions and acute emotional reactivity to external stressors. The following section includes a review of literature regarding minority stress theory along with the basis for using it as the framework for the current study. In the subsequent section, I review literature regarding microaggressions, the psychological impact of media and the level of distress related to racial discrimination. The last section includes a summary of the literature concerning the research questions, gap identified, and a brief preview of the content included in Chapter 3.

Literature Search Strategy

I used the following online databases and search engines to locate and retrieve research for the literature review: EBSCO Discovery Service, ProQuest, Sage Journals, Taylor & Francis, Science Direct, APA PsychINFO, Academic Search Complete, and

Google Scholar. In order to retrieve articles relevant to the study, a combination of various search terms was utilized. The relevant key words used were *African American, Black, Black American, media representation, media portrayal, news media, mass media, media discourse, racial, political polarization, racism, discrimination, prejudice, levels of distress, racial discrimination, racial bias, USA, United States, and America*. The literature reviewed was published between 2019 and 2024, with the exception of those attached to the theoretical foundation and instruments used in various studies. The sources were peer reviewed.

Theoretical Foundation

MST offers a beneficial framework for analyzing and addressing microaggressions, as it focuses on distal stressors, proximal stressors, and mental health outcomes. Both racial microaggressions and structural uncertainties are experiences that are prevalent for Black individuals, which significantly contribute to minority stress (Seiler, 2023). MST was created by positing that individuals from stigmatized minority groups experience chronic stress due to their marginalized status, which has an adverse effect on their mental health. Originally conducted by structured interviews with gay men, Meyer (1995) concluded that distal stressors were external in nature and caused by objective events and conditions such as discrimination and violence. Proximal stressors were internal and resulted in internalized homophobia, concealment, and vigilance. He surmised that these existing stressors contribute to adverse mental health outcomes such as low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety.

Review of Literature

This literature review examines the complex interplay between racial microaggressions, the psychological impact of media, and levels of distress related to racial discrimination. . It investigates how racial microaggressions can contribute to acute emotional reactions. The review also analyzes the role of media in forming and challenging these microaggressions, stressing the potential of media literacy and cultural competence as tools for cultivating perspectives that are more inclusive. By integrating findings from several studies, this chapter aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors through which racial microaggressions are used and maintained, and to identify strategies for mitigating their adverse effects on individuals and communities. This section describes research findings about things that contribute to racial microaggressions in Black Americans. The reviewed literature is organized into different factors that contribute to racial microaggressions in America. Factors such as the psychological impact of media and levels of distress related to discrimination.

Microaggressions

One way in which negative racial attitudes can be expressed from one person to another is through racial microaggressions. These have been defined as “a form of everyday racism” and typically can consist of racial slurs or insults, implicitly or explicitly expressed, toward persons of color (Perez Huber & Solorzano, 2015, p. 298). Family communication can lead to the expression of racial microaggressions by White adults when conformity is stressed (Curran et al., 2023). Racial microaggressions cause racism-related trauma and should be considered a public health issue so that the impact of

racism on individuals can be better understood (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2023). It is also important to address implicit bias in order to uphold genuine equality and inclusivity (Morehouse et al., 2023).

Research has indicated statistical significance for a positive correlation among racial microaggressions, tendency to deny, downplay impact of negative experiences and psychological distress. In addition, while the Superwoman Schema could serve as a protective mechanism, this could also lead to increased psychological distress, which could ultimately impact physical health, work productivity, and lifespan (Knighton et al., 2022).

Other research has confirmed that racial microaggressions are a central feature of Black students' academic and social experiences (Brown-Smith, 2023). A qualitative study on Black students' experiences with racial microaggressions at a predominantly White University showed that all experienced racial microaggressions, which reduced their sense of belonging at their university (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2023). In the classroom, students described feeling dismissed by faculty, tokenized in discussions about race, and often having to overperform to counter negative stereotypes (Brown-Smith, 2023)—a phenomenon consistent with Steele and Aronson's (1995) theory of stereotype threat. Outside the classroom, students faced subtle yet persistent signals of exclusion in residence halls, cafeterias, and student organizations, echoing what Pierce (1974) initially conceptualized as microaggressions and later expanded on by Yosso et al. (2009).

Students have reported negative coping mechanisms such as avoiding commenting back to microaggressions and for one participant, leaving the university

altogether; positive means of coping included creating community through supportive networks and self-protective coping strategies (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2023). To cope, students rely on culturally affirming spaces and communities—referred to as “Black spaces”—such as cultural centers and Black student organizations. These environments serve as sanctuaries where students could express themselves freely, process their experiences, and receive support from peers (Hypolite, 2020). A significant theme is double consciousness—a term coined by Du Bois (1903)—which describes students’ internal conflict between how they see themselves and how they are perceived by the dominant White culture. Participants often engaged in self-monitoring behaviors to avoid being labeled as “aggressive” or “angry,” particularly women (see Corbin et al., 2018). The cumulative emotional burden of these experiences manifest as symptoms consistent with racial battle fatigue, including frustration, exhaustion, academic disengagement, and psychological withdrawal (Smith et al., 2007; Smith, 2008

Appah-Sampong et al. (2022) conducted a study to examine the thematic nature and frequency of racial microaggressions experienced by racial and ethnic minority surgeons within the surgical workplace. Recognizing that microaggressions are among the most predominant forms of discrimination in medicine, the researchers aimed to identify the specific types of microaggressions reported and to explore how these experiences varied across different racial and ethnic subgroups. This study contributes to a growing body of literature seeking to address the institutional and interpersonal barriers to equity in medical professions.

The study employed a cross-sectional, survey-based methodology. A total of 185

surgeons participated, and 166 responses were included in the final analysis. The sample consisted of 97 male-identifying and 67 female-identifying surgeons from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, including Black/African American, Asian/Asian American, and Hispanic/Latino individuals. Participants completed a one-time, anonymous online survey that included demographic questions and a shortened, 32-item version of the Racial Microaggressions Scale (Nadal, 2011), a confirmed instrument designed to assess everyday experiences of racial microaggressions. This scale measures microaggressions across several thematic subscales, including environmental microaggressions, perceptions of foreignness/not belonging, assumptions of low achievement or undesirability, assumptions of criminality, and invisibility.

Subscale means were calculated for each participant, and the researchers conducted t-tests and ANOVA to assess differences across racial and ethnic groups. The results revealed significant differences in microaggression experiences by race and ethnicity. Black and African American surgeons reported the highest levels of microaggressions related to assumptions of low achievement/undesirability ($M = 1.7$) and invisibility ($M = 1.5$), compared to Asian/Asian American ($M = 0.9$ and 0.8 , respectively) and Hispanic/Latino surgeons ($M = 1.2$ and 0.8 , respectively). In contrast, Asian/Asian American and Hispanic/Latino surgeons reported significantly higher experiences on the foreigner/not belonging subscale ($M = 1.6$ for both) than Black and African American surgeons ($M = 0.9$). All of these differences were statistically significant, with $p < .001$ across multiple comparisons.

The study concluded that racial and ethnic minority surgeons experience

microaggressions in distinct and identity-specific ways, emphasizing the role of intersectionality in workplace discrimination. These findings underscore the need for health institutions to implement more nuanced and culturally informed strategies to address microaggressions and support diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts within surgical environments. By using a validated measure like the Racial Microaggressions Scale (Nadal, 2011), the study adds empirical weight to ongoing conversations about structural change in medicine and affirms the necessity of acknowledging the lived experiences of underrepresented groups in the field.

Marconi et al. (2024) conducted a cross-sectional study to examine the relationship between racial microaggressions and alcohol use behaviors among marginalized college students attending a predominantly White institution. The study explored both direct and vicarious experiences of racial microaggressions, exploring how these experiences may influence alcohol-related behaviors, including personal alcohol use, perceptions of peer alcohol use, and avoidance behaviors related to campus drinking culture. The research also intended to assess the influence of demographic variables such as race, year in school, and contextual alcohol norms in shaping these associations.

The study sample consisted of undergraduate students attending the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Participants were recruited as part of the “Color of Drinking” survey, conducted between November 2017 and January 2018. 1,164 students completed the online survey. African American/Black students were specifically identified as reporting significantly higher rates of both witnessing and personally experiencing microaggressions compared to students from other racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Participants completed survey measures assessing experiences of racial microaggressions and alcohol-related behaviors. Alcohol use behaviors were assessed by measuring alcohol consumption in the past 30 days, whether participants felt impacted by others' drinking, and whether they avoided certain areas of campus because of alcohol use. These behavioral outcomes are consistent with prior studies examining college alcohol norms and peer influence.

The results demonstrated that African American students had significantly higher odds of witnessing (RRR = 9.5, 95% CI: 4.7–19.1) and experiencing (RRR = 7.0, 95% CI: 3.4–14.3) racial microaggressions compared to peers from other racial groups. Furthermore, among students of color, exposure to microaggressions was associated with an increased likelihood of considering leaving the university (RRR = 3.5, 95% CI: 2.0–6.2). Students who reported more frequent microaggressions were also more likely to engage in alcohol use, feel affected by the campus alcohol culture, and avoid social areas. Notably, the frequency of witnessing microaggressions increased with academic progression, suggesting that exposure accumulates over time.

These findings provide strong evidence that racial microaggressions may function as a psychosocial stressor that contributes to maladaptive coping behaviors, such as increased alcohol use. By linking racialized campus experiences to substance use outcomes, the study expands the literature on the intersection of racism, mental health, and behavioral risk in college settings. The results also reveal the need for culturally responsive interventions to address both alcohol misuse and racial microaggressions within predominantly White institutions.

Psychological Impact of Media

This section describes research findings about things that contribute to the psychological effect media has on Black Americans. The reviewed literature is organized into different factors that contribute to bias in media in America. Factors such as cultural competence, police shootings, systemic bias, and representation. These topics will be discussed below.

Venegas et al. (2021) looked at how media can influence cultural competence on college life. They looked to critically analyze the portrayals in popular films to prompt students to discuss issues related to race, ethnicity, and stereotypes which would further cultural awareness. The qualitative study was conducted with 32 diverse students (school classification, race/ethnicity, gender, major) at a private predominantly White institution. Participants engaged in discussion to analyze the depiction of college life in contemporary popular films to critically evaluate media messages and the social implications. The students chose two popular films from a list because most participants had seen them both. Data were collected by observation of discussions and analyzing the participants reflections. Using Critical Media Literacy (Kellner, 1998), Explanation Building Technique (Yin, 2014), and the Data Analysis Spiral (Creswell, 2013), recurring themes and patterns in the discussion and reflections with a focus on how students perceived and interpreted the medial portrayals and how it impacted cultural competence. Findings of the study concluded that while students of color perceived stereotypes, White students saw the portrayals as comedic or satirical. Students of color shared their personal experience with prejudice, racism, and stereotyping which helped to garner a deeper

understanding from their peers. The study emphasized the importance of adding critical media literacy to educational environments to help students significantly gauge media representations and develop cultural competence.

Shrinkant and Sambaraju (2021) conducted a study to determine which racial categorizations influenced how culpability was portrayed and how the incidents were framed in police shootings of Black individuals. The study analyzed news reports from major media outlets in the U.S. between May 2020 and October 2020. The articles selected were those that specifically mentioned the race of the individuals involved. Using the qualitative method of Membership Categorization Analysis (Fitzgerald & Housley, 2015; Sacks, 1974; Stokoe, 2012), they investigated how social reality was constructed by language and categories in reviewed communications. The findings of the study concluded that news reports were frequent in formulating their headlines as “police officer shot a Black man,” which highlights racial dynamics while implicitly suggesting that the officer is culpable. The study suggests that media outlets bear responsibility in shaping the perception of the public by constructing narratives that feed into the context of systemic racism.

Xu et al. (2023) conducted a study to determine which local television (TV) news covered racial disparities in the coronavirus of 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic outcomes, how they were framed, what causes were attributed and the proposed solutions, and if the coverage patterns changed significantly after George Floyd was murdered. Floyd, a Black man, died during an arrest in May 2020 when Derek Chauvin, a White police officer, knelt on his neck for over nine minutes. The incident, captured on video, brought global

attention to issues of racial injustice and police brutality. Between March and June of 2020, researchers collected data from 169 local TV news stories from 80 broadcast networks across 22 intentionally selected media markets. Key words were selected to pull relevant news content. They conducted a content analysis to determine how these stories attributed to the causes and solutions for COVID-19 related racial health and social disparities. There were several key findings. The study determined that while the racial disparities were discussed as it pertains to COVID-19, racism as a public health crisis was not discussed. After George Floyd's murder, stories increased their mention of Black and Hispanic people.

Crowe et al. (2023) conducted a study to investigate the perspectives for Black military affiliated individuals at the intersection between nationalism and racial issues in sports, the role of sports media covering racial representation and athlete activism, and how protests during the national anthem affected their views. A qualitative study was done with 10 Black respondents who had an affiliation with the U.S. military which included active duty, veterans, and members of military families. Using interviews, researchers gathered in-depth understandings into the participants' experiences and perceptions. The questions were focused on nationalism, racism, athlete activism, and how the media covered these aspects. Key results suggested that participants expressed desire for more nuanced news coverage that acknowledged systemic racism in sports since they often perpetuate a colorblind approach which neglects the specific challenges of Black athletes.

Richardson (2022) conducted a study to investigate local TV newsrooms to assess

the racial and gender composition, examine the demographics of the directors and general managers, and to examine the relationship between diversity of the leadership and the diversity of the on-air talent in the newsroom. Data collection came from 193 local TV stations in 64 media markets in the United States spanning across various regions. Race and gender of 4,317 on-air newscasters was collected along with their directors and general managers. The study examined if patterns emerged showing a correlation between the diversity of newsroom leadership and on-air talent as well as if regional differences determined diverse representation. Just over 73% of White men and White women held most on-air positions while non-Whites held just under 27%. In the Southeast and Southwest, non-White on-air talent was more prevalent in comparison with regions in the Mid and Northwest, 63.91% and 42.07%, respectively. The study found that the race of the general manager or director was significantly related to the diversity of the on-air talent. The study advocated for more diversity in positions of authority to foster greater representation for on-air talent.

Graber et al. (2020) conducted a study to identify the strategies implemented by mainstream newspapers to highlight or downplay the actions of Colin Kaepernick's protest. Kaepernick was a Black quarterback who played for the National Football League (NFL). In 2016, to peacefully protest systemic racism and police brutality against minorities, he kneeled during the National Anthem. The decision proved to be controversial and cost him his career as a professional athlete but catapulted him into activism for social justice. Data were collected from 10 major newspapers, with a total of 89 articles that were published between August 26th and September 9th of 2016. These

were the two weeks that followed the protest. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1992), they examined the specific language used to construct social realities and power dynamics. The themes were aversive racism, symbolic/modern racism, and colorblind racism. They analyzed each article by themes that were recurring, patterns in language and the devices used to frame the articles. Articles framed the discussion around national symbols and patriotism, neglecting to address the racial motivations for his actions. Key results showed that racial issues were sidelined for national symbols such as the flag and the anthem. The media focused on perceiving Kaepernick's actions as disrespectful and avoided in depth discussions of systemic racism. Sources for their coverage were statements from official sources such as team owners and league representatives that also framed the protest as patriotism versus racism. The study concluded that media plays a role in shaping the narrative of public discourse that has the potential to perpetuate systemic biases.

Levels of Distress Related to Racial Discrimination

One of the ways discrimination manifests itself is through distress. Distress from racial discrimination can show up in various forms. The following studies give examples and context. Seiler (2023) investigated how institutional racism, racial microaggressions, and minority stress intersected in the lived experiences of Black people. The premise of the study was to compare experiences between Black and White individuals to examine how racial stressors impacted minority stress among Black people. Utilizing the 2016 Racial Attitudes in America II survey, they conducted the study among 3,036 participants comprised of Black and White individuals of which 480 were a subsample of Black

respondents.

The study revealed the significant disparities in experiences of racism between Black and White respondents. For the Black respondents, there was significantly higher rates of structural uncertainties such as manifestations of institutional racism in employment, housing, and education including frequent microaggressions. The persistent exposure was a contributing factor to heightened levels of stress experienced by Black respondents. The study showed evidence that elevated levels of minority stress were related to their marginalized racial identity that allowed them to experience microaggressions and systemic inequities. The study highlighted its findings revealing a critical need for systemic changes and interventions at the intersection of institutional racism, racial microaggressions, and minority stress.

McKenna et al. (2023) conducted a study to determine the effects of intergenerational maternal adversity on offspring emotional reactivity focusing on the role of epigenetic age acceleration. They pulled a sample of 180 pregnant Black American women from the longitudinal Maternal Adversity, Vulnerability, and Neurodevelopment project. The mothers provided self-reported data on experiences of adversity in the form of stress and trauma, during pregnancy. Assessments used were Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (Childhood Trauma Questionnaire; Bernstein et al., 2003), Adverse Childhood Experiences Questionnaire (Adverse Childhood Experiences Questionnaire; Felitti et al., 1998), Krieger Experiences of Discrimination Scale (Krieger et al., 2005), and the Jackson, Hogue, Phillips Contextualized Stress Measure (Jackson, Hogue, Phillips Contextualized Stress Measure; Jackson et al., 2005). They also provided

samples of blood to biologically assess the epigenetic markers in both mother and children to evaluate stress exposure. This method was employed to estimate biological age in comparison to their chronological age to determine if there was any acceleration. The researchers conducted assessments through multiple developmental stages up to three years of age. Key findings showed that maternal adversities, including both personal trauma and systemic discrimination, may contribute to heightened emotional sensitivity in the next generation, likely through biological aging process.

Zhou et al. (2022) investigated the relationship between racism, posttraumatic stress symptoms and racial disparities during the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. Utilizing data from a national sample of U.S. adults, researchers used a sample of 2,019 individuals that mirror U.S. demographics in gender, race, residency, income and educational attainment. The study measured the relationship posttraumatic stress symptoms and racial disparities had during the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of the study was to determine how experiences of racism and pandemic-related stressors played a role in mental health outcomes on different racial groups in the United States. Using statistical analysis, the researchers examined how these factors impacted different racial groups measuring the results with personal experiences as well as vicarious and systemic forms of racism. They also measured stressors specific to the pandemic such as health concerns, economic challenges, and social disruptions. The key findings of the study concluded that racism exacerbates mental health disparities during times of crisis. The study identifies racism as a key predictor for posttraumatic stress symptoms. The study suggested that in order to mitigate the effects on mental health, both direct and indirect

racism must be addressed.

Similarly, Moody et al. (2023), conducted a study to examine how maternal experiences of racial discrimination influenced the stress hormones of their children to highlight transgenerational effects from discrimination. Participants were 120 Black youths from New Orleans, Louisiana. Youths underwent the Trier Social Stress Test (Phan et al., 2017), a standard protocol that elicits a stress response from public speaking and mental arithmetic tasks performed in front of an evaluative audience. For the mothers, they self-reported experiences of racial discrimination measured by the Experiences of Discrimination Scale (Experiences of Discrimination Scale; Krieger, 2005). The researchers tested the cortisol, dehydroepiandrosterone, and testosterone levels of the youths multiple times before and after the stress test. The key results of the study showed that maternal experiences of racial discrimination were associated with stronger positive coupling between cortisol and testosterone in their children. The youths with higher baseline testosterone levels whose mothers reported higher levels of racial discrimination had a blunted cortisol recovery during the stressor. The study highlighted how the maternal experiences of racial discrimination can impact the biological stress regulation of their children, showing that racial discrimination can extend beyond those it directly affects to subsequent generations.

Sheikh et al. (2024) conducted a study to explore the role racial identity played in the relationship between race related stress and trauma symptoms among Black American women. Using a sample of 222 Black women from various communities, researchers used Latent Profile Analysis to identify three distinct racial identity profiles. The

undifferentiated personality is low on all dimensions of racial identity. The detached identity has a low centrality and private regard with a moderate public regard. The nationalist identity has high centrality and private regard with low public regard. The key results of the study were that there was a significant difference in how racial identity was influential in being vulnerable to trauma symptoms. There was a weaker link between those with a nationalist profile between race related stress and trauma symptoms which suggested that strong racial identity centrality and private regard may act as protective factor. Those with undifferentiated and detached identities had a stronger association which indicated there was a higher susceptibility to mental health impacts of race-related stress. This research highlights how complex racial identity is because it can buffer or exacerbate the psychological effects of racial stressors which suggests mental health interventions should be nuanced.

Sosso et al. (2020) examined how internalized racism affects the link between racial discrimination and anxiety symptoms among 157 first year Black college students attending a predominantly White university in the southeastern United States. Participants consisted of 107 females and 50 males that were recruited through the university's registrar's office who self-identified as Black. To conduct the study, researchers conducted pre and posttests eight months apart measuring racial discrimination, internalized racism, and anxiety symptom distress. Racial discrimination was measured by the Daily Life Experiences Scale (Daily Life Experiences Scale; Harrell, 1994). Internalized racism was measured by the Internalized Racial Oppression Scale (Internalized Racial Oppression Scale; Bailey et al., 2011) which consists of four

subscales measuring internalization of negative stereotypes, belief in biased representation of history, alteration to physical appearance, and hair change. Anxiety symptoms were measured by the Symptom Checklist 90-Revised (Symptom Checklist-90-R: Derogatis, 1996), focusing on the anxiety subscale.

Key results of the study indicated higher levels of internalized racism, particularly negative stereotypes and alteration of physical appearance intensified the association between anxiety and racial discrimination at the second assessment. Indicating that those who seek to change their physical appearance to appeal to more Eurocentric standards and accept negative societal beliefs about their racial group may be more vulnerable to the psychological effects of discrimination. The study also indicated that those who rejected negative internalized beliefs had a weaker connection between racial discrimination and anxiety symptoms. The study highlights that external racial stressors as well as internalized racism play a role in shaping mental health outcomes, indicating the need for both to be addressed to improve the psychological well-being of Black students.

Keum et al. (2022) investigated the correlation between hate crimes and hate groups at the state level and the impact online and offline racism had on mental health. Data was collected from 935 racial/ethnic minority adults. Hate crime data was collected from 2021 FBI Hate Crime Statistics. Online and offline racism were assessed through self-reported surveys, Perceived Online Racism Scale (PORS; Keum & Miller, 2017), Perceived Ethnic Discrimination Questionnaire-Community Version Brief (Perceived Ethnic Discrimination Questionnaire-Community; Brondolo et al., 2005) and Perceived

Stress Scale (PSS-10; Cohen et al., 1983). Using a multilevel model, they analyzed the data to focus on individual experiences and the broader context at the state level. The key findings of the study were that higher levels of state-level hate crimes and a greater presence of hate groups intensified the negative impact on both online and offline racism. The study suggests that systemic hate using state level indicators exacerbates the psychological distress associated with personal experiences of racism. When addressing mental health effects of racism, this study highlights the necessity to consider the broader societal context. Interventions may be more effective if systemic hate is diminished by lowering hate groups and hate crimes within communities.

DeAngelis (2022) conducted a study to determine if residing in higher-status neighborhoods mitigated the psychological stress responses among Black Americans or if these potential health benefits were counteracted by racism-related stressors. Data was pulled from Vanderbilt University's Nashville Stress and Health Study. There were 1,252 Black and White participants, where 194 Blacks were the primary sampling unit in Davidson County, Tennessee. To conduct the study, the researcher assessed the neighborhood status looking at median household income, educational attainment, and employment rates. Participants were interviewed in their homes or on the campus of Vanderbilt University. The next day interviewers collected biomarkers in the form of urine, intravenous blood, blood pressure measurements, and anthropometric measures. Participants reported their experiences of perceived discrimination and goal-striving stress. Key findings from the study found that Black individuals residing in higher-status areas reported more discrimination, which linked to higher psychological stress negating

the potential health benefits of living in affluent neighborhoods. Implications highlighted from this study is that improving socioeconomic conditions may not be sufficient to enhance health outcomes in Black Americans if racism-related stressors persist.

Thomas-Hawkins et al. (2022) conducted a study to examine 788 registered nurses employed in New Jersey hospitals to determine how Black nurses were affected by race, COVID-19 worry, racial microaggressions and the racial climate of the workplace affected their emotional well-being in comparison to their White counterparts. Conducting a cross-sectional correlation study, an online survey was given quantitative scales and open-ended questions. Emotional distress was measured by the Well-Being Index (WBI; Dyrbye, 2016). Racial climate was measured by the Racial Climate Scale (RCS; Watts, 1991). Racial microaggressions was measured by the Workplace Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS; Nadal, 2011). COVID-19 worry was assessed by three single item measures conducted by a 4-point scale that measured knowledge, preparedness and concerns during pandemic outbreaks. Key results found that nonwhite nurses reported significantly higher levels of emotional distress compared to their White counterparts. They also experienced more racial microaggressions and had a perception that the workplace had a more negative racial climate. High levels of concern over COVID-19 was associated with emotional distress among all nurses, but with a disproportionate impact on nonwhite nurses. The study also found that there was a link between workplace racism and institutional racial climate was a significant mediation between race and emotional distress. The conjunction of systemic racism and the pandemic amplified emotional distress for nonwhite nurses.

Anderson et al. (2023) conducted a study to investigate the relationships between racial socialization, experiences of racial discrimination, and psychological distress of middle-aged Black men and women. Data was collected from the Child Health and Development Studies, a longitudinal cohort that follows a group of Black individuals from the prenatal period through mid-life. Using a sample of 244 participants based in Northern California, they were approximately 50 years old at the time of the assessment. Through structured interviews and questionnaires that focused on racial discrimination, racial socialization, and psychological distress. Researchers used The Racial Socialization Scale (Sanders Thompson, 1994, 1999), the Lifetime Discrimination Scale (Williams et al., 1997), and the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K6; Kessler et al., 2003).

Using a multiple regression analysis separately for men and women, the study assessed direct associations between racial discrimination, racial socialization, and psychological distress. It evaluated whether racial socialization moderated the relationship between psychological distress and racial discrimination. It also controlled for childhood factors that included socioeconomic status, internalizing symptoms, parental marital separation, and number of siblings. The key results of the study was that approximately 70% of participants experienced at least one major discriminatory event where men had higher reports of discrimination which had a significant effect on psychological distress. In women, there was no link found between reported discrimination and psychological distress, also racial socialization did not appear to moderate this relationship. The study highlights that racial socialization during childhood

serves as a protective factor against the psychological impacts of racial discrimination for Black men. It suggests that gender specific approaches may be necessary when addressing mental health impacts of racial discrimination.

Guerrero et al. (2023) investigated the relationship between racial discrimination experienced during late adolescence and subsequent mental health outcomes. Data from the Transition into Adulthood Supplement of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics was used to pull 661 participants between the ages of 18 and 21 years of age. The study used the Everyday Discrimination Scale (Everyday Discrimination Scale; Williams et al., 1997) to measure racial discrimination, the Kessler Six (K6; Kessler, 2003) to measure psychological distress, and the Mental Health Continuum Short Form (Mental Health Continuum Short Form; Lamers, 2011) to measure emotional well-being. The study used a generalized linear mixed model for the analysis. Approximately 25% of the participants reported high levels of racial discrimination which had a significant association with worse psychological distress. Key results of the study found that racial discrimination during late adolescence has a detrimental impact on mental health. It highlights the need for targeted mental health interventions and support systems to address challenges that are unique to adolescents experiencing racial discrimination.

Summary

The literature reviewed in this chapter focused on the intersection of microaggressions, emotional reactivity and psychological distress. The research showed the persistent impact of racial microaggressions as a form of systemic discrimination that is demonstrated through subtle, everyday exchanges that contribute to chronic stress and

adverse emotional outcomes, specifically among marginalized populations (Perez Huber & Solorzano, 2015; Seiler, 2023). Grounded in minority stress theory this literature review highlights how both distal and proximal stressors shape the mental health experiences of individuals who are subject to racial microaggressions (Meyer, 1995; Seiler 2023).

These studies indicate there is a role media plays as both a perpetrator and a potential platform to challenge racial biases showing evidence that media representation influences emotional responses and societal perceptions of racialized groups (Venegas et al., 2021, Xu et al., 2023). Additionally, research demonstrates the widespread effects of microaggressions on emotional and psychological well-being that range from heightened distress to long-term mental health consequences (Knighton et al., 2022; DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2023). Developing cultural competence and media literacy emerged as key strategies for reducing harmful impacts and fostering a more inclusive social environment (Venegas et al., 2021).

This chapter identified the gap in the existing literature, while the chronic effects of microaggressions are well-known, less is known about the acute emotional reactivity to racially charged stimuli, specifically in the context of media. This gap provided the foundation for the present study, which examined how exposure to microaggressions influences emotional responses to emotionally charged movie scenes. The findings should deepen our understanding of the mechanisms linking microaggressions to psychological distress. The literature reviewed in this chapter affirm the necessity for continued research into microaggressions, particularly how they intersect with emotional

and psychological health as well as the importance of interventions that are targeted to address the effects (Sosso et al., 2020, Keum et al., 2022).

Chapter 3 provides a comprehensive overview of the research design, rationale, methodology, and threats to the validity of the current study. The chapter details the selection of movies, participant demographics, and the instruments utilized to measure ethnicity and attitudes. In addition, it outlines the methodological approach employed in detail to conduct the study to investigate the impact chronic exposure to microaggressions has on acute emotional reactivity to external stressors.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this quantitative study was to investigate the impact of self-reported exposure to microaggressions on emotional reactivity and distress in response to an emotionally laden movie scene among African American adults. By examining the relationship between chronic exposure to microaggression and acute emotional responses, this study contributes to the understanding of how minority stress impacts psychological well-being and inform interventions to mitigate the adverse effects of microaggressions on mental health.

In this chapter, the procedures that were used to conduct the study are described. The first section of the chapter details the research design used for the study. The second section covers the methodology of the study, which includes recruiting participants, sample size, strategy for sampling, power analysis, data collection, and any potential risks to participants and informed consent. The third section describes the instruments that were used in the study and what methods were used to verify the instruments' validity and reliability. The fourth section details the methods used for data analysis while the last section presents ethical concerns and how they will be handled.

Research Design and Rationale

This section provides in-depth analysis of the research design and reasons to support the selected design. This dissertation was conducted to investigate how prior exposure to microaggressions affects changes in distress levels when individuals are exposed to an emotionally provocative movie scene.

Research Questions

Research Question 1: Does prior exposure to microaggressions predict greater emotional reactivity to an emotionally laden movie scene?

H₀1: Prior exposure to microaggressions does not predict greater emotional reactivity to an emotionally provocative movie scene.

H₁1: Prior exposure to microaggressions predicts greater emotional reactivity to an emotionally provocative movie scene.

Research Question 2: Are individuals with higher microaggression exposure more likely to report greater changes in distress levels compared to those with lower exposure?

H₀2: Individuals with higher microaggression exposure are not more likely to report greater changes in distress levels compared to those with lower exposure.

H₁2: Individuals with higher microaggression exposure are more likely to report greater changes in distress levels compared to those with lower exposure.

Research Question 3: Do demographic factors (e.g., age, gender, marital status, household income, basic education, and employment status) moderate the relationship between microaggression exposure and changes in distress?

H₀3: Demographic factors (e.g., age, gender, marital status, household income, basic education, and employment status) do not moderate the relationship between microaggression exposure and changes in distress.

H₁3: Demographic factors (e.g., age, gender, marital status, household income, basic education, and employment status) do moderate the relationship between microaggression exposure and changes in distress.

Methodology

Target Population

The target population for this study was African American adults who were 18 years of age and older. Research on microaggressions often uses diverse racial and ethnic samples, but fewer studies assess African American populations exclusively. By focusing on African American adults, this study highlights unique cultural and racial stressors that might contribute to emotional vulnerability. Moreover, by focusing exclusively on African Americans, studies can more accurately measure the impact of racial microaggressions and structural uncertainties on anxiety, depression, and overall well-being through quantitative assessments of these stressors (Knighton et al., 2022; Seiler, 2023). A sample size of only 173 participants was needed, which is discussed further in the following sections.

Sampling Strategy

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling, which involves selecting individuals who meet specific criteria relevant to the study (Burkholder et al., 2016). In this case, eligible participants were African American adults aged 18 years or older. As the researcher, I implemented the following procedures to recruit and screen participants for eligibility. First, potential participants were informed of the study's eligibility requirements through a brief overview provided on the Zoho Survey platform before indicating interest. Zoho Recruit was instructed to use its database to identify participants who met the two eligibility criteria—being African American and at least 18 years of age; if a participant's responses indicated they did not meet these criteria, the survey

automatically prevented them from proceeding. Ineligible participants were exited from the survey and shown a *Thank You* message (Appendix A), while eligible participants were permitted to continue and complete the survey. Additional details regarding specific survey items are presented in later sections.

Sample Size and Power Analysis

G*Power 4.0 power analysis (Faul et al., 2007) was used to determine the estimated sample size needed. Using a multiple regression analysis as the basis for the power analysis with an estimated statistical power set at .80, an effect size of .10 (medium effect size), and alpha at .05 it was estimated using G*Power 4.0 a sample size of 150 participants were needed. However, to adjust for attrition, an additional 15% was added to the sample size for a total of 173.

Participant Recruitment

For participant recruitment, the internet service, Zoho Recruit was used to recruit participants for the study. Zoho Recruit is a global market research tool that provides the opportunity to purchase responses to their surveys, and it provides secure online survey collection. This platform allows a researcher to create the survey that has been described here, specify the eligibility requirements for the participants being sought, and select the number of responses needed. Zoho Survey first posts a recruitment flyer, the overview of the study authored by me, the researcher, as means to inform potential participants of an opportunity for research participation (see Appendix B). Zoho Recruit selected participants who responded to the flyer, based on the research criteria to ensure that participants met the eligibility requirements. After this, the survey sent these participants

an IRB-approved informed consent form for their consideration to consent to participate in the study.

Informed Consent and Potential Risks to Participants

Conducting research can be intrusive to the lives of the participants. According to the American Psychological Association (2017), before participants consent to take part in research, they should know the purpose of the research, the duration of the study, procedures involved, their rights to volunteer, decline and cease participation even after initial informed consent as well as any risks involved in their participation and means to allow potential participants to ask questions about the research. The step to provide informed consent is necessary because participants should be properly informed about all aspects of the research before they are expected to make an informed decision regarding their participation. Confidentiality regarding participant information and data is an ethical requirement when conducting research as well as ensuring no harm comes to the participants. An informed consent form was built into the online survey presented by Zoho Recruit as the first step after participants notify Zoho Recruit they are interested in the study, but before any questionnaire or survey items are presented to the participant. If participants gave their consent, they advanced to the next part of the study that included specific questionnaire items in the Zoho Survey. If they did not give their consent, they received a *Thank You Message* (Appendix A) for their time and were automatically exited from accessing the remainder of the survey. The informed consent form laid out the purpose of the study, the benefits, as well as the risks in clear language.

Data Collection

Participants were recruited, and data collected through Zoho Recruit. After reviewing the study overview (Appendix B) and providing informed consent (Appendix B) participants would proceed to the scales measuring the dependent variables. There are 45 questions on the REMS and six questions in the STAI-6. These 51 questions were used to develop the independent and dependent measures for microaggressions and distress, respectively. Both questionnaires were completed prior to watching the three movie scenes. Estimated time to complete these surveys was 15 minutes. After viewing the movie scenes, the participants completed the six questions from the STAI-6 again, which took about 5 minutes to complete.

The three movies selected for the study were chosen for their historical context in American cinema and their emotionally provocative (sadness, anger, or anxiety) scenes concerning racial discrimination in American society and were rated as such by myself and my committee which is discussed further below. The movies chosen were also not recent releases to increase the chances the participants had not seen them before. The movie scenes were 3-5 minutes in length and provided via YouTube links embedded in the survey. YouTube is a widely used online video-sharing platform that allows users to upload, share and interact with video content across various genres such as education, entertainment, and news (Burgess & Green, 2018). After watching the movie scenes, participants repeated the STAI-6 to determine if their level of distress changed after watching the emotionally provocative movie scenes. Once participants were done with the post-test, the survey was completed, and they were reminded of the resources

provided in the informed consent letter should they feel emotionally distressed beyond the length of the survey (Appendix B).

The collected data were uploaded to SPSS version 30.0 and encoded according to the Likert items and the scale for positively and negatively worded items. I monitored the progress of the data collection to determine if the questionnaires needed to be available longer to ensure sufficient data was received for the statistical analyses to be reached. Completed questionnaire data were monitored daily to check whether the data met the criteria needed to be sufficient for the power analysis. I collected the data over a period of approximately 4 days once the power requirements were fulfilled.

Instrumentation and Operationalization of Constructs

In this section, first, the independent variables are listed and defined followed by definitions of the dependent variables and how these are measured. The section ends with a descriptive list of instrumental questionnaires designed to facilitate the study.

Independent Variables

In this study, the independent variable was the self-reported exposure to microaggressions measured by the REMS. In this context, microaggressions are defined as “a form of everyday racism” that typically consists of racial slurs or insults, whether implicitly or explicitly expressed towards persons of color (Perez Huber & Solorzano, 2015, p. 298).

Selection of Movies

To select movies for this study, I focused on movies that centered on racial themes that were produced prior to 2007. This condition was established to increase the

likelihood that participants had not previously viewed the selected movies, as the youngest eligible participants would have been born in 2007. However, due to the historical and cultural significance of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and its profound impact on American society, I chose to include the 2016 film of the same name, despite its markedly different message. While there is a possibility that participants have seen the 2016 movie due to its more recent release, I am confident that the selected scene would still evoke a strong emotional response. Urwand (2018) asserts the foundation of the relationship between African Americans and media, specifically cinema, was established in the early 20th century with *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which contributed to the construct of what he describes as “the Black image in a White mind” (p. 45). This film elicited intense emotional reactions and played a central role in reinforcing and perpetuating harmful racial stereotypes. In order to give context to the movies so the scenes were not completely foreign, I used ChatGPT to create a one sentence synopsis of each of the three movies (OpenAI, 2025).

The three movies that made the final list were chosen because they met the selection criteria and contained emotionally provocative scenes—eliciting sadness, anger, or anxiety—that were readily available on a public platform. The selected films were *American History X* (Kaye, 1998), *The Birth of a Nation* (Parker, 2016), and *Glory* (Zwick, 1989). In order to select the scenes, the researcher chose three scenes from each movie with strong emotional displays via YouTube so that they were easily accessible. Then each person on the dissertation committee watched the movie clips and rated them 1 (*no anxiety/stress*) to 5 (*extreme anxiety/stress*) to determine which movie clips would

make the final cut. The movie clip with the highest average score was the final selection for each movie. There was one movie where two clips rated the same average score, I chose the one with the highest individuals scores for the final selection (Appendix D).

Data Collection Sequence

The following steps outline the sequence participants will follow:

1. **Informed Consent:** Participants signed the informed consent to proceed.
2. **Demographic Eligibility Questionnaire:** Participants completed the eligibility questionnaire verifying they are African American and 18 years or older.
3. **Baseline Measurement:** Participants completed the 6 questions on the Six Item State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI-6).
4. **Exposure:** Participants completed the 45 questions on the Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS).
5. **Movie Scenes:** Participants watched one scene from each of the three movies selected for the study.
6. **Post-Movie Measurement:** Participants repeated completing the 6 questions on the Six Item State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI-6) immediately after watching the three movie scenes.
7. **Completion:** Once all questionnaires were completed, the participants role in the study was finished. The expected time to complete this data collection sequence was approximately 30 minutes or less.

Measurement of Independent and Dependent Variables: Instruments and Assessment

The Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS), developed by Nadal (2011), is a validated self-report measure designed to assess the frequency and impact of microaggressions experienced by individuals from racial and ethnic minority groups. It captures various forms of microaggressions, including assumptions of inferiority, second-class citizenship, and environmental invalidations. In this study, the REMS served as the independent variable, quantifying participants' exposure to microaggressions. The Six-Item State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI-6) is a brief version of the widely used STAI, which measures transient changes in anxiety levels. It distinguishes between state anxiety (temporary emotional responses to stressors) and trait anxiety (a stable predisposition to anxiety). The STAI-6 was used as the dependent variable to assess changes in anxiety levels following exposure to microaggressions, allowing researchers to evaluate the psychological impact of these experiences. Both instruments are discussed below.

REMS

This instrument captures both the frequency and types of microaggressions encountered by respondents, drawing from previous research on measuring the microaggressions of racial and ethnic minorities (e.g., Sue, Bucceri, et al., 2007, Sue, Nadal, et al., 2008; Riviera et al., 2010). The REMS consist of 45 items segmented into six separate subscales: Assumptions of Inferiority, Second-Class Citizen and Assumption of Criminality, Microinvalidations, Exoticization and Assumptions of Similarity, Environmental Microaggressions, and Workplace and School Microaggressions. Each

item on the scale reflects a specific form of microaggression. Participants responded using a 6-point Likert Scale (1 = none of the time to 6 = all of the time), reporting their experiences over the past six months. Responses of 1 (none of the time) were coded as 0 and responses 2-6 were coded as 1 which indicates any perceived experience in microaggressions. The final composite score, derived by summing responses across all six subscales, ranges from 0-45. Higher scores reflect a greater perception of microaggressions. I used the REMS composite score for each participant.

The REMS has strong psychometric properties. In an initial validation study with 407 participants which 127 were Hispanic Americans, the high internal consistency of the scale had an overall Cronbach's alpha of .928 and .905 for the Hispanic participants (Nadal, 2011). Reliability was confirmed by an analysis that supported its reliability ($\alpha = .882$). The validity was concurrent because it significantly correlated with the Racism and Life Experiences Scales-Brief Version (Harrell, 2000).

STAI-6

To assess participants' distress levels before and after viewing emotionally provocative movie scenes, this study used the Six-Item State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI-6; Marteau & Bekker, 1992). The STAI-6 specifically measures state anxiety (A-State), which is temporary, situational, and influenced by external factors. Unlike the full State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI), which assesses both state (transient) and trait (stable) anxiety, the STAI-6 is a shortened version designed for efficient measurement of immediate anxiety changes. Given that this study examined changes in distress over a short time period—specifically, before and after watching three 5-minute movie scenes –

the STAI-6 was selected for pre-post measurement due to its brevity and sensitivity to fluctuations in state anxiety. The STAI-6 is a six-item self-report measure that assesses an individual's current emotional state, specifically their levels of stress, tension, or calmness. Participants rated their feelings on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from "Not at all" to "Very much so." Three items (1, 4, and 5) are positively worded and measure calmness, meaning higher scores indicate lower anxiety. To align with the other three items, which assess stress and anxiety, these calmness-related items must be reverse-scored before calculating the total anxiety score. Once reverse-scoring was completed, all six item scores were summed to produce the raw STAI-6 score. To align with the full STAI Form, the raw STAI-6 score was converted using the following formula:

$$\text{Standardized Score} = (\text{Raw Score} / 24) \times 80$$

Where 24 is the maximum possible raw score (6 items \times 4 points). Higher scores indicate greater state anxiety at that specific moment rather than long-term anxiety tendencies.

The STAI-6 has been validated as a reliable measure of state anxiety. Marteau and Bekker (1992) reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.82, demonstrating acceptable internal consistency. Additionally, research has shown that the STAI-6 produces scores comparable to the full 20-item STAI, effectively capturing state anxiety fluctuations while maintaining measurement accuracy.

Background Characteristics of Study Participants

The Zoho platform gathers background data to describe all the participants who belong to the Zoho research group and who complete their Surveys. I migrated certain data about specific designated characteristics that describe specific aspects of the

participants in this study. I compiled a summary table based on these data to present aspects that characterize the participants of this study as a group. These characteristics included age, gender, marital status, household income, basic education, and employment status.

Eligibility Questionnaire

This first questionnaire determined eligibility for participation in the study (Appendix D). The three questions assessed the participants ethnicity whether they were African American and 18 years or older. It also assessed if they would be candid and honest in their responses. If their answers indicated they did not meet the study requirements, they were then directed to a brief message thanking them for their time and participation (Appendix A).

Data Analysis Plan

The study collected data on participants' demographic characteristics, including age, gender, marital status, household income, basic education, and employment status. Additionally, participants completed the Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS) and the Six Item State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI-6) both before and after watching an emotionally provocative movie scene. Data was collected using Zoho Recruit®. Once responses from 173 participants were obtained, the dataset was downloaded into SPSS for analysis. Below is the sequence of steps in the data analysis plan, which were followed to test all necessary statistical assumptions before performing any inferential analyses. If any assumptions were violated, appropriate statistical adjustments or alternative methods were applied. These steps ensured the results were

valid, reliable, and meaningful in understanding the impact of microaggressions on emotional reactivity.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographic information, baseline distress levels, and microaggression exposure scores. This step ensured data accuracy and provided an overview of participant characteristics before conducting inferential analyses.

Data Analysis Plan for Research Question 1

Research Question 1: Does prior exposure to microaggressions predict greater emotional reactivity to an emotionally laden movie scene?

H₀1: Prior exposure to microaggressions does not predict greater emotional reactivity to an emotionally provocative movie scene.

H₁1: Prior exposure to microaggressions predicts greater emotional reactivity to an emotionally provocative movie scene.

A simple linear regression analysis was performed to assess whether prior exposure to microaggressions predicted the degree of distress change. Before conducting this analysis, the following assumptions were tested:

Linearity: The relationship between microaggression exposure (independent variable) and distress change (dependent variable) should be linear. The test will be a scatterplot of X vs. Y, which should show a linear pattern.

Independence of Errors: The residuals should not be correlated. The test will be the Durbin-Watson test for autocorrelation.

Homoscedasticity: The variance of residuals should be consistent across all values of the independent variable. The test was the Breusch-Pagan test or White's test. These tests check if the errors (or residuals) in a regression model have constant variance. This issue is called heteroskedasticity, which means that the errors spread out unevenly, possibly making the model unreliable. A graphical check involved examining the residuals vs. fitted values plot, which should not show a funnel shape. If it does, then there is heteroskedasticity, indicating a violation of this assumption.

Normality of Residuals: The residuals should follow a normal distribution. The tests were the Shapiro-Wilk test, Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, or Anderson-Darling test. The graphical check will include a histogram and Q-Q plot of residuals.

No Multicollinearity: This assumption does not apply for simple linear regression since there is only one predictor. However, it applies to multiple regression analyses.

Data Analysis Plan for Research Question 2

Research Question 2: Are individuals with higher microaggression exposure more likely to report greater changes in distress levels compared to those with lower exposure?

H₀2: Individuals with higher microaggression exposure are not more likely to report greater changes in distress levels compared to those with lower exposure.

H₁2: Individuals with higher microaggression exposure are more likely to report greater changes in distress levels compared to those with lower exposure.

An ANCOVA was planned to assess changes in participants' STAI-6 total scores

from pre- to post-assessment, with the post-STAI-6 score as the dependent variable and the pre-STAI-6 score as a covariate. The independent variable, measured by the Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS), was used to determine whether experiences of microaggressions predicted changes in anxiety levels. By including the pre-STAI-6 score as a covariate, the analysis accounted for baseline anxiety, allowing for a clearer examination of the relationship between REMS scores and post-assessment anxiety. The assumptions for ANCOVA include:

- The dependent variable should be normally distributed within each group.
- Homogeneity of variance should be met (assessed using Levene's test).
- Homogeneity of regression slopes should be verified.

Data Analysis Plan for Research Question 3

Research Question 3: Do demographic factors (e.g., age, gender, marital status, household income, basic education, and employment status) moderate the relationship between microaggression exposure and changes in distress?

H₀₃: Demographic factors (e.g., age, gender, marital status, household income, basic education, and employment status) do not moderate the relationship between microaggression exposure and changes in distress.

H₁₃: Demographic factors (e.g., age, gender, marital status, household income, basic education, and employment status) do moderate the relationship between microaggression exposure and changes in distress.

A hierarchical multiple regression analysis (i.e., a moderation analysis) was conducted to determine whether demographic factors influence the relationship between

microaggression exposure and distress changes. This analysis follows the same assumptions as multiple regression. These assumptions are:

- **Linearity:** Scatterplots and residuals vs. fitted plot
- **Independence of errors:** Durbin-Watson test
- **Homoscedasticity:** Residuals vs. fitted plot, Breusch-Pagan or White's test
- **Normality of residuals:** Histogram, Q-Q plot, Shapiro-Wilk test
- **Multicollinearity:** Correlation matrix, Variance Inflation Factor (VIF)
- **Outliers/Influential points:** Boxplots, z-scores, Cook's distance

If a significant interaction effect is found in the hierarchical multiple regression, it will suggest that demographic factors alter the strength or direction of this relationship.

Threats to Validity

Internal Validity

According to Creswell (2014), internal validity can be a threat to the integrity of the results of a study if the procedures, treatments, or experiences of the participants compromise the researcher's ability to correctly draw inferences from the population data. Another threat to internal validity may be participant selection. Some of the participants may have characteristics that cause them to be predisposed to certain outcomes. A way to mitigate this threat is to randomly select the participants so there is equal probability of characteristics being distributed among the experimental groups (Creswell, 2014). A non-experimental study can be problematic because an independent variable can be correlated or confounded with other independent variables making it not

possible to determine if any of the independent variables have an impact that's causal to the dependent variable (Warner, 2013).

External Validity

According to Warner (2013), external validity is the extent to which the results of a study can be generalized to the participants, settings, and materials beyond what was included in the actual study. The threat to external validity is that all the results of this study may not be generalizable due to the extensive number of variables being evaluated in this study, some of which focus on two specific groups of people in the same culture. I was clear in acknowledging that this study will focus specifically on African American participants to examine the unique cultural implications within this distinct demographic group.

Another potential issue with external validity is that the emotionally provocative movie scenes used in this study, serving as substitutes for full-length movies, may not be intense enough to elicit the same level of stressors that might arise from watching the entire films. The decision to use scenes instead of full movies was made due to the prohibitive costs associated with showing the full-length films, both in terms of participant time and research funding. Moreover, copyright laws bind me from doing this. However, the short scenes chosen were some of the most iconic in the overall movies to ensure strong emotions could be evoked.

Ethical Procedures

This proposed study adhered to guidelines by the American Psychological Association Code of Conduct (APA, 2017), and permission from the Walden University

Institutional Review Board (IRB) was obtained prior to implementation of the study. According to Principal E in the APA ethics code, researchers must respect people's rights and dignity. This entails making sure that safeguards are implemented as part of the study to ensure that the participants' rights to self-determination, confidentiality and privacy are respected. Each of these are discussed here and the safeguards that were implemented are described.

Participants' rights to self-determination were respected in the procedures for informed consent to participate in the study. In the consent form for the study in Appendix B, participants were fully informed of the processes regarding the study from initial contact to completion. Having informed consent ensures that the participants' autonomy is being upheld (Sil & Das, 2017). This is a basic ethics principle. Directly making the participants aware of the requirements of the study and what will be asked of them ensures their autonomy is respected. Further, the consent form stated that participation in the study is voluntary, therefore participants were not to be coerced in any way to engage in the study, and they were allowed to leave the study at any time.

According to Surmiak (2018), confidentiality is the process of ensuring that participants' identity and their responses are not revealed in any manner. I ensured anonymity and confidentiality, so that participants' rights were respected, and they were more comfortable in volunteering for the study. Anonymity was ensured through participants' internet participation such that I had no access to the participants' identity or anything else about the participant such as what s/he looks like. Confidentiality was ensured in that no information about an individual participant or his or her personal

responses during the research will ever be made public in any way.

The Zoho platform used to conduct the Survey for the study provided anonymity for the participants. I only had access to the background data described earlier, and Zoho provided these data in aggregate form rather than at the individual participant level. The Zoho Corporation protects their data against cybercrime so that user data is kept private and confidential with SIEM Log 360 for threat detection and intervention to interrupt cybercrime (Zoho Corporation, 2025). The results of the study were expressed only through aggregated group data. Participants who wish to know the outcome of the study may obtain a copy of the results by searching for the completed dissertation in the ProQuest database.

Several ethical considerations arose in this study due to the sensitive nature of the racial themes in the selected movie scenes and some of the questionnaire items. Participation may have elicited strong emotions, both from recalling the films referenced in the study and from participants' potential recollection of their own experiences involving racial issues. Participants were informed in advance, through the Informed Consent form (Appendix B), about the racial comparisons that would be conducted and the racial content of certain questionnaire items. This allowed those who might have been upset or offended to decline participation. Care was taken throughout the study to minimize the risk of negative emotional responses during and after participation. Participation was strictly voluntary. The Informed Consent form also reassured participants that they would face no negative consequences if they chose to opt out at any point, even after beginning the questionnaires. Assurances of confidentiality and privacy

were provided to help alleviate potential concerns about harm resulting from their responses. All procedures adhered to the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct established by the American Psychological Association, which require that participants be informed of any limits to confidentiality and how their data will be used (American Psychological Association, 2022).

Summary

This chapter began with an introduction to the study, the methodology, and purpose and design of the research. Quantitative research methods were used to answer the research questions and address the hypotheses prompted by the research. Chapter 3 also contains the rationale for the research design, procedures for data collection with an analysis of the sample size and power analysis to justify the number of participants chosen along with instrumentation, and ethical procedures designed to protect the participants' privacy rights during the study and at the conclusion. The responses from the participants were collected on the Zoho internet platform from an anonymous electronic survey to attract participants to participate as well as minimize their risks. In Chapter 4, the results of the study will be presented and in chapter 5, analyzed, including descriptive data to describe my participant sample and data analysis linked to each research question.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this quasi-experimental quantitative study was to examine the relationship between self-reported exposure to racial microaggressions to determine if it played a role in predicting greater emotional reactivity to media that was racially charged and whether this varied based on demographic characteristics. The research questions were

- RQ 1: Does prior exposure to microaggressions predict greater emotional reactivity to an emotionally laden movie scene?
- RQ 2: Are individuals with higher microaggression exposure more likely to report greater changes in distress levels compared to those with lower exposure?
- RQ 3: Do demographic factors (e.g., age, gender, marital status, household income, basic education, and employment status) moderate the relationship between microaggression exposure and changes in distress?

The sample of this study were African Americans 18 years of age or up. Data were analyzed using simple linear regression, analysis of covariance, and hierarchical multiple regression analysis. The strategies used for data collection are discussed in this chapter along with descriptive statistics and demographics. The conclusion of this chapter will discuss the results the analyses.

Data Collection

IRB approval was granted, and data collection began. These data were collected through an anonymous online survey published in Zoho Survey between June 23rd and

June 26th, 2025. The target population was African Americans 18 and older. The Zoho Survey screened potential participants to make sure they qualified for the survey.

Before beginning the survey, participants provided consent. They completed a demographic eligibility questionnaire that verified they were African American and at least 18 years of age. They then took the baseline measurement pretest of the STAI-6 (Marteau & Bekker, 1992) followed by the REMS (Nadal, 2011) that determined their exposure to microaggressions. Next they were presented with three movie scenes that depicted various forms of racially charged content. Lastly, they took the STAI-6 again as post measurement to determine if there was a change in their distress. Additionally, they were also asked about various demographics such as age, gender, education, household income, education, employment and relationship status. Reporting demographics shows if my sample of African Americans aligns with real world movie demographics of Black moviegoers since I am testing them in RQ 3.

Using the G*Power analysis, it was concluded that 173 participants were needed as the sample size. Zoho's selection of participants was in increments of 50. A minimum of 200 responses was selected. Two hundred and sixty-two individuals began the survey, 40 partially completed the survey, while 21 were disqualified for not matching the criteria. Two hundred and one participants completed the survey, but of those, only 183 were included in the study due to the rest not watching any of the three movie scenes included in the survey. Therefore, I had more than enough participants to meet my sample size.

Once the survey closed, the scored responses were entered into a Microsoft Excel

spreadsheet securely stored on a computer that was password protected. From the spreadsheet, they were imported into SPSS Version 30.0. Descriptive statistics and regression analyses were conducted, and the results are presented in this chapter. The study's findings indicate a statistically significant relationship between high levels of prior exposure to microaggressions and those with low exposure. Moreover, demographic factors showed a statistically significant predictive effect on elevated anxiety levels.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Participants were African Americans 18 years and older. A total of 183 individuals participated in the study. Demographics for the participants were collected for the following areas: gender, education, relationship status, employment, income, and how many of the three movie scenes they watched. The sample consisted of mostly females ($n = 126$; see Table 1). The age range of the participants was between 18 to 78 with an average age of 29.5 ($SD = 11.62$; see Figure 1). Figure 2 shows the number of movie clips watched ($M = 2.46$; $SD = 0.72$). Regarding the education level of participants, 106 obtained a high school diploma. The relationship status of the participants consisted of mostly single ($n = 149$). Of the participants 139 were employed. The participants income levels showed that 56 made under \$35K, and 39 made between \$35K-49.9K. Table 2 includes descriptive statistics that show the characteristics of the rest of the participants' demographic data.

Table 1*Descriptive Statistics for Gender of Participants*

Variable	Category	Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	55	30.05%
	Female	126	68.85%
	Non-binary	0	0.00%
	Trans Man	2	1.09%
	Trans Woman	0	0.00%

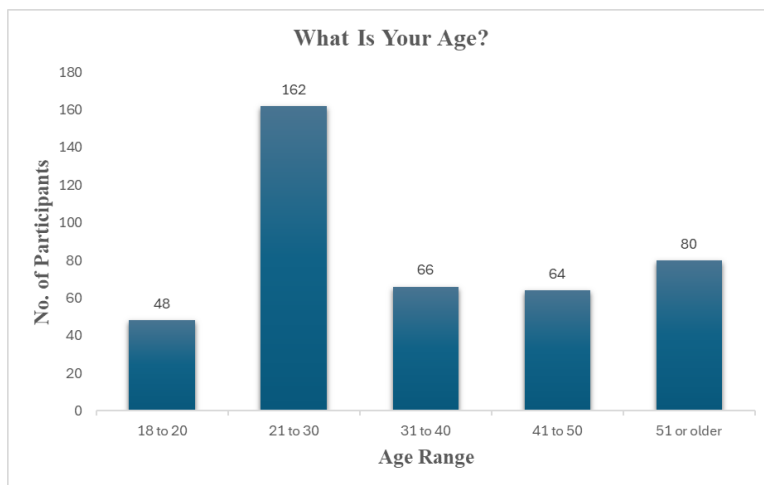
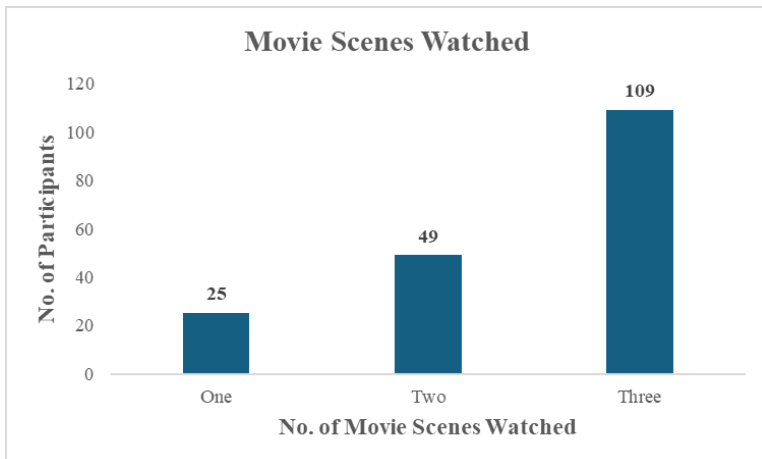
Figure 1*Descriptive Statistics for Age*

Figure 2*Descriptive Statistics for Number of Movie Scenes Watched***Table 2***Descriptive Statistics for Demographics of Education, Relationship Status, Employment and Income*

Demographics	Category	Number	Percentage
Education	Bachelors	41	22.40%
	Doctorate	9	4.92%
	Diploma	106	57.92%
	Masters	21	11.48%
	None	6	3.28%
Relationship Status	Single	149	81.42%
	Married	25	13.66%
	Divorced	7	3.83%
	Widowed	2	1.09%
Employment	Employed	139	75.96%
	Unemployed	41	22.40%
	Retired	3	1.64%
Income	Under \$35K	56	30.60%
	\$35K - \$49.9K	39	21.31%
	\$50K - \$74.9K	43	23.50%
	\$75K - \$99.9K	23	12.57%
	\$100K - \$149.9K	13	7.10%
	\$150K & Over	9	4.92%

According to FilmGrail (2024), cinema audience demographics are evolving due to generational shifts, cultural representation, and digital competition. The analysis reveals that younger audiences (particularly Gen Z and Millennials) dominate global cinema attendance, valuing diversity, immersive experiences, and socially conscious storytelling. The article also notes that women increasingly make up a larger share of moviegoers, especially when content reflects diverse gender and racial identities. Importantly, the demand for inclusive representation and emotionally resonant narratives is reshaping how studios produce and market films. African American moviegoers, in particular, have shown strong engagement with films that reflect cultural authenticity, racial identity, and social justice themes, making them a critical demographic in the evolving cinema landscape. These insights support the relevance of using racially charged media in psychological studies, as audience engagement is often influenced by identity-based experiences, especially among marginalized populations. This context strengthens the rationale for examining emotional responses to racially provocative film scenes among African American participants, as such media may act as identity triggers or reinforce lived experiences of bias and microaggression.

Statistical Assumptions

To ensure validity and reliability, all statistical analyses were preceded by tests of key assumptions. These included (a) linearity, (b) normality of residuals, (c) homoscedasticity, (d) independence of errors, (e) absence of multicollinearity (for multiple regression), (f) absence of outliers or influential points, and (g) adequate sample size. Meeting these assumptions was essential before proceeding with data analysis. The

testing of these assumptions is imbedded in the paragraphs addressing each of the research questions but below is a summary.

Assumption Summary

Across the three analyses—simple linear regression, ANCOVA, and hierarchical multiple regression—assumptions were carefully evaluated. For the simple linear regression predicting distress change from prior microaggression exposure, scatterplots confirmed linearity, the Durbin-Watson statistic supported independence of errors, residual plots indicated homoscedasticity, and both histograms and Q–Q plots supported normality of residuals. As only one predictor was included, so multicollinearity was not applicable.

Initially, an ANCOVA was planned to assess whether individuals with higher microaggression exposure reported greater changes in distress levels, with post-test STAI score as the dependent variable and pre-test STAI as a covariate. The assumption of homogeneity of regression slopes was satisfied; however, Levene's test for equality of error variances was significant ($p < .001$), indicating a violation of the homogeneity of variance assumption. Because ANCOVA is sensitive to unequal variances, the analysis was switched to an ANOVA, which is more robust to this violation, particularly with nearly equal group sizes ($n = 95$ vs. $n = 88$). The assumption of normal distribution of the dependent variable within each group was not directly tested, representing a limitation.

For the hierarchical multiple regression assessing whether demographics moderated the effect of microaggressions on distress change, all assumptions were satisfied. Linearity was confirmed through residual scatterplots, normality through

histograms and Q–Q plots, and homoscedasticity through residual plots. The Durbin-Watson statistic indicated independence of errors, VIF values below 2 confirmed no multicollinearity, and no significant outliers or influential cases were identified via Cook’s Distance and Mahalanobis distance. The sample size ($N = 183$) met established guidelines, supporting regression stability.

The primary violation occurred with the dependent variable (STAI post–pretest difference scores), which did not meet the assumption of normality. To address this, a constant of 8 was added to eliminate negative values, followed by a \log_{10} transformation [$\log(Y + 8)$]. This transformation reduced skewness, compressed higher values, and expanded lower values, thereby producing residuals more consistent with regression assumptions. After transformation, all regression models met the required assumptions, supporting the validity of the inferential analyses.

Assumptions in Research Question 1

To evaluate whether prior exposure to microaggressions predicted emotional reactivity, a simple linear regression was conducted. Prior to interpreting the results, the key assumptions were tested to ensure the validity of the analysis. The assumption of linearity was assessed via scatterplots (Figure 3), which revealed no curvature or funneling, suggesting a linear relationship between microaggression exposure and distress change. Independence of residuals was confirmed with a Durbin-Watson value of 2.087 (Table 3), falling within the acceptable range of 1.5 to 2.5. Homoscedasticity was supported by a visual inspection of residual plots, which showed consistent variance across predicted values. Additionally, the normality of residuals was verified through a

histogram (Figure 4) and normal P-P plot (Figure 5), both indicating approximate normal distribution. Since the model included only one predictor, multicollinearity was not applicable. All assumptions were satisfactorily met, confirming that the regression results were statistically valid, even though the overall model was not significant ($p = .947$), suggesting no predictive relationship (Table 4).

Figure 3

Scatterplot – Dependent Variable: Log 10+8 Distress Change

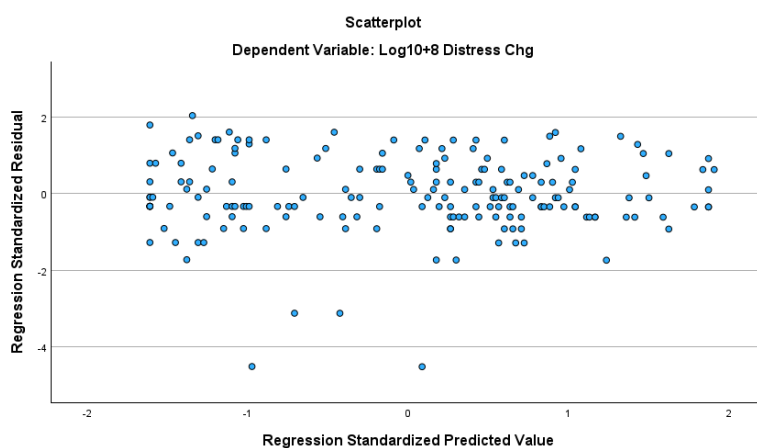


Table 3

Model Summary

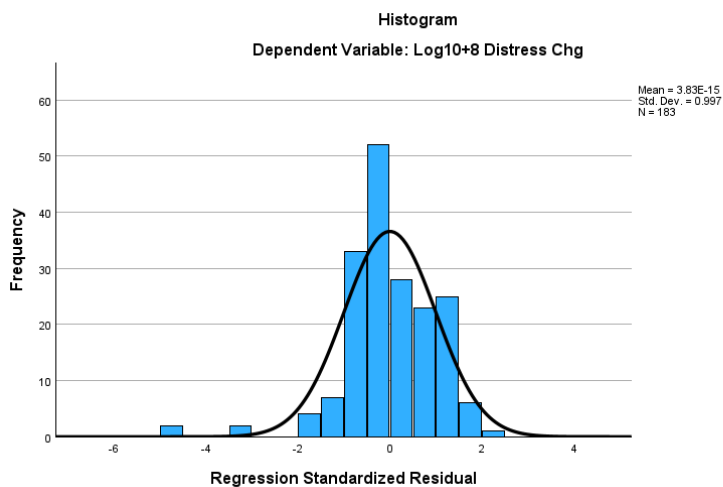
Model summary ^b					
Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	SE of estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.005 ^a	.000	-.006	.21623101310	2.087

a. Predictors: (Constant), REMS Total

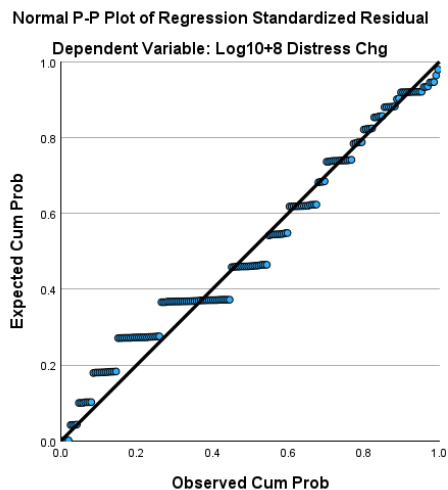
b. Dependent variable: Log10+8 Distress Chg

Figure 4

Histogram – Dependent Variable: Log10+8 Distress Change

**Figure 5**

Normal P-P Plot of Regression Standardized Residual

**Table 4**

Dependent Variable: Log10+8 Distress Change

Model		Coefficients ^a					95% CI for B		Collinearity statistics		
		Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients		t	Sig.	Lower	Upper	Tolerance	VIF
B	SE	Beta									
1	(Constant)	.974	.030		32.096	< .001	1.033				

REMS	.001	.013	.005	.067	.947	-.024	.026	1.000	1.000
Total									

a. Dependent variable: Log10+8 Distress Chg

Assumptions in Research Question 2

Initially, an ANCOVA was planned to assess whether individuals with higher microaggression exposure reported greater changes in distress levels, with post-test STAI score as the dependent variable and pre-test STAI as a covariate. However, Levene's Test for Equality of Error Variances was significant ($p < .001$), indicating a violation of the homogeneity of variance assumption. Because ANCOVA is sensitive to unequal variances, the analysis was changed to an ANOVA, which is more robust to this violation, particularly given the nearly equal group sizes ($n = 95$ vs. $n = 88$).

The assumption of homogeneity of regression slopes was examined and satisfied, as the interaction between the covariate (pre-STAI) and the independent variable (REMS exposure group) was non-significant ($p = .660$). The assumption of normal distribution of the dependent variable within each group was not directly tested in the output, representing a limitation.

To further address variance issues, the median REMS score (2.3) was used to divide participants into two subgroups (low exposure and high exposure). An independent t-test was then conducted on the log-transformed post-pre STAI difference scores. The results were significant; however, Levene's test again indicated unequal variance between subgroups (Table 6). Therefore, the decision to proceed with ANOVA rather than ANCOVA was maintained, with results interpreted cautiously.

Table 5*Test of Between-Subjects Effects*

Source	Type III sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Corrected model	731.532 ^a	3	243.844	12.817	< .001
Intercept	1440.101	1	1440.101	75.695	< .001
HiLoGroup	7.101	1	7.101	.373	.542
TotalSTAI Score	723.319	1	723.319	38.020	< .001
HiLoGroup* TotalSTAI Score	3.697	1	3.697	.194	.660
Error	3405.462	179	19.025		
Total	15833.000	183			
Corrected Total	4136.995	182			

Note. Dependent variable: Total STAI post test

a. $R^2 = .177$ (Adjusted $R^2 = .163$)

Table 6*Levene's Test Equality of Error Variances*

Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances ^a			
F	df1	df2	Sig.
12.690	1	181	< .001

Note. Tests the null hypothesis that the error variance of the dependent variable is equal across groups

Dependent variable: TotalSTAI post test.

a. Design: Intercept + TotalSTAI Score + HiLoGroup

Assumptions in Research Question 3

To determine whether demographic factors moderated the relationship between microaggression exposure and distress change, a hierarchical multiple regression was performed. All key assumptions for multiple regression were evaluated. The linearity assumption was met, as scatterplots of residuals showed a consistent linear pattern (Figure 6). Normality of residuals was supported by the histogram (Figure 7) and Q-Q plot (Figures 8 and 9), which indicated an approximately normal distribution. Homoscedasticity was visually assessed and appeared acceptable, with no obvious heteroscedastic pattern in the residual plots. While the Durbin-Watson statistic was not

explicitly reported, no patterns in residuals suggested issues with independence. Multicollinearity was ruled out, as all Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values were below 2, well within acceptable limits. No extreme outliers or influential points were detected based on Cook's Distance and Mahalanobis distance values (Table 7). Given that all assumptions were met, the regression results are considered valid and reliable, supporting the conclusion that certain demographic variables may moderate the relationship between microaggressions and distress changes (final model $p = .036$: Table 8).

Figure 6

Scatterplot – Dependent Variable: Distress Change Post-Pre

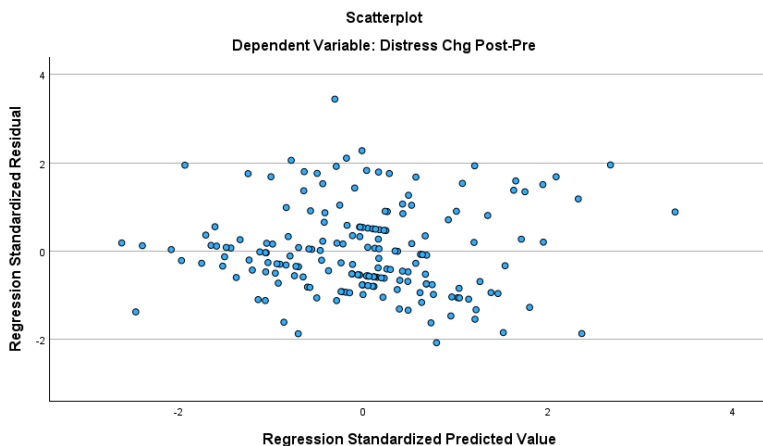


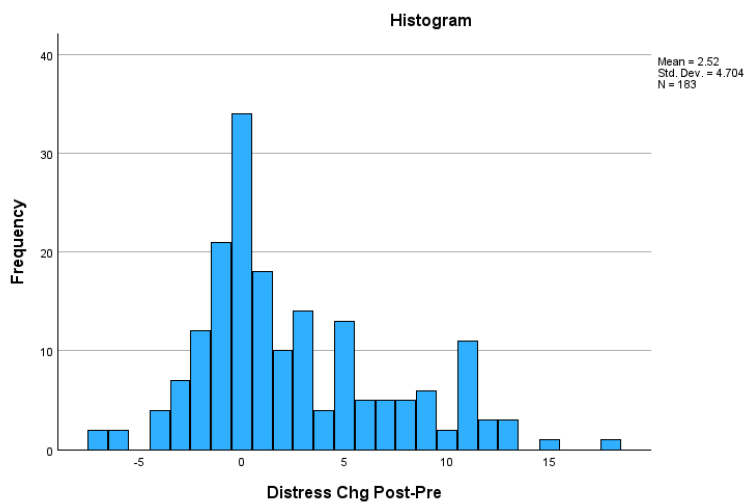
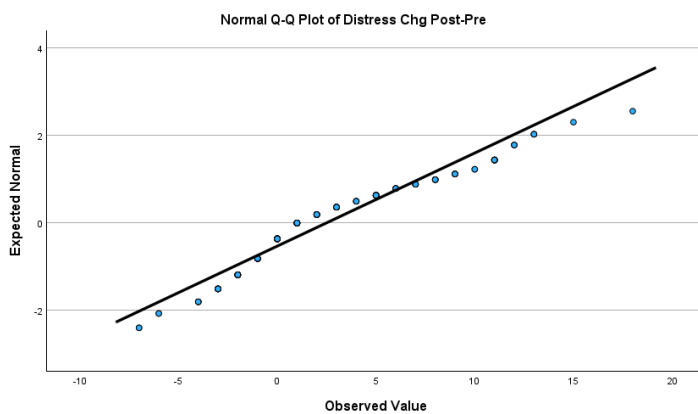
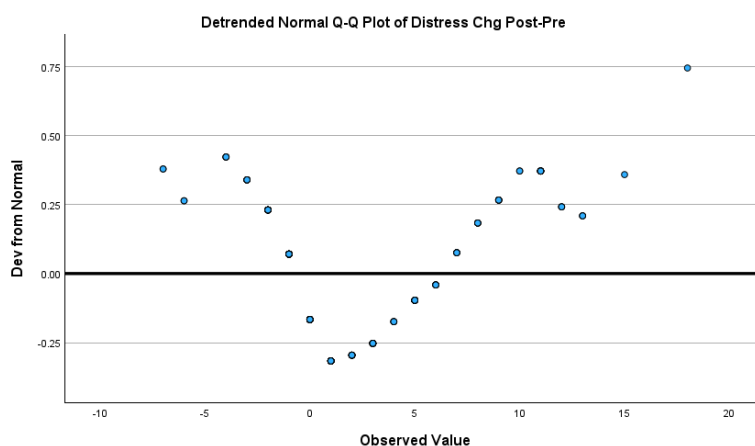
Figure 7*Histogram Distress Change Post-Pre***Figure 8***Normal Q-Q Plot Distress Change Post-Pre*

Figure 9

Detrended Normal Q-Q Plot of Distress Change Post-Pre

**Table 7**

Residuals Statistics

Residuals Statistics ^a					
	Min	Max	Mean	SD	N
Predicted value	-.87	6.90	2.52	1.296	183
Std. predicted value	-2.612	3.380	.000	1.000	183
SE of predicted value	.521	1.990	.929	.259	183
Adjusted predicted value	-1.01	6.43	2.51	1.321	183
Residual	-9.552	15.875	.000	4.522	183
Std. residual	-2.071	3.442	.000	.981	183
Stud. residual	-2.160	3.500	.001	1.005	183
Deleted residual	-10.384	16.407	.008	4.755	183
Stud. deleted residual	-2.183	3.618	.003	1.011	183
Mahal. Distance	1.330	32.910	6.962	4.906	183
Cook's distance	.000	.100	.007	.013	183
Centered leverage value	.007	.181	.038	.027	183

a. Dependent variable: Distress Chg Post-Pre

Table 8

Model Summary

Model Summary ^c									
Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	SE of the estimate	R ² change	F change	df1	df2	Sig. f change
1	.053	.003	-.003	4.711	.003	.516	1	181	.473

2	.276	.076	.039	4.612	.073	2.308	6	175	.036
a. Predictors: (Constant), REMS Total									
b. Predictors: (Constant), REMS Total, Relationship Status, Education, Gender, Income, Employment, Age									
c. Dependent variable: Distress Ch Post-Pre									

Inferential Statistical Analysis

In exploring RQ 2, an ANCOVA was initially planned with group status (high vs. low REMS exposure) as the independent variable, post-STAI score as the dependent variable, and pre-STAI score as the covariate. However, assumption testing revealed that the STAI difference scores were not normally distributed, requiring a log transformation. After transformation, participants were divided into subgroups based on the median REMS score of 2.3, with those scoring below 2.3 classified as Low REMS and those above 2.3 classified as High REMS. Levene's test indicated a violation of homogeneity of variance, making ANCOVA inappropriate; therefore, the analysis was changed to ANOVA, which is more robust to such violations. An independent t-test was then conducted to compare the two subgroups, consistent with this adjustment. Results showed a statistically significant main effect for REMS group, $F(1, 180) = 38.12, p < .001, \eta^2 = .175$, as well as a significant covariate effect of pre-STAI score, $F(1, 180) = 80.60, p < .001$ (see Table 9). These findings supported the alternative hypothesis: individuals with higher microaggression exposure reported significantly greater changes in distress levels than those with lower exposure, even after accounting for baseline anxiety.

Table 9*Test of Between-Subjects Effects*

Source	Type III sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.	Partial eta squared
Corrected model	727.835 ^a	2	363.918	19.214	< .001	.176
Intercept	1526.516	1	1526.516	80.598	< .001	.309
TotalSTAI Score	721.890	1	721.890	38.115	< .001	.175
HiLoGroup	3.652	1	3.652	.193	.661	.001
Error	3409.159	180	18.940			
Total	15833.000	183				
Corrected total	4136.995	182				

Note. Dependent variable: Total STAI- Post Test

a. $R^2 = .176$ (Adjusted $R^2 = .167$)

Table 10*Coefficients^a*

Model		Unstandardized B	Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	T	Sig.
1	(Constant)	2.923	.661		4.423	<.001
	REMS Scale Total	-.200	.278	-.053	-.718	.473
2	(Constant)	-.650	2.323		-.280	.780
	REMS Scale Total	.010	.289	.003	.033	.973
	Gender	1.505	.724	.153	2.078	.039
	Age	.086	.032	.212	2.645	.009
	Education	-.264	.332	-.059	-.795	.428
	Income	-.011	.243	-.003	-.044	.965
	Relationship Status	-.104	.634	-.013	-.164	.870
	Employment	-.863	.755	-.087	-1.143	.255

In exploring RQ3, a hierarchical multiple regression was conducted to assess whether demographic variables moderated the relationship between REMS scores and distress change. In Model 1, REMS alone did not significantly predict distress ($R^2 = .003$, $p = .473$). In Model 2, after including demographics (age, gender, education, income, employment, relationship status), the overall model was significant, $F(7, 175) = 2.06$, $p = .036$, $R^2 = .076$. More specifically, gender ($\beta = 1.505$, $p = .039$) and age ($\beta = .086$, $p =$

.009) were significant positive predictors to distress indicated by Table 10. However, no significant interaction terms were entered, so this indicates partial moderation or confounding rather than full moderation. Based on this analysis, partial support was found for the alternative hypothesis (H₁₃). While the overall moderation model was significant, only age and gender levels emerged as meaningful predictors of distress change. Full moderation by demographic factors was not supported and indicated by Table 8.

Summary

The results of this study offer mixed findings. Microaggression exposure alone did not predict emotional reactivity (RQ1), but grouping individuals by high or low exposure levels to microaggression showed significant differences in distress responses (RQ2). Demographic factors, specifically age and gender, added predictive value to distress outcomes (RQ3), suggesting nuanced interactions between race-based stressors and older Black women. This group were more likely to have higher scores in changes in distress. These findings are discussed in the next chapter in relation to Minority Stress Theory, prior research, and implications for intervention.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this quasi-experimental quantitative study was to examine the relationship between exposure to racial microaggressions and emotional reactivity to racially provocative media, and whether this reactivity was moderated by demographic characteristics. Grounded in MST (Meyer, 1995), this study used simple linear regression, ANOVA, and hierarchical multiple regression analyses to answer three research questions. This chapter presents a summary of key findings, interpretation of results in the context of the theoretical framework and prior literature, limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and implications for positive social change.

Interpretation of the Findings

The findings of this study yielded mixed outcomes across the three research questions. For RQ 1, a simple linear regression did not reveal a statistically significant predictive relationship between exposure to racial microaggressions (measured by the REMS) and emotional reactivity (measured by the STAI-6), thus leading to failing to reject the null hypothesis. However, RQ 2 provided stronger results. When REMS scores were divided into high and low microaggression exposure groups based on a median split, ANOVA revealed statistically significant differences in distress changes between the two groups. This finding supports the alternative hypothesis, suggesting that individuals with higher exposure to microaggressions experienced greater changes in emotional distress after viewing racially charged media. In RQ 3, the hierarchical multiple regression analysis showed that while REMS scores alone did not significantly predict distress change, the inclusion of demographic variables, particularly gender and

age, significantly improved the model. That is, older women were more likely to have higher scores in changes in distress. These results indicate partial moderation and provide nuanced insights into the role age and gender play in emotional reactivity.

These findings are consistent with previous literature that demonstrates a connection between microaggression exposure and mental health challenges. For instance, Nadal et al. (2014) found that racial microaggressions are significantly associated with anxiety, depression, and psychological distress. Similarly, Torres et al. (2010) identified racial discrimination as a predictor of increased emotional reactivity in Latinx populations. The current study builds upon such findings by extending the understanding of this phenomenon to media-based stimuli, demonstrating that emotionally provocative content depicting racial bias can act as a psychological trigger for those with high levels of prior microaggression exposure.

The significant difference observed between the high and low REMS exposure groups in RQ 2 affirms the cumulative nature of racial stress and aligns with Seaton et al.'s (2008) assertion that chronic exposure to racial discrimination intensifies psychological sensitivity. The group-level analysis was critical in identifying emotional differences that a linear model in RQ 1 may have missed. This suggests that threshold effects may be at play, where a certain level of microaggression exposure triggers amplified emotional responses. Thus, while a linear relationship was not evident in RQ 1, categorizing exposure levels revealed meaningful patterns in emotional reactivity.

The results of RQ 2 of the study were compelling because it suggests that individuals who have experienced racial bias respond to racially charged films much like

a tuning fork reacts to sound. Those with greater personal experiences of bias resonate more strongly when exposed to movies portraying racial bias—their emotional or psychological responses are more intense and immediate. In contrast, individuals who have been less impacted by racial bias tend to show a weaker or more muted response to the same films. In essence, the more a person has been affected by racial bias in real life, the more sensitively they react to its depiction on screen.

The findings from RQ 3 revealed that age and gender were significant predictors of distress, indicating that older women reported higher emotional reactivity to racially charged media. This insight highlights the layered and compounding effects of intersecting identities—specifically race, gender, and age—on psychological vulnerability. Previous literature has emphasized that racial microaggressions are emotionally taxing, but these results suggest that their impact may intensify when compounded by the societal burdens uniquely suffered by older African American women. Seiler (2023) and Knighton et al. (2022) both acknowledge that Black women often endure dual pressures from both racial and gender-based microaggressions, a phenomenon commonly referred to as “double jeopardy.” As individuals age, the accumulation of such experiences may lead to heightened emotional sensitivity, particularly when exposed to media content that mirrors or reinforces past traumas. The emotional response in this demographic is not simply a reflection of individual vulnerability but the result of a lifetime of compounded social stressors.

These findings further validate the need to approach racial trauma research through an intersectional lens, as proposed by Crenshaw (1989), and echoed by Nadal et

al. (2014). When age and gender are examined in isolation, their effects may appear modest; however, their interaction with race reveals deeper psychological burdens. Older Black women, in particular, may have lived through decades of overt and covert racism, gender-based exclusion, and systemic inequities, all of which contribute to the development of chronic stress responses. This population may also carry generational trauma that makes racially charged media notably triggering. Recognizing these intersecting dimensions is crucial for developing targeted mental health interventions, culturally competent clinical training, and inclusive media representation. The findings from RQ 3 serve as a reminder that lived experience is not monolithic, and effective social change must consider how overlapping identities shape emotional and psychological outcomes.

The heightened emotional reactivity observed among older African American women may be particularly intensified for those who also serve as caregivers, a role that often compounds stress through emotional labor, familial expectations, and limited support systems. Caregiving women may already be navigating persistent stressors associated with balancing their own mental health, professional responsibilities, and care for children, aging parents, or other family members. When coupled with the cumulative burden of racial microaggressions and gendered expectations, this population may be especially vulnerable to distress when exposed to racially charged media. Knighton et al. (2022) emphasized that Black women frequently bear the emotional weight of both personal and communal trauma, often suppressing their own distress to care for others. Seiler (2023) similarly highlighted that racialized experiences tend to be suppressed over

time, increasing the psychological toll. For caregiving women, the intersection of race, gender, age, and role-based responsibilities may leave them with fewer opportunities for self-care or therapeutic processing. As such, media depictions of racial injustice may not only resonate more deeply but also serve as unintentional triggers that galvanize unprocessed trauma, placing these women at greater risk for anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion. This highlights the importance of creating culturally informed mental health interventions that account for caregiving roles and prioritize accessible, holistic support.

Although the study found that not all variables were predictive, the overall pattern of results paints a meaningful picture. In particular, the identification of group-level emotional differences offers strong evidence that those who endure more frequent microaggressions are indeed more reactive to media representations of those same experiences. This affirms what MST has long posited—that the stress endured by marginalized groups is not simply a momentary reaction to individual acts of discrimination but part of a chronic and compounding psychological burden. Furthermore, these findings build on the broader scholarly consensus that representation in media is not a neutral act but can invoke deep emotional and cognitive responses tied to one's lived experience.

In addition to the statistical significance in the data, the practical significance should also be acknowledged. The emotional impact of media consumption for African American audiences, especially when the content reflects or reinforces racially traumatic experiences, is substantial. As supported by FilmGrail (2024), African American

moviegoers are more likely to engage with content that reflects cultural authenticity and social justice narratives, making them a critical demographic in cinema. Their engagement with media is not just entertainment-driven but often identity-affirming or trauma-reinforcing. This adds further rationale for why racially provocative movie content was an appropriate and relevant stimulus in this study.

The findings align with MST (Meyer, 1995), which posits that exposure to chronic discrimination contributes to cumulative psychological stress and emotional vulnerability. These results are consistent with prior literature from Knighton et al. (2022), DeCuir-Gunby et al. (2023), and Seiler (2023), which collectively underscore the emotional consequences of repeated microaggressions. While the lack of significance for RQ 1 may suggest complexities in how emotional reactivity is measured or experienced, the significant findings for RQ 2 confirm that cumulative racial stress can act as a sensitizing factor. Moreover, the significant predictors identified in RQ3—age and gender—highlight the ways in which a monolithic approach to reduction in racial stress is not conducive to all demographics. These findings further validate the importance of considering demographic context when analyzing race-based emotional responses.

Limitations of the Study

Generalizability

Several limitations influenced the outcomes and should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, in terms of generalizability, the study was limited to African American adults. While this focus provided critical insights into a historically

marginalized group, it also restricts the applicability of findings to other racial and ethnic populations. Broader sampling across multiple identity groups would be necessary to extend the conclusions beyond this demographic.

Validity

Regarding validity, the study used self-report instruments (REMS and STAI-6), which are subject to response biases such as social desirability and recall inaccuracies. While the instruments themselves have demonstrated strong reliability and validity in prior studies (Marteau & Bekker, 1992; Nadal, 2011), the reliance on participants' subjective evaluations introduces limitations in construct validity and internal validity.

Reliability

Reliability was supported using well-established, previously validated instruments. However, differences in interpretation of emotionally charged movie scenes and the immediate nature of the post-test measurement may have affected consistency. The cross-sectional design also limited the ability to assess test-retest reliability or long-term emotional effects. Additionally, media stimuli may have elicited varied emotional responses due to individual familiarity, differing sensitivity levels, or personal relevance.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should expand the scope of participant demographics to include individuals from different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. A mixed-methods approach could enhance understanding by integrating qualitative data to capture deeper emotional narratives. Furthermore, examining the impact of diverse media types—such as social media clips, news footage, or live interactions—could shed light on

how format influences reactivity. Longitudinal studies would provide insight into the enduring psychological effects of microaggressions and racially charged media exposure, as well as the development of coping strategies over time. Finally, research should explore the buffering effects of resilience factors, such as racial identity, spirituality, and social support, which may moderate emotional responses.

Implications for Positive Social Change

This study contributes to growing discourse on racial trauma and its psychological impact. The findings have significant implications for social change across media, education, and mental health sectors. Media producers should consider the emotional consequences of racially charged content and prioritize more culturally responsive storytelling. Mental health professionals must be equipped to identify media-based triggers for racial trauma and support clients through culturally competent interventions. Educational institutions should integrate race-conscious emotional wellness programs and media literacy into their curricula. From a policy perspective, the evidence presented here supports the integration of anti-racism frameworks within mental health, media regulation, and educational initiatives. Ultimately, acknowledging and addressing the emotional ramifications of racial microaggressions can lead to more inclusive, empathetic, and healing-centered environments.

Additionally, findings from FilmGrail (2024) provide a broader cultural lens on how African American audiences interact with cinema. African American viewers have shown a consistent preference for films that reflect cultural authenticity, social justice, and racially relevant narratives. This behavioral trend, when considered alongside this

study's findings, emphasizes the emotional potency of media experiences for racially marginalized groups.

Renowned Black actor, Denzel Washington, said in an interview about the movie, *Fences*, "It's not color, it's culture," (Hunter, 2016). Denzel Washington's point can be applied to other movies, such as *Goodfellas* and *Schindler's List*, that were box office hits and nominated for awards, in part, due to their depiction of cultural authenticity. This authenticity was created through having directors who had firsthand experiences with the respective ethnic cultures depicted in each movie. Washington's point indicates how the subtle nuances of the culture of native ethnicity can play a role in enriching understanding of the characters and story being represented in a movie. Unless someone who is native to the culture and ethnicity is part of telling the narrative in their own voice, important cultural nuances may be lost, and those from different ethnicities will not have the opportunity to experience an authentic representation of the culture being depicted.

Incorporating this perspective into production, policymaking, and therapeutic settings can promote better emotional safety and media literacy. Advocating for diverse representation in storytelling is not only an ethical imperative but also a psychologically protective strategy for audiences disproportionately exposed to racial trauma. Addressing these needs holistically fosters a media landscape that is not just inclusive in appearance, but restorative in function—validating lived experiences while reducing psychological harm.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study reinforces the assertion that racial microaggressions have

psychological consequences that extend beyond everyday interactions and into media consumption. The results provide partial yet significant support for MST, particularly in highlighting how prior exposure to racial bias sensitizes individuals to subsequent racially themed stimuli. While not all hypotheses were fully supported, the consistent patterns observed in group comparisons and demographic moderation emphasize the cumulative burden of racial discrimination. These findings contribute to academic, clinical, and public discourse, offering evidence-based strategies for addressing racial trauma and supporting affected communities in meaningful ways.

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Appendix A: Thank you Message

Thank You Message

Dear Participant,

I am sorry, but you do not meet the eligibility requirements to be a participant in this study. In designing my study, I was required to describe specific characteristics of the participants, so that I could recruit a similar group of people to be participants. Researchers are required to do this. Your time and participation are sincerely appreciated, and I wish you the best of luck!

Gwendolyn Jefferson
Researcher

Appendix B: Overview of the Study (Recruitment flyer)

Dear Participant,

I am writing to invite you to participate in the research that I will be conducting. My name is Gwendolyn Jefferson. I am a Ph.D. student at Walden university studying Social Psychology. The research study is titled “The Impact of Microaggression Exposure on Emotional Reactivity and Distress Following an Emotionally Provocative Movie Scene.” The purpose of this study is to contribute to the gap identified prior by evaluating how ongoing exposure to racial microaggressions affects emotional responses to provocative movie scenes. My study will be approved by my dissertation faculty committee and the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

You are eligible to participate in this study if you can answer “YES” to all the following:

- African American
- 18 years or older
- Willing to give candid and honest responses.

If you agree to take part in the study, you will:

- Complete online questionnaires that include eligibility requirements to participate in the study; your background characteristics; brief psychological surveys; and a brief debriefing to end the study.
- Read and acknowledge your consent to participate in the *Consent* form.
- Have the right to volunteer freely for this research without any pressure from any source, you can discontinue your participation at any point for any reason of your choosing without the necessity of explanation of that choice.

I would greatly appreciate your volunteering to participate in this study of which the results will provide opportunities for authentic voices to be heard giving representation to all races, ethnicities and cultural backgrounds.

You can reach my dissertation committee chairperson through steven.linnville@mail.waldenu.edu or the University Institutional Review Board (IRB) that has approved the study at IRB@mail.waldenu.edu.

Your participation will take approximately 30 minutes or less to complete. Click the link below to start the study. Thank you in advance for your participation.

To confidentially volunteer, click the link: [Insert Survey Link]

Appendix C: Eligibility Questionnaire

This is a questionnaire that has each of the eligibility requirements for you to be a participant in this study. For the purposes of my research, I need to make sure that all of the participants have similar features.

1. Do you consider your race/ethnicity to be African American or Black?

_____ Yes

_____ No

2. Are you 18 years or older?

_____ Yes _____ No

3. Are you willing to give candid and honest opinions on anonymous and confidential questionnaires including those that are about racial attitudes or bias?

Some people might find some of the questions upsetting about racial attitudes or bias.

Your responses are strictly for research purposes. Your opinions are not associated with your name and all of your responses are kept confidential.

Willing to participate?

_____ Yes

_____ No

Appendix D: Movie Selections

To select the emotionally laden movie scenes, the researcher and the committee reviewed three scenes from the three movies selected to determine which would make the final cut. Each movie scene was rated from 1 (No Anxiety/Stress) to 5 (Extreme Anxiety/Stress). See the table below to see how the final movies were selected.

Rating 1: No anxiety/stress							
Rating 2: Minimal anxiety/stress							
Rating 3: Average anxiety/stress							
Rating 4: Above average anxiety/stress							
Rating 5: Extreme anxiety/stress							
Jefferson		Moore		Linnville		Selection	
Birth of a Nation	Rating	Birth of a Nation	Rating	Birth of a Nation	Rating	Avg by Clip	
Clip 1	4	Clip 1	5	Clip 1	2	3.67	
Clip 2	5	Clip 2	5	Clip 2	4	4.67	
Clip 3	3	Clip 3	5	Clip 3	3	3.67	
American History X		American History X		American History X			
Clip 1	5	Clip 1	5	Clip 1	5	5.00	
Clip 2	3	Clip 2	3	Clip 2	1	2.33	
Clip 3	3	Clip 3	3	Clip 3	3	3.00	
Glory		Glory		Glory			
Clip 1	4	Clip 1	4	Clip 1	2	3.33	
Clip 2	5	Clip 2	2	Clip 2	3	3.33	
Clip 3	4	Clip 3	3	Clip 3	2	3.00	

Appendix E: Demographic Questionnaire

Instructions: *Please answer each question with the best answer that fits you.*

1. What is your gender?
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Non-binary
 - d. Trans Man
 - e. Trans Woman

2. How old are you?
 - a. 18 to 20
 - b. 21 to 30
 - c. 31 to 40
 - d. 41 to 50
 - e. 51 or older

3. What is your highest level of education?
 - a. High School Diploma or Equivalent
 - b. Bachelor's Degree
 - c. Master's Degree
 - d. Doctorate Degree
 - e. None of the above

4. What is your household income?
 - a. Less than \$35,000

- b. \$35,000 to \$49,999
 - c. \$50,000 to \$74,999
 - d. \$75,000 to \$99,000
 - e. \$100,000 to \$149,999
 - f. \$150,000 or higher
5. What is your marital status?
- a. Married
 - b. Divorced
 - c. Widowed
6. What is your employment status?
- a. Employed
 - b. Unemployed
 - c. Retired