

## ABSTRACT

LOGAN, SIMONE WAVERLY. Coping Self-Efficacy: A Moderator of Depression, Self Esteem and Stress in Asian American and Latinx American College Students (Under the direction of Dr. Christy Byrd).

Racial and ethnic microaggressions have received increased empirical attention in recent years with more of the focus on African American college students' experiences leaving out Latinx American and Asian American students. Some research has been conducted on the mental health ramifications of subtle, covert forms of discrimination on different minority populations, thus this analysis aims to contribute to Asian American and Latinx American mental health research. The present study examines the role of coping self-efficacy as a relationship between racial and ethnic microaggressions, levels of depression, self-esteem and stress while comparing first-year experience to upper-level students. Further coping self-efficacy and grade level were tested as moderators between racial and ethnic microaggressions and mental health. Among a sample of 211 Asian American and Latinx American college students a meta-analysis revealed statistically significant conditional interactions in which coping self-efficacy moderated the relationship between ethnic and racial microaggressions and stress, depression, and self-esteem. The major findings suggest conditional effects were most reliable with self-esteem and stress.

**Keywords:** Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions (REMS), Latinx American, Asian American, Coping Self-efficacy, Depression, Stress, Self-Esteem

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Coping Self-Efficacy: A Moderator of Depression, Self-Esteem and Stress in Asian American & Latinx American College Students

by  
Waverly Simone Logan

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APPROVED BY:

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Dr. Christy Byrd  
Committee Chair

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Dr. Patricia Marshall

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Dr. Jenn Ayscue

**DEDICATION**

I dedicate my thesis to my two loving parents Robert and Sonia Logan and my sister Sterling.

Without them none of this would be possible.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

The author was born in Durham, NC to Robert and Sonia Logan in January 1996. In 2014, she began attending North Carolina State University, during which time she found a passion for curriculum and instruction with a focus in educational psychology. In May 2018, she graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Sport Management and continued her studies with pursuit of a Master of Science in Curriculum and Instruction.

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## CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND

### Introduction to Microaggressions

College is a critical period for ethnic identity and mental health development as minority students navigate racial climates and race-related stressors on their campuses. Many Asian-American and Latinx American first-year, minority college students are still subjected to microaggressions in their U.S. learning environments, not only from other students but faculty as well. Discussions about race can be uncomfortable for many students but avoiding these conversations, out of fear of offending someone, is not a productive way to engage in effective discourse between those sharing a learning environment. Torino's et al. (2019) study reported how experiencing microaggressions in the classroom setting has shown connections to feelings of invisibility, isolation, and self-doubt, which hinder one's ability to problem solve and stay on task in the learning environment. Through studying the experiences first year, minority college students in comparison to their upper-level counterparts are having with microaggressions, researchers can better understand how the age difference and ones coping self-efficacy to respond to microaggressions affects student's mental health, stress levels, and interactions with microaggressions. The purpose of this secondary quantitative data analysis is to understand first year Asian American and Latinx American college students' experiences with microaggressions at a predominately Latinx-serving institution on the West Coast, in comparison to their upper-level student counterparts. It is important to note the language of Latinx-serving institution as many higher education institutions take a title for political purposes while underserving the students recognized in the title. This study will be exploring whether coping self-efficacy moderates first-year students experiences with stress, depression, and self-esteem compared to upper-level students? As well as exploring whether first-year students more negatively affected

by microaggressions in comparison to upper-level students? A key objective was to explore the perceived ability of upper-level students using the coping self-efficacy (CSE) scale in relation to mental health outcomes. While many racial-ethnic studies explore the interactions between depressive symptoms and first-year students, few studies examine the intersectionality of coping-self efficacy moderating stress, and self-esteem and depressive symptoms in Asian American and Latinx American upper level students compared to first-level students.

### **The Negative Effects of Microaggressions on First-Year Ethnoracial Minority Students**

The first hypothesis examines whether first-year students will experience higher levels of depressive symptoms in comparison to their upper-level student counterparts. Hope et.al. (2018), conducted a longitudinal study of African American and Latinx American first-year students experiences with racial and ethnic microaggressions. Hope et.al. (2018), found that the more first-year students experiences with microaggressions did not, in fact, report higher frequencies of depressive symptoms. In contrast, Sanchez et.al. (2018), found that depressive symptoms in Latinx American and Asian American college students were heightened after interactions with racial and ethnic microaggressions. A study conducted by Choi et.al. (2017), explored the moderating role of ethnic identity among 353 Asian-American college students in relation to microaggressions and depressive symptoms. Choi et.al. found that ethnic identity moderated the relationship between racial microaggressions and significantly predicted depressive symptoms in students. With confounding research comes the opportunity for interpretive examinations, encouraging the more in-depth analysis of first-year students experience's with depressive symptoms and microaggressions. Through the secondary data analysis of the research collected on microaggressions, more information is to be acquired

providing insights into first-level Asian-American and Latinx students interactions with microaggressions regarding their mental health.

The second hypothesis investigates whether more prepared upper-level students, in comparison to first-year students, report lower stress symptoms. A study conducted by Watkins (2012) found that upper-level African American students were more likely to subscribe to exaggerated self-regulation styles (e.g., inability to restrain unwanted behavioral and emotional impulses) as well as heightened thoughts and feelings surrounding the trauma and distress provoked by negative race-related encounters. In other words, the increased stress and trauma due to the interactions with insidious, ubiquitous racism-related stressors leads to unfavorable reactions and decreased capacity for self-regulation (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007; Gailliot et al., 2007). Further research examining the relationship between the self-regulation and coping self-efficacy as it interacts with stress triggered by racial and ethnic microaggressions in first-year minority students could enhance coping strategies inadvertently enhancing the student's self-efficacy associated with using those strategies. Tao et.al. (2017), provided studies which reported the emotional distress affecting minorities due to the ambiguous nature of racial and ethnic microaggressions. Investigating the experience of upper-level students in comparison can yield broader research insights into the impact of microaggressions on minority students helping to increase targeted coping strategies thus increasing coping self-efficacy.

The third hypothesis looks to evaluate whether first-year students with high coping self-efficacy have higher self-esteem in comparison to upper-level students. Research provides limited examinations of minority student interactions with microaggressions and its effects on students coping self-efficacy. The coping self-efficacy scale provides a measure of a person's perceived ability to cope successfully with life stressors and life changes. The coping self-

efficacy scales used in this secondary data analysis were three subscales of problem focused coping, stopping unpleasant emotions and thoughts, and getting support from family and friends (Chesney et.al. 2006). A study conducted by Lian (2017), on a college population of Chinese international students ages 18 and older experiencing microaggressions reported lower levels of coping self-efficacy, while using problem-solving and controlling unpleasant emotions and thoughts. Lian's (2017), study also reported moderately higher levels of coping self-efficacy in seeking support from friends and family. Microaggressions impacting the coping self-efficacy of Asian American and Latinx American students proves detrimental, as students are unable to focus attention effectively to responding in subjectively desirable manners. Coping self-efficacy as a moderator of microaggressions offers room for more exploration on the impact of students perceived abilities to react and interact to racial and ethnic stressors in their learning environments.

### **Research Questions**

The following questions will guide the research study into first-year Asian American and Latinx American student's experiences with microaggressions:

- 1: Does coping self-efficacy (perceived ability) moderate first-year students experiences with stress, depression, and self-esteem compared to upper-level students?
- 2: Are first-year students more negatively affected by microaggressions in comparison to upper-level students?

## CHAPTER 2: CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE CURRENT STUDY

Prejudiced acts against marginalized groups are a persistent problem in the United States and remain an unavoidable reality for many existing in today's society. Evolving from the blatant atrocities seen decades ago, acts of prejudice towards minorities have merely become more indirect, manifesting in subtler forms of insidious behaviors (Sue et.al. 2007). Extended research and academic discourse label these subtle indecencies as microaggressions. Sue et al. (2007), defines microaggressions as, "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group" (p.273). There are three forms of microaggressions which can be identified: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Microassaults are verbal or nonverbal racial attacks in an unambiguous manner portraying straightforward demeaning racial assaults meant to negatively affect the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions (Sue et.al. 2007). For example, referring to someone as the "n-word" is a microassaults because it clearly conveys racist sentiments (Sue et.al. 2007). Microinsults are slights intended to communicate rudeness and insensitivity and degrade a person's racial heritage or identity (Sue et.al. 2007). For example, an employee of color is asked, "How did you get your job?" leaving the victim grappling with the hidden intention of the microaggression and the idea people of color are not qualified (Sue et.al. 2007). Microinvalidations are communications aimed to exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experienced subjective reality of a minority individual (Sue et.al. 2007)). For example, when Asian Americans (natives of the United States) are praised for eloquent speech or are continuously asked where they were born (Sue et.al. 2007). African American, Latinx American, and Asian American students on college

campuses find themselves in the minority in most of their classes, unsure of their experiences with microaggressions, unsure of the effects of microaggressions, and uncertain of how to respond (Tao et.al. 2017). When experienced in excess, racial and ethnic stressors can have long-term developmental consequences, especially due to the difficult nature in recognizing these prejudiced slights as discrimination (Huynh, 2012). The number of racial and ethnic minority students in college is at an all-time high, according to the 2005 report from the American Council on Education. Yet still we are seeing a struggle across college campuses to maintain a welcoming climate for diversity and culture (Boysen, 2012). Racial and ethnic minorities report having lower satisfaction with campus climates than their White counterparts due to the racial and ethnic adversities they face in the learning environment (Boysen, 2012). Students report that the most common way ethnicity impacts their education is through the experience of prejudiced acts received within their academic cohort (Syed, 2010). As research has revealed, racial and ethnic minority students are reporting they frequently face subtle slights and insults that are offensive but largely unintentional (Bourke 2010; Samuel 2004). Further research shows, based on surveys of students, that prejudice, discrimination, and stereotypes are relatively common on college campuses, as about 50% of students report encountering some form of prejudice on campus and that classrooms are the most common places for discrimination to occur (Boysen, 2012). It is imperative to teach minority student populations awareness and confidence in using coping mechanisms to microaggressions in order to combat the mental health ramifications associated with experiencing these prejudiced slights in academic environments. The purpose of this review is to address the ambiguity behind these prejudiced slights, the ramifications of microaggressions on mental health, and the impact of coping self-efficacy as a moderator for mental health outcomes (e.g., depression, stress, and self-esteem).

## **Coping Self-Efficacy with Racial-Ethnic Microaggressions**

According to stress theory, individuals interact with coping mechanisms as a means to reframe or react to the experience of a stressful event (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). How one appraises and responds to a stressor is critical in determining whether the individual will be stressed by the experience (Sanchez et.al. 2018). According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), coping is defined as “one’s cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (p.141). Coping, as Lazzarus defines it, mediates the relationship between stressor and stress, thus the manner in which an individual copes with that event will, in turn, impact whether they are stressed by the experience (Kim et.al. 2018). When investigating coping strategies literature has reported them in two broad categories: engagement strategies and disengagement strategies. Engagement coping strategies are defined as attempts to actively manage the stressful situation or event through problem-solving behaviors such as positive cognitive reframing and emotional support seeking (Tobin, Holroyd, and Reynolds, 1984). Disengagement coping strategies are attempts to detach oneself mentally, emotionally, and physically from the stressors, which include problem avoidance, self-criticism, wishful thinking, and social withdrawal (Tobin, Holroyd, Reynolds, & Wigal, 1989). With disengagement coping strategies comes low self-efficacy as this could explain the difference between mental health outcomes associated with high self-efficacy, compared to low self-efficacy found in college students when dealing with racial and ethnic microaggressions. Past research on racial discrimination and Asian American and Latinx American college student populations have provided empirical support for coping as a mediator (Kim et.al. 2018). As microaggressions occur self-efficacy can be the fragile determinant of what coping strategy a student chooses.

Despite the plethora of research on microaggressions and mental health, few studies have directly examined how Asian American and Latinx American college student's self-efficacy affects their approach to coping with racial-ethnic microaggressions (Sanchez et.al. 2018). Coping self-efficacy (CSE) beliefs refer to an individual's beliefs about one's capability to cope with exterior stressors (Pisanti, 2012). Pisanti (2012), also reported that efficacy beliefs can direct whether people will invest effort, and how long they will endure in their effort in the face of stressors and aversive experiences. Further research found people with higher levels of coping self-efficacy beliefs are inclined to approach challenging circumstances in an active and persistent way, whereas those with lower levels of coping self-efficacy beliefs have a propensity to direct greater energy to managing increasing emotional distress (Bandura, 1997). Increased experience of microaggressions leads one to develop coping mechanisms which can manifest in positive and negative approaches to protecting oneself from the racial and ethnic covert discriminations experienced on a day to day basis (Kim et.al. 2016). As microaggressions occur self-efficacy can be the fragile determinant of what coping strategy a student chooses.

Regardless of the lack of research comparing coping self-efficacy to first-year and upper-level students, the link between racial microaggressions and mental health among Asian American and Latinx American college population shows there is a plethora of research that examines the role of coping strategies in this relationship (Kim et.al. 2018). For example, a study conducted by Liang et.al. 2007, reported engagement coping strategies (e.g., positive cognitive reframing and emotional support seeking) were associated with functioning and reduced negative outcomes when used by Asian American college students dealing with perceived discrimination and racism-related stressors. Similar research examining mediation effects were found in studies among Latinx American college students dealing with cultural stressors and perceived

discrimination (Lee & Ahn, 2012). There have also been studies to contradict these findings. A study conducted by Lee & Ahn, (2012), found that disengagement coping strategies (e.g., avoidant coping and emotion-focused coping) have been associated with poor mental health outcomes among Asian American college students and Latinx American college students dealing with acculturative stress, and perceived racial discrimination. Disengagement coping strategies often associated with emotional and mental detachment could offer explanations as to why self-efficacy is affected when attempting to cope with racial and ethnic microaggressions. Self-efficacy is an interesting substitute for coping as it can provide explanations as to why victims are not working harder to stop the microaggression and more focused on removing or addressing the negative impacts in unproductive ways.

Although research on racial and ethnic microaggressions is growing rapidly there have been few studies to date that have examined the role of coping self-efficacy and the link between racial-ethnic microaggressions and mental health among Asian American and Latinx American college students (Kim et.al. 2018). Thus, the following study will go beyond assessing the relationship between racial-ethnic microaggressions and mental health by providing an analysis of the potential moderating role of coping self-efficacy in this link. This examination is important as it may give insight into the ways Asian American and Latinx American first-year college students, in comparison to upper-level students, use coping self-efficacy with racial-ethnic microaggressions. As the population of Asian American and Latinx American college students rapidly increases, results from this study might help to determine the direct link between coping self-efficacy and mental health outcomes among these minority populations.

## **Ambiguity of Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions**

In today's literature microaggressions are commonly explained as brief encounters, negative racial slights, unintentional insults, or implicit behaviors communicating hostile biases (Sue et.al. 2007). Tao et al. (2017), touches on the complexity of microaggressions and how ambiguous situations can often trigger confusion or dilemmas on whether to react due to lack of awareness of the ill-intent on the part of the micro-aggressor. The nature of the ambiguous microaggressions for first-year students could cause more negative mental health effects due to lack of awareness or fear of a negative social response. Literature suggests that ethnic microaggressions may lead to more severe psychological consequences than overt discrimination (Torres & Taknint, 2015). Due to the nature of these prejudiced exchanges, which are often ambiguous, denied, or rationalized as well-intentioned, interpretations of microaggressions often result in a more active and complicated assessment of the situation (Torres & Taknint, 2015). Upper-level students, due to more experience and knowledge, may not use as many cognitive resources when appraising the prejudice interaction, thus reporting lower mental health effects as a result of the ambiguous nature of the microaggression. The surreptitiousness of the ambiguity itself, including the emotional distress, is induced by trying to determine whether a statement was or was not racist (Tao et.al. 2017). Lilienfeld (2017) proposes the idea of the "Catch 22" because victims are uncertain of whether acts of prejudice have been expressed, they frequently find themselves in a no-win situation, trapping them in a loop of unidentifiable emotions. A recent meta-analysis conducted by Jones et.al, (2013) compared subtle and overt discrimination reporting that both had comparable significance, concluding that occurrences of ethnic microaggressions are at least equally damaging to psychological health. Understanding the ambiguity of microaggressions for first-year minority students is crucial to facilitating their

positive mental health. Not much research has been conducted on the experience of Latinx American populations reported experiences with microaggressions, as the bulk of investigative work is focused of African American college students (Torres & Taknint, 2015). Future research would benefit from the ambiguous nature of microaggressions in relation to confidence in utilizing coping strategies to improve preparedness and overall mental health impacts of minority students.

The ambiguous nature of microaggression's affects different minority populations different ways. A look into the Latinx American community's experience's with microaggressions has proven to be a budding topic of literature. Latinx Americans are often treated as perpetual foreigners or have others assume, they are undocumented immigrants despite their citizenship status (Nadal, Mazzula, Rivera, & Fujii-Doe, 2014). Latinx Americans often report being treated like second class citizens, coupled with assumptions of inferiority, or ascriptions of low intelligence, as well as, constant speculation of native status (Rivera, Forquer, & Rangel, 2010). Latinx American women are more likely to experience workplace/school microaggressions than Latinx American men, in comparison, foreign born Latinxs are more likely to be treated as lower rank citizens compared to their U.S. born counterparts (Nadal, Mazzula, et.al. 2014). Further, it is generally accepted that African Americans and Latinx Americans experience both blatant and ambiguous forms of racism, Asian Americans are frequently spared from this type of racism as they are viewed as a "model minority" who have succeeded in American society (Wong & Halgin, 2006). The community's perceptions of model minorities can lead to apathy and detachment toward discrimination targeted against Asian American youth (Wang, Siy, & Cheryan, 2011). A study conducted by Sue et.al. (2009), found Asian Americans experienced microaggressions from well-intentioned friends, neighbors,

teachers, co-workers, and colleagues leaving strong and lasting negative reactions. Sue et.al. (2009), also reported Asian American participants described feelings of belittlement, anger, rage, frustration, alienation, and of constantly being dismissed by microaggressions. Most Asian Americans reported, Sue et.al. (2009), experience some psychological conflict and distress because of the difficulty in determining whether a microaggression occurred. Participants were often left wondering whether or not they were being oversensitive or simply misinterpreting the remarks. Participants also reported expending considerable amounts of psychic energy trying to discern the motives of the person and/or dealing with inner turmoil and agitation caused by the event. Through this secondary data analysis light will be shed on the importance of coping self-efficacy strategies as college students are wasting cognitive processes which in turn are affecting their mental and physical health. Cheryan and Monin's (2005), study of college students showed that Asian Americans attempted to defend their American identity by demonstrating more assimilation through American cultural knowledge and reporting higher participation in American cultural activities. Further, first-year minority students using more cognitive processes and effort to assimilate into American culture, could provide more insights for continued research into the mental health effects of trying to acculturate and whether there is a link between races/ethnicities extending the same cognitive resources to do so.

In summary, educating Asian American and Latinx American minorities to the fact that they are not alone, and are in fact experiencing these derogatory slights, could impact overall awareness of the ambiguity of microaggressions and influence initial receptions of these prejudiced acts, and the confidence to use coping strategies offered. Because many victims do not realize they are experiencing a form of aggression, occurrence of potential racial microaggressions can lead minority populations to wonder whether they are being oversensitive,

increasing race-related stress (Harell, 2000). Based on the prior research analyzed, Asian Americans and Latinx Americans are experiencing different styles of microaggressions but all have reported development of negative mental health outcomes as a result. Although the experiences of Asian American and Latinx American college students have been studied less frequently, evidence suggests that these minority populations experience specific microaggressions based on their perceived racial/ethnic group membership (Sanchez, 2018). Further research on the ambiguity of microaggressions can lead to researchers developing easier ways for minority students to detect racial derogations intended to communicate discriminatory sentiments.

### **Mental Health: Depression and Self-Esteem & Stress in Asian American and Latinx American College Students**

There are psychological pitfalls, such as low self-worth and low self-esteem, as a result of experiencing microaggressions in academic settings (Sue et.al. 2007). Racial minorities in the United States suffer from poorer mental and physical health than their White counterparts (Adler & Rehkopf, 2008; Williams & Mohammed, 2009; Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2003). Analysis of population-based studies have reported that experiencing higher frequencies of discrimination is associated with increased mental illness (Williams et.al. 2003; Williams & Mohammad, 2009). It is important to protect and support the mental health of college students as first-year to upper-level students could be equally affected by the negative impact of racial and ethnic microaggressions in the learning environment. Nadal's et al. (2014), study of 44 African Americans, 87 Latinx Americans, and 43 White/European Americans concluded that microaggressions that occur in educational settings (i.e., by professors or other students) may particularly hurt individuals self-worth. With low self-worth, reaching out for help could become

challenging and coping self-efficacy could drop thereby affecting minorities' experience with the academic environment. Solórzano et al. (2000), found the most obvious consequences of racial microaggressions among African American students in academic spaces were the students' reported struggles with feelings of self-doubt, frustration and isolation. Exposure to microaggressions in the academic environment promotes a negative sense of minority populations' intellectual identity. Further research should explore psychological effects of microaggressions and the impact on Asian American and Latinx American students in the classroom environment relative to grade level, that is examining whether first-year or upper-level students are having similar or dissimilar experiences. Through examining specific age groups targeted coping strategies can be put to the test.

A national study of Asian American adults, conducted by Gee, Spencer, Chen, Yip and Takeuchi (2007), found that self-reported racial discrimination was associated with a greater likelihood of having any depressive or anxiety disorder over a 12-month period of time. Asian American students reported microaggressions based on being stereotyped as the “model minority”, contributed to the assumptions that Asians do not experience discrimination (Sanchez, 2018). Gee et.al. (2009), reported in a recent review focusing on Asian American adults, that greater self-reported racial discrimination was associated with an increased risk of mental health problems in 37 of 40 studies. Among Asian American college students, discrimination has been found to be associated with lower self-esteem (Lee, 2003), whereas those who anxiously expect rejection from others due to their race, also report lower self-esteem due to feelings of increased shame (Chan & Mendoza-Denton, 2008). Researchers argue, unlike African Americans who may be more likely to make their emotions apparent in response to anticipation of discrimination, Asian Americans have yet to set-off a racial consciousness-raising movement to shield their self-

esteem against racial discrimination (Chan & Mendoza-Denton, 2008; Twenge & Crocker, 2002). Asian Americans may also be at heightened risk for depression and anxiety compared to other racial groups due to the dismissal of their racially discriminatory experiences (Wang, Siy, Cheryan, 2011). Goto (2008) reported college aged Asian Americans reveal links between discrimination and diagnoses of clinical depression. Symptoms of depression apparent in Asian American college populations convoke the interventions of targeted coping strategies. Hwang and Goto (2008) found a positive relationship between occurrences of and perceived stress resulting from racial discrimination and mental health consequences such as psychological distress, suicidal ideation, state and trait anxiety, and clinical depression.

Latinx American and Asian American college students grappling with mental health due to experiences with racial and ethnic microaggressions also show implications for affecting stress levels, academic success, and psychological distress. A study conducted in 2018 by Sanchez et.al., of Asian American and Latinx American college students found a positive relationship between racial-ethnic microaggressions and psychological distress, including increased depression and negative affect, somatic and heightened traumatic symptoms. Sanchez et.al. also found the experience of feeling invisible and invalidated as it relates to racial-ethnic microaggressions is quite distressing for Asian American and Latinx American college students, and can have damaging effects on their mental health, and their academic performance. Feeling invisible and invalidated could manifest as low coping self-efficacy, as the confidence to reach out for help and engage in coping strategies could be stunted. Findings from Sanchez et.al. (2018) showed that racial microaggressions were significantly linked with increased engagement and disengagement coping strategies among Asian American and Latinx American college participants.

Sanchez et.al.'s (2018) findings also suggest that proactive coping strategies, such as problem solving or being able to discuss the situation with family, friends, or a therapist, may prepare Asian American and Latinx American college students to better respond to microaggressions. The difference between first-year students and upper-level students' response to engaging in coping strategies could be explained by overall frequency of experience, confidence in an established status (grade level), or cultural factors such as comfort reaching out to family and friends. Despite Asian Americans and Latinx Americans experiencing distinct historical patterns of oppression and ascribed stereotypes in the United States, contrasting with other racial-ethnic groups (e.g., African Americans), they report similar types of microaggressions, such as being stereotyped as foreigners and perceived as speaking poor English (Sanchez et.al. 2018). The overall multidimensional nature of microaggressions and its negative repercussions on mental health outcomes among minority students, requires more research in order to identify coping mechanisms that are linked to better mental health outcomes (Sanchez et.al. 2018).

## **Conclusion**

The ambiguous nature of microaggressions on college campuses result in the lack of awareness and the failure of minority students to recognize when they are being unfairly treated in their learning environments (Tao et.al. 2017). The ambiguity of microaggressions coupled with the lack of recognition by minority students result in low self-esteem and increased levels of depression among Asian American and Latinx students. The negative mental health effects of experiences with microaggressions is why increasing awareness of coping mechanisms to implement on college campuses is of extreme value. This is no longer an acceptable occurrence happening in the academic setting. Research and intervention should aim to fill the gaps between

the trajectory of Asian American and Latinx American college students' experiences with microaggressions, coping self-efficacy strategies and associations with their academic selves.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODS

### Design of Study

A descriptive, quantitative design was used in conducting this study in order to gather more in-depth data. Critical Race Theory and Social Constructivism frameworks are also being used. Social Constructivism is often described as interpretivism where the goal of the research is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). When using the Social Constructivism lens, the data will seek to understand the way in which Latinx Americans, Asian American and other non-White races, in their first year of undergraduate school report subjective meanings of their experience's toward microaggressions. Microaggressions are social interactions, so the participants' subjective meanings are going to be negotiated socially and through their interactions with their micro-aggressors, hence social construction. Due to working with non-White races, Latinx Americans and Asian American undergraduate students, it is important to take into account the contextual factors in which they experience microaggressions. Because these are racially charged acts toward minorities, this lens will be important in order to capture the full understanding of participants' experiences.

### Participants and Procedures

Students were recruited from across the campus of a predominately Latinx-serving institution on the West Coast. Students were invited to join the study if they had experienced microaggressions or were interested in learning more about them. Only those who completed surveys were included in the current analysis. The sample was 211 college students between the ages of 17 and 33 ( $M_{age} = 19.89$ ,  $SD = 2.15$ ). About two-thirds (74%) were women, and the racial make-up of the sample was 34% Asian American, 42% Latinx American, and the rest other non-White races. All procedures were approved by the university's Institutional Review Board and

informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Participants completed the survey online in a research lab and received \$10 for their service.

## Measures

Age, race, and gender were self-reported and there were five scales used for data collection. Racial/Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (Nadal, 2011), was used which asks how often various microaggressions have been experienced in the past six months. The scale has 45 items on a response scale of 1 (never) to 5 (often/frequently), with higher scores indicating more frequent microaggressions ( $\alpha = .94$ ). Self-esteem was assessed using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), which has ten items ( $\alpha = .89$ ) and a response scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression Scale (CES-D) was used to measure depressive symptoms. Participants indicated how frequently they had experienced the 20 symptoms in the last week, on a scale of 1 (rarely or none of the time, less than 1 day) to 4 (most or all of the time, 5-7 days). Items were summed-up, so that higher scores indicated more depressive symptoms ( $\alpha = .78$ ). The Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen et al., 1983) is designed to measure how much participants find their lives unpredictable and uncontrollable. It consists of 14 items asking participants how often in the last month they have experienced feelings of stress, such as, “In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and stressed?” and “In the last month, how often have you felt that you were on top of things?” (reversed). The response scale is from 0 (never) to 4 (very often). Items were averaged together such that higher scores indicated more stress ( $\alpha = .85$ ). Coping self-efficacy scale (CSE) was the fifth scale used encompassing three subscales of problem focused coping, stopping unpleasant emotions and thoughts, and getting support from family and friends. A fourth subscale measuring strategies for dealing with microaggressions in the moment was added and all items were averaged into one

score. The CSE scales is used to calculate a person's perceived capacity to cope effectively with adverse life task as well as a way to assess changes in CSE over time in intervention research (Chesney et.al. 2006).

### **Research Bias and Assumptions/Ethical Considerations**

As an African American female in higher education I am personally vested in this research. Having experienced microaggressions as an undergraduate student, I find this study extremely valuable in understanding other's experiences that might have resembled my own. Going into this study I assume that gender will play a role in the effect microaggressions have on students of color. Another assumption I carry into the study is that students of color experience microaggressions more frequently on predominantly white college campuses in the South. As an African American female, safeguards will be taken to prevent personal biases relating to my findings. Reviewing findings with peers will safeguard against information others may see that I have missed. Checking for alternative explanations will provide consideration for why the data was obtained making my interpretations stronger. The last safeguard used is triangulation of previous studies which will provide other data sources that support my interpretations.

### **Positionality Statement**

In a world of subjective experiences and perspectives, I have found myself leaning toward a constructivist viewpoint. It is important to allow those around me, including myself, to create their own meanings and understandings of the world. Through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences, I believe it provides richer knowledge for researchers and learners. Considering my constructivist viewpoint, it is important to look at how this impacts my identity as a researcher and how my identity has impacted the lens through which I experience the world around me. As an African American woman, race and gender have been significant

influences on how I identify myself in the current society. They have guided my interest and the level of importance I assign certain research topics. I expect my viewpoint to be expanded about how microaggressions make me feel, and how I personally react to them in the future. I expect my passion for the topic to grow as I interact with people with similar experiences to mine. Additionally, I expect the findings to affect my future implications of this research on my career and professional development. I bring no privileges or power to this project and acknowledge the biases that I am a researcher who has experienced microaggressions and low academic self-efficacy. To safeguard against my personal biases while reviewing the data I will check for alternative explanations, allow peers to review my data, and triangulate my findings through studies and literature to support my data.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

### Summary of Findings

The level of self-esteem depended on the type of coping self-efficacy strategies while stress levels moderated by self-efficacy mattered for both first-year students and upper-level students. Depressive symptoms showed no significant relationship as coping self-efficacy did not moderate. For everyone microaggressions did not relate to depressive symptoms.

### Main Findings

Figure 1.1 shows a simple slope of depressive symptoms moderated by coping self-efficacy and grade level year. To investigate the first hypothesis that first-year with higher coping self-efficacy compared to upper-level students would report lower levels of depression a simple moderator analysis was performed using PROCESS for SPSS. The outcome variable for analysis was depression. The predictor variable for the analysis was racial and ethnic microaggressions (REMS). The moderator variables evaluated for the analysis were first-year student status and coping self-efficacy. The results identify coping self-efficacy as a negative moderator of the relationship between racial and ethnic microaggressions and depression.  $R^2 = .24$ ,  $F(11, 179) = 5.24$ ,  $p < .05$ . Thus, coping self-efficacy was found to be a non-significant moderator of the relationship between racial and ethnic microaggressions, grade level, and depression.

Figure 1.1 Depressive Symptoms

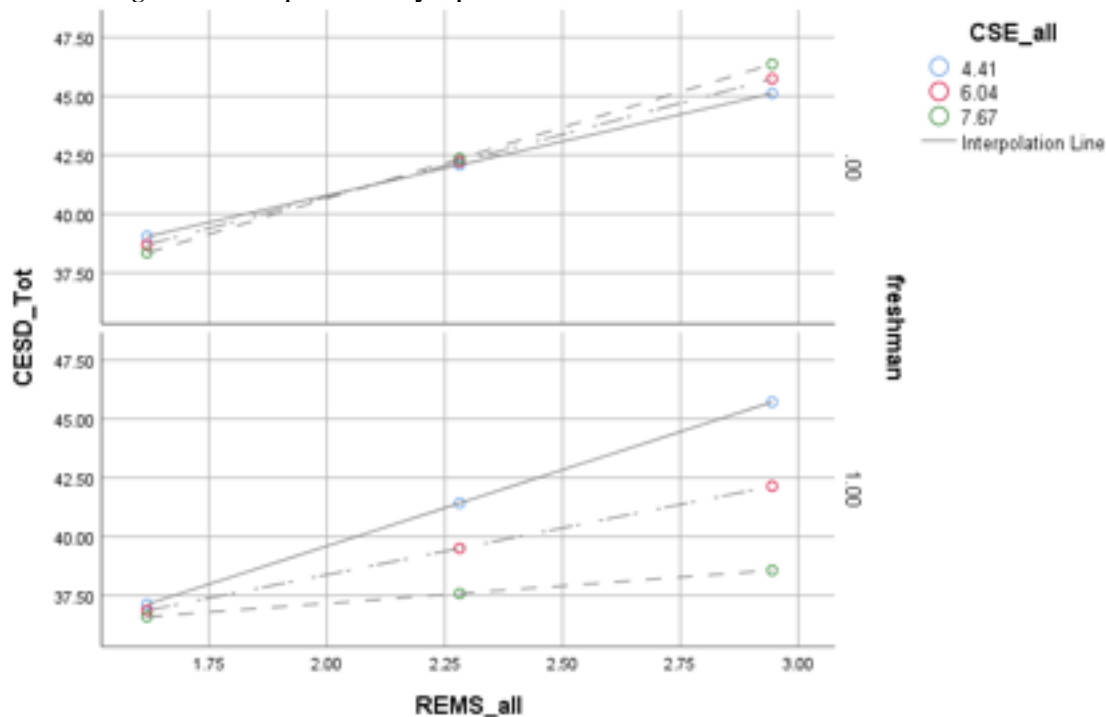


Figure 1.2 shows perceived stress symptoms moderated by coping self-efficacy for first-year students. To investigate the second hypothesis that more prepared upper-level students, in comparison to first-year students, have lower stress symptoms a simple moderator analysis was performed using PROCESS for SPSS. The predictor variable for analysis was racial-ethnic microaggressions (REMS). The outcome variable for the analysis was perceived stress symptoms. The moderator variables evaluated for the analysis were first-year student status and coping self-efficacy. Results identify coping self-efficacy as a positive moderator of the relationship between racial-ethnic microaggressions and perceived stress.  $R^2 = .27$ ,  $F(11, 180) = 6.29$ ,  $p < .05$ . Thus, coping self-efficacy was found to be a significant moderator of the relationship between racial and ethnic microaggressions, grade level, and stress.

Figure 1.2 Perceived Stress Symptoms

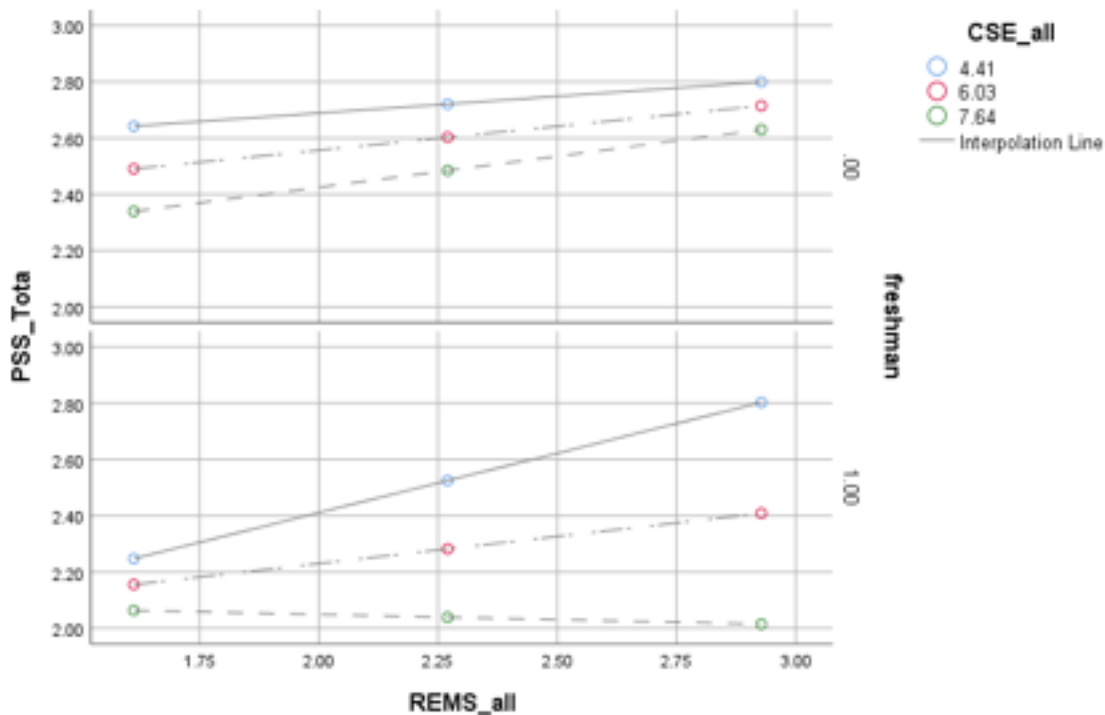
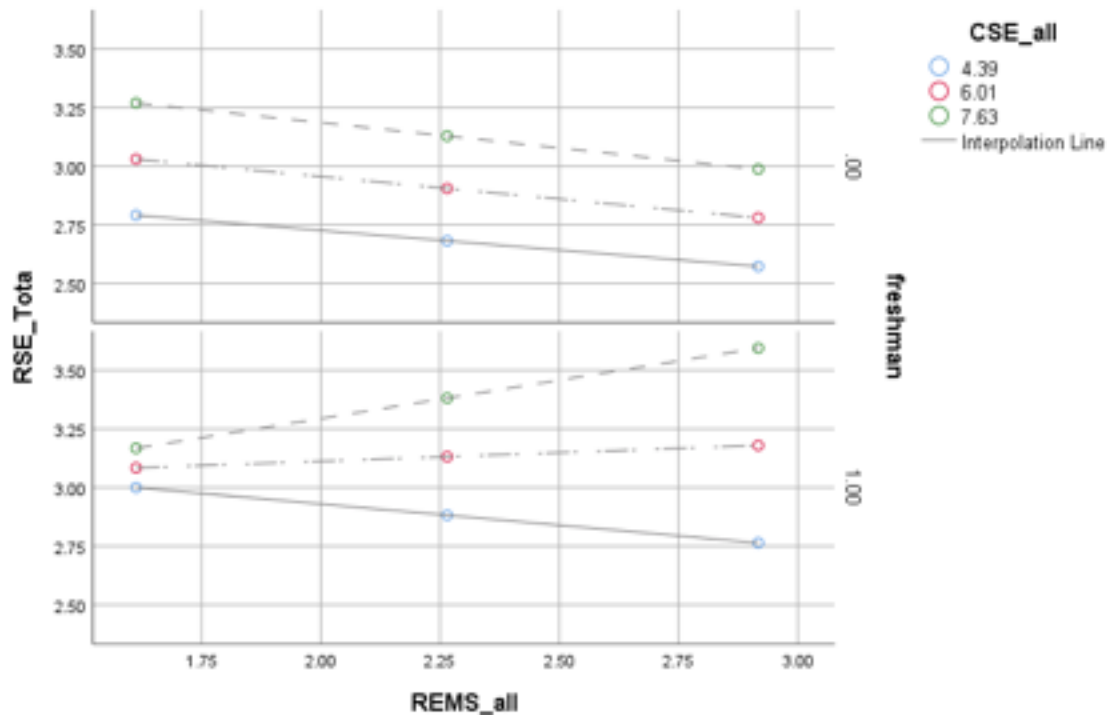


Figure 1.3 shows self-esteem moderated by coping self-efficacy and grade level. To investigate the third hypothesis that first-year students with higher coping self-efficacy have higher self-esteem a simple moderator analysis was performed using PROCESS for SPSS. The predictor variable for analysis was racial-ethnic microaggressions (REMS). The outcome variable for the analysis was self-esteem. The moderator variables evaluated for the analysis were first-year student status and coping self-efficacy.  $R-sq = .30$ ,  $F(11, 180) = 7.01$ ,  $p < .05$ . The interaction between self-esteem, first-year students and coping self-efficacy was found to be statistically significant. The results identify coping self-efficacy as a positive moderator of the relationship between racial-ethnic microaggressions, grade level and self-esteem.

Figure 1.3 Regulated Self-Esteem



## Discussion

The goal of the current study was to examine the effects of racial-ethnic microaggressions on first-year's mental health (e.g., stress, self-esteem, and depression) moderated by coping self-efficacy (e.g., perceived ability) in relation to upper-level students. This study tested three hypotheses about the effects of racial-ethnic microaggressions and coping self-efficacy, have on stress, depression, and self-esteem relative to first-year students versus upper-level students. The sample was derived from Asian American and Latinx American college students at a predominantly Hispanic serving institution on the West Coast.

The first hypothesis that first-year with higher coping self-efficacy compared to upper-level students would report lower levels of depression was not confirmed. As there was no significant relationship between coping-self efficacy as a moderator of depressive symptoms. There is not much research available on the interaction between coping self-efficacy and

depressive symptoms in Asian American and Latinx American first-year. However, overall more reports of racial-ethnic microaggressions did significantly impact higher levels of depressive symptoms in first-year students. Upper-level students were found to have higher levels of depression reported with more frequent interactions with racial-ethnic microaggressions. The findings align with previous research as the combination of experiencing subtle covert forms of discrimination along with decreased ethnic group attachment and self-efficacy contributes to a heightened emotional stress response, which in turn can lead to greater depressive symptoms (Torres, 2015). The lack of correlation between coping-self efficacy and depression may be attributed to the lower frequency of experiencing microaggressions as the survey was conducted at such a diverse university. There is room for further research as correlations could differ at predominantly White Institutions. Minority students could possibly have increased frequency of experiences with microaggressions increasing depressive symptoms as predominantly White Institutions may provide more opportunities for microaggressions to be experienced. Minority students attending predominantly White Institutions could show stronger correlations between coping self-efficacy and stress as a minority student could be anticipating a racial stressor more often due to the racial climate of the campus. Thus, more research could be done on the racial climate of the campus by observation as well as data collected directly from participants. There are many avenues to extend research on the interaction between microaggressions and minority college students in the future.

The second hypothesis that upper-level students would report lower levels of stress due to higher coping self-efficacy was not confirmed. Both upper-level students and first-year students' interactions with microaggressions reported higher stress levels as coping self-efficacy only significantly moderated first-year students experiences with stress. Asian American and

Latinx American first-year students did report higher levels of stress based on their coping self-efficacy. First-year students with high coping self-efficacy showed no relation between microaggressions and stress, as first-year students with lower coping self-efficacy reported higher stress levels and more experiences with microaggressions. For upper-level students who reported higher coping self-efficacy and higher frequency with microaggressions reported more stress. Upper-level students who had lower coping self-efficacy reported no significant relationship with stress and microaggressions. These findings align with existing research as these reactions of increased stress can occur if a student of color is anticipating a racial conflict (Smith 2011a).

The third hypothesis that the higher Asian American and Latinx American first-year students coping self-efficacy to address racial and ethnic microaggressions the higher their self-esteem was confirmed. Highly prepared first-year students reported the more microaggressions experienced the higher their self-esteem. Coping self-efficacy significantly moderated the relationship between first-year students dealing with microaggressions and self-esteem. For less prepared first-year students there was no significant relationship between microaggressions and self-esteem. For all upper-level students the more microaggressions they experienced the lower self-esteem they reported. Coping-self efficacy for first-year students confirmed the more prepared the decreased likelihood of lower self-esteem was found. The current results have the potential to advance empirical research by illustrating the markedly important role that coping self-efficacy responses to microaggressions have on the relationship among first-year students. The findings suggest that the higher coping self-efficacy you have as a first-year student to interact with racial and ethnic microaggressions the higher your self-esteem will be when you do encounter the prejudiced slights.

## CHAPTER 5: FUTURE WORK AND IMPLICATIONS

### Implications

The findings suggest implications for mental health and strengthening social and emotional support for Asian American and Latinx American students to better manage racial-ethnic microaggressions. Social support and behavioral coping strategies have been positively associated with self-efficacy in past research (Schwarzer & Knoll, 2007). There are several limitations of the current study, as the study was a secondary data analysis. The cross-sectional methodology does not allow for causal conclusions to be made, emphasizing the importance of conducting longitudinal studies in the future. Some of the data collected was self-reported which can be impacted by memory bias, and or social desirability (Torres, 2015). The low sample size of the current study requires that any conclusions not be generalized until further research can corroborate these interactions. Lastly, individuals with clinically diagnosed mental health disorders were not accounted for and may be more vulnerable to the consequences of daily life stressors including ethnic microaggressions.

Several implications are apparent from the current secondary data analysis with regard to racial-ethnic microaggressions, coping, and mental health among first-year college students compared to their upper-level counterparts. First, the findings demonstrate that there is a need for mental health professionals to be aware of the different ways in which patients cope with racial-ethnic microaggressions. Evidence shows that people of color engage in various processes when they experience racial-ethnic microaggressions (Sanchez, 2018). First, they engage in a cautious deliberation about how to appraise and respond to the microaggression, followed by an employment of various coping techniques. Secondly, similar to prior studies that showed engagement coping strategies were beneficial for Asian American and Latinx American

college students mental health in the face of racism and discrimination (e.g., Sanchez, 2018; Kim 2016), the findings indicated that coping strategies were linked to less psychological distress (e.g., self-esteem, stress, and depression). First year Asian American and Latinx American students compared to upper-level students show that level of coping self-efficacy is linked with lower psychological distress. This leaves educators and clinicians in a unique position to assist students through fostering engagement coping strategies that actively deal with microaggressions, as they may reduce overall psychological distress (Sanchez, 2018).

### **Future Work**

Conducting further research on the effects of microaggressions on minority college students in the field of educational psychology would prove beneficial to many educators, clinicians and counselors. Exploring the effects of microaggression's on predominantly White college campuses would be interesting as the racial climate of the campus may be different from that of a Hispanic serving institution on the West Coast. Focusing on the Southern East Coast specifically could provide different geographical perspectives. Studies of microaggressions could possibly benefit from a more in-depth data collection process as quantitative research can give statistical analysis, qualitative research can provide the subjective lived experiences of participants. Through acquiring the narrative experiences of minorities, the collection of data will provide a voice for minority participants often overlooked in today's society. The use of a mixed methods approach will provide the statistical validity of the data collection as the use of qualitative data will provide the intimate connection to the public through the data. Further research would benefit from exploring African American minorities as well as Asian American and Latinx Americans as there is not a hierarchy of oppression to be reported through the data I

wish to produce. Once minorities adopt the mindset of working together only then will we overcome the systematic oppression embedded societies current educational system.

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