



The Mediating Role of Colorblindness on Gender and Acceptability of Racial Microaggressions among Black People at a Historically White Institution

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ABSTRACT

Chronic exposure to racial microaggressions (i.e., interpersonal race-based insults or invalidations that are often based stereotypes) may lead to traumatic stress symptoms, increased headaches, reduced self-efficacy, and fatigue among Black individuals. We were interested in examining differences in how Black students, faculty, and staff at a historically white institution rate racial microaggressions as acceptable, with particular focus on gender and colorblind racial attitudes as predictors. Using survey-based methods and mediation analysis, we found that colorblind racial attitudes mediate the relation between gender and ratings of acceptability. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

Keywords: colorblind, microaggressions, race, and racial attitudes

INTRODUCTION

The focus of the current study surrounds the racially microaggressive experiences of Black people (i.e., individuals with African ancestry, which includes the African diaspora broadly) on university campuses. We were specifically interested in (a) understanding how Black men and women perceive microaggressions differently and (b) exploring potential factors that may account for such differences. Pierce (1970) coined the term, microaggression, to describe *offensive mechanisms* that occur daily for Black Americans and send the message that they are inferior. The definition of the term has expanded, as racial microaggressions today are defined as verbal, behavioral, or environmental slights that often communicate hostile and derogatory messages toward people holding racially minoritized identities (Sue et al., 2007). Derald Wing Sue is one of the leading microaggression scholars, and in one of his seminal papers, he and colleagues (2007) define three types of racial microaggressions. *Microassaults* are blatant instances of racism (e.g., use of the n-word, refusing service to Black people), whereas *microinsults* (e.g., asking a Black woman if her hair is real) and *microinvalidations* (e.g., telling Black people they are too focused on race and that they should instead focus on our shared experiences as Americans) are often more subtle forms of microaggressions.

It is important that we acknowledge our positionalities as scholars engaged with the current research project before referencing the relevant literature and discussing the methods we used to engage in the current project. All four authors identify as Black women who have had direct lived experiences with racial microaggression in our personal, academic, and professional lives. The first author is an Associate Professor of psychology and Licensed Clinical Psychologist who has written extensively on microaggressions and has facilitated multiple workshops and trainings on the topic. She has also supervised several graduate student projects on microaggressions, as she is the Principal Investigator for a lab that focuses on these transgressions. During the development of the study and data collection, the remaining authors were graduate-level student members of this lab whose dissertation projects focused on racial or income-driven microaggressions. As practitioners trained in school psychology, each of these authors was trained to engage in socially just service provision that addresses issues of racism and other forms of oppression head on.

The lead author's interest in this project stemmed from her engagement in prior research studies that identified limitations that we specifically aimed to address as part of the current project. There exists limited literature to understand how individuals holding racially minoritized identities experience microaggressions differently or that focus on the mechanisms for which these direct effects may be relevant. Further, our lab

has had conversations anecdotally about differences in perceptions and responses to racism among Black men and women. These conversations also sparked an interest in the relevant project, and our views, thoughts, and opinions given our personal experiences surely have informed our engagement. As such, we were intentional about using the existing research literature to inform our hypotheses, instead of relying on our direct lived experiences. It should be noted that we very much value the experiences that we have had as Black women, as a CRT framework necessitates that people's experiential knowledge is at the forefront. However, because we reflect a particular shared identity, it was of upmost importance that we relied on the empirical literature to support our hypotheses.

RESEARCH METHOD

Critical Race Theory (CRT) has received growing attention publicly although most people's understanding of the concept is flawed. Nonetheless, CRT can be directly applied to understanding the lived experiences of people holding racially minoritized identities, and specific to this study, Black people. Scholars like Derrick Bell and Richard Delgado founded CRT following the Civil Rights Movement given the lack of attention to racism and the centrality of whiteness in research (Curry, 2008). Initially, the focus was on education, as scholars have written extensively on the role of racism in education (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 2020). However, engagement in CRT scholarly work has expanded across disciplines, with scholars in fields such as psychology using the framework.

Relevant to CRT, Solórzano and Pérez Huber (2020) contextualize racial microaggressions as an outcome of white supremacy and institutional racism that permeates systems such as education, healthcare, and the media. Although use of the term *micro* may signal that these are small or unintentional, this term instead refers to the interpersonal (rather than systemic) nature of these transgressions. When individual actors exist in systems that are racist and have been socialized to hold biases, they may be likely to engage in microaggressive behaviors whether they are purposeful or not. One tenet of CRT emphasizes the *experiential knowledge* of racially minoritized people and the importance of *counter-stories* that push back on the dominant narrative (Brown, 2021). Solórzano and Pérez Huber (2020) stress that an analysis of microaggressions that centers the lived experiences of those holding racially minoritized identities is key, rather than a focus on how microaggressions affect white individuals. Relevant to the current study, we specifically focused on the perspectives of Black people instead of engaging in a comparative analysis of their experiences opposite to their white counterparts.

Racial microaggressions are often driven by stereotypes that we hold for certain groups of people. It should be noted that *no one* is exempt from engaging in microaggressive behavior—whether that be based on race or other minoritized identities such as sexuality, ability, or religion—as individuals are socialized to hold stereotypes about groups. Further, it is also the case that individuals may experience microaggressions at the intersection of their multiple minoritized identities. Crenshaw (1989) coined the term *intersectionality*, which refers to how social and political systems disadvantage and marginalize individuals when they hold multiple interlocked minoritized identities. For example, Black trans disabled women may experience oppression differently than white disabled women, given the addition of minoritized racial and gender identities that situate them to experience ableism intersecting with racism and sexism. Relevant to the current study, we were interested in exploring how perceptions of racial microaggressions as acceptable may be different for Black people in higher education given their gender.

Racial Microaggressions and the Context of Higher Education

The microaggressive experiences of Black people have been studied extensively (Gadson & Lewis, 2022; Hall & Fields, 2018; Smith et al., 2011; Sue et al., 2008), and researchers have specifically well-documented the racially microaggressive experiences of Black people on college campuses (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2018; Kanter et al., 2017; Lewis et al., 2013; Morales, 2021; Pittman, 2012; Rollock, 2021; Solórzano et al., 2000). Black people's microaggressive experiences are often driven by stereotypes about their race. For example, stereotypes that position Black people as criminals may produce microaggressions such as clutching one's purse or wallet around Black people, watching them closely in a store, or over-policing their gatherings on college campuses (Smith et al., 2016; Sue, 2008). In education, Black students are also perceived as less intelligent, and school personnel often assume that their families do not prioritize their education (Allen, 2010). When teachers and college-level professors hold such stereotypes, they may be more likely to express surprise when they have a Black student who is the exception, or they may not make an effort to engage with their Black students and their families. When one assumes that all Black people have the same lived experiences and values, such stereotypes may lead to college professors or department chairs asking the only Black student or faculty member in their class or department for the *Black perspective*. Black faculty report that their race very much defines their role on campus, as they have daily microaggressive encounters with white colleagues who invalidate them and white students who insult them (Pittman, 2012).

An understanding of Black people's experiences in higher education is very relevant to our understanding of how they interpret the university

environment. In their review of the literature on *school climate*, Thapa and colleagues (2013) reference five domains that describe the general functioning of schools: safety, relationships, teaching and learning, the institutional environment, and the school improvement. The relationships domain (i.e., respect for diversity, school connectedness and engagement, social support) is most relevant to the current study, as a significant amount of research has demonstrated that students holding racially minoritized identities experience their school climate as more negative as their white counterparts *and* that the student-teacher relationships domain is the most important dimension of school climate for Black students (Thapa et al., 2013). These findings are important because positive perceptions of school climate are directly related to higher academic achievement, adaptive mental health, and less behavioral problems (Thapa et al., 2013).

Although a significant amount of the school climate literature references experiences in K-12 education (McIntosh et al., 2021; Pena-Shaff et al., 2019), this work can be directly applied to university students and the campus setting more broadly. In their study about the transforming perceptions of campus climate for historically underrepresented groups on college campuses, Rankin and Reason (2008) defined climate as “the current attitudes, behaviors, and standards and practices of employees and students of an institution,” with specific focus on “attitudes, behaviors, and standards/practices that concern the access for, inclusion of, and level of respect for individual and group needs, abilities, and potential” (p. 264). An abundance of literature suggests that perceptions of campus climate for students and faculty/staff holding racially minoritized identities vastly differ from the perceptions of their white counterparts, which is on par with the K-12 literature (Campbell-Whately, 2015; Konold et al., 2017; Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003; Shirley & Cornell, 2012; Voight et al., 2015).

It is essential to note the role of exposure to microaggressions on interpretations of campus climate for racially minoritized people at historically white institutions (HWIs). Results of quantitative and qualitative empirical studies have found that exposure to microaggressions plays an integral role in how individuals interpret campus climate, as experiences with these transgressions lead to a lack of connection with the learning environment and feelings of isolation (Muñoz & Vigil, 2018; Ogunyemi et al., 2020; Sanchez, 2019; Solórzano et al., 2000). We know that Black students and faculty/staff at HWIs perceive their campus climate negatively, and these disparities may be influenced by the degree to which these students are exposed to microaggressions on campuses that are predominantly white (Fields et al., 2022; McDougal et al., 2024).

Results of these studies that are specifically relevant to the consequences of microaggressions on college campuses are not surprising,

given what we know about the general impact of these transgressions. Whether intentional or unintentional, racial microaggressions often result in deleterious effects on one's physiological, psychological, and emotional functioning (Nadal et al., 2014; O'Keefe et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2007). Specifically, chronic exposure to microaggressions has been linked to the presentation of traumatic stress symptoms, reduced-self efficacy, increased headaches, and fatigue in Black individuals (Helms et al., 2010; Moody & Lewis, 2019; Smith et al., 2007;). Research also points to immediate cognitive consequences of these transgressions, as exposure to microaggression immediately depletes one's cognitive resources to inhibit responses (Banks & Landau, 2021), which are essential for functioning in an academic environment. Clearly, the consequences of racial microaggressions for college-age individuals on university campus may be substantial, as higher education as a system is embedded with racism (Barber et al., 2020; Harper, 2012), making exposure to these transgressions for individuals holding racially minoritized identities inevitable.

Racial Microaggressions and the Intersection of Gender

Given our focus on the role of gender, a discussion surrounding the microaggressive experiences for Black women and men is important. There exists an abundance of literature demonstrating that Black women are often perceived as loud, angry, and hypersexual, as the stereotypes of the sapphire and jezebel have long existed and continue to be relevant in systems that are embedded with racism, such as media (Ward et al., 2023). Several scholars (Gadson & Lewis, 2022; Lewis & Neville, 2015; Lewis et al., 2021; Moody & Lewis, 2019; Sissoko & Lewis, 2023; Williams & Lewis, 2019) have published a significant amount of research surrounding the specific experiences of Black women with gendered microaggressions (i.e., transgressions that occur at the intersection of this group's race *and* gender). For example, Black women report experiencing microaggressions that objectify them (e.g., comments about their body parts), silence them (e.g., professors not calling on Black women in science, math, engineering, and technology classes), or reference the *strong Black woman* (e.g., being told they are too independent or assertive) or *angry Black woman* (e.g., being told that they need to calm down) stereotypes (Lewis & Neville, 2015).

Although it is clear that Black women have specific microaggressive experiences that are driven by the interconnectedness of racism and sexism, one cannot ignore the nuanced experiences of Black men. Although cisgender Black men hold the dominant gender identity, racial identity intersects for all Black men so that their experiences with power and privilege are much different than their white same-gender counterparts. For example, regardless of physical characteristics, Black men and boys as young as five are more

likely to be perceived as larger in size, threatening, and aggressive in comparison to their white counterparts (Todd et al., 2016; Wilson et al., 2017). Robinson-Perez (2021) argues that state sanctioned violence, mass incarceration, and the over policing of Black men is disproportionate when compared to other groups (Alexander, 2010) and occurs as a result of gendered racism. On college campuses, these stereotypes may lead to microaggressive behaviors from others such as discipline practices that are harsher for Black men, being interpreted as aggressive and threatening when you disagree with others during meetings, encounters with campus police and law enforcement that are not warranted, pushback from students driven by assumptions that Black faculty are not experts, and general assumptions that they are not a part of the campus community (Davis et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2007). We recognize that Black men's and women's unique experiences with racism may impact how they interpret their experiences with racial microaggressions. As such, we were not only interested in exploring the main effect of gender on ratings of acceptability—we aimed to examine a potential explanation for potential differences.

Some scholars have positioned research on microaggressions as problematic given multiple arguments including their interpretation of them as subjective and depending on individuals' interpretation (Williams, 2020). Further, legislation to dismantle diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts on college campuses have increased given the U.S. political climate and the Trump administration's agenda (Conyers & Wright Fields, 2025). Such efforts provide systemic legitimacy to the dominant narrative that *reverse racism* is the problem and that these transgressions do not matter. Although we argue that individuals' subjective interpretations are valid, given our theoretical interpretation of racial microaggressions under a CRT lens, there is nonetheless research that has addressed these concerns. For example, researchers have examined differences in individuals' perceptions of microaggressions as acceptable. For example, Mekawi and Todd (2018) found that that men are more likely to rate microaggressions as acceptable when compared women. Other studies have identified similar findings, as women and girls are more likely to notice microaggressions and perceive them as more offensive than men and boys (Banks et al., 2022). Researchers have speculated that these differences may occur given girls' and women's exposure to more transgressions given their gender identity (Current Authors; Mekawi & Todd, 2021). Conceivably, Black women may interpret microaggressions as more harmful, as the intersectionality of race and gender may make these transgressions more salient for this group. These findings are directly relevant to the current study; however, research has not specifically identified whether these relations are particularly relevant for Black men and women. These groups have many experiences on university campuses that are

similar given their racial identity and other encounters that are particularly relevant to the intersection of their race and gender. Given these differences, it may be the case that Black men and women experience and perceive microaggressive encounters differently. As part of the current study, we were interested in examining potential differences in how Black university students perceive microaggressions as acceptable and identifying a potential explanation for why this may be the case.

Colorblind Racial Attitudes as a Potential Mediator

The described differences in perceptions of microaggressions do not undermine the rigor of microaggression research, as differences in individuals' perceptions of *any* concept is plausible and expected. In fact, an analysis of how and why individuals perceive microaggressions differently is useful, in that such scholarship can be used to address the harm that occurs as a result of these transgressions. Research suggests that colorblind racial attitudes may explain how one perceives microaggressions as offensive. Racial color blindness is a "distortion and minimization of racism" (Neville et al., 2005, p. 28) and "refers to the belief that race should not and does not matter" (Neville et al. 2000, p. 60). From a CRT lens, colorblind ideologies ignore the prominence of racism in the everyday lived experiences of racially minoritized people, and erases these experiences when we attempt to engage in research that is positioned as *neutral* and *objective*. An extensive amount of research has pointed to white individuals' difficulties perceiving racism and microaggressions when they endorse colorblind ideologies (Edwards, 2017; Wise, 2021), but researchers have not yet explored the role of these ideologies in explaining how racially minoritized people perceive experiences with microaggressions. We were interested in exploring the relation between Black university students' colorblind attitudes and their perceptions of microaggressions as acceptable.

Although there is limited research in this area, prior studies helped to inform the hypotheses we posed. Specifically, Wise (2021) found that for white college students, colorblind attitudes were inversely related to perceptions of racial microaggressions as problematic. When participants endorsed greater colorblind attitudes, they were less likely to find these transgressions offensive. Banks and Horton (2022) identified similar findings as part of an experimental study where undergraduate students were prompted to rate the harmful nature of multiple microaggressive vignettes. Specifically, researchers found that participants' endorsement of colorblindness predicted harmfulness ratings, as those participants who reported greater colorblind ideologies rated the scenarios as less harmful. Lastly, Mekawi and Todd (2018) not only found that men are more likely to rate microaggressions as acceptable when compared to women but also that ratings of acceptability are significantly related to colorblind ideologies. As such, it may be the case that

colorblind ideologies explain the process by which gender predicts one's ratings of acceptability for Black women and men.

Given differences in how Black women and men experience microaggressions relevant to the specific stereotypes that exist for them at the intersection of their race and gender, we aimed to explore explanations for how perceptions of these transgressions may differ for Black individuals enrolled and working at an HWI. First, we wanted to assess potential differences in acceptability for Black men and women. Given prior research (Mekawi & Todd, 2018) we hypothesized that Black women would rate microaggressions as less acceptable than Black men, given their specific experiences with racism at the intersection of their gender and race. We were not only interested in exploring this direct effect, as we also asked the following question: do colorblind racial attitudes explain the relation between gender and acceptability of racial microaggressions? Given the literature regarding colorblindness detailed above, we predicted that colorblind racial attitudes would explain the relation between gender and acceptability. The following includes details surrounding the survey-based methods we used to address these questions specific to the mediating role of colorblind racial attitudes on gender and perceptions of acceptability.

Participants

We recruited 97 Black students ($n = 72$) and faculty/staff ($n = 25$) enrolled at a Midwestern historically white institution (HWI). We did not place any restrictions on age, as participants were 18-62 years old ($M = 28.10$, $SD = 12.54$). Participants who reported a nonbinary gender identity were not included in the sample, because we were interested in comparing the experiences of Black men and women given specific literature on how individuals of these genders experience their Blackness differently. There were 71 women and 26 men who participated in the study. Relevant to sexual orientation, 22 participants endorsed a lesbian, gay, or bisexual sexual orientation and 70 reported that they were heterosexual or straight. It should be noted that five participants did not respond to this item. Finally, 86 participants responded that they identified as Black racially, and 11 endorsed a biracial identity.

MEASURES

The data used for the current study were part of larger dataset where participants completed counterbalanced questionnaires to assess exposure to racial microaggressions, colorblind racial attitudes, and the degree to which they perceived microaggressive behaviors as acceptable. Given our focus for the current study was on perceptions of acceptability, we did not use questionnaire data that assessed participants' actual exposure to microaggressions, as we only focused on their interpretations of these transgressions as acceptable. As such, the below sections represent the two

measures that were used for the current study. Prior to the completion of these measures, participants responded to a demographic survey that assessed their race, gender, sexual orientation, and age.

Perceptions of Microaggressions as Acceptable

Participants completed items on the *Acceptability of Racial Microaggressions Scale (ARMS)* (Mekawi & Todd, 2018) to assess the degree to which they found 34 microaggressive items acceptable. The *ARMS* includes four subscales: *Victim Blaming*, *Exoticizing*, *Power Evasion*, and *Color Evasion*. Items included racial microaggressions that target multiple racial and ethnic identities. Ratings were on a Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*totally unacceptable*) to 6 (*perfectly acceptable*). For the purpose of the current study, we were interested in participants' overall endorsement of the presented items as microaggressive, instead of a focus on the specific subscales. As such, we obtained an average across all items, with higher scores indicating greater acceptability of the microaggressive items. Reliability data for subscales from the initial study ($\alpha = .91-.94$) was consistent with data we obtained for ratings across the overall scale ($\alpha = .95$).

Colorblindness

We used the *Colorblind Racial Attitudes Scale (CoBRAS)* (Neville et al., 2000) to assess participant color-blind racial attitudes. The *CoBRAS* includes the *Racial Privilege*, *Institutional Discrimination*, *Blatant Racial Issues* and *Total Colorblindness* subscales. The latter was the focus of the current study. Participants responded to 20 items on a Likert scale that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). We averaged ratings to obtain the *Total Colorblindness* subscale score, with higher scores indicating greater colorblind racial attitudes. Reliability data obtained from the current sample ($\alpha = .89$) is consistent with reported coefficients from Neville and colleagues' (2000) initial study ($\alpha = .86$).

PROCEDURE

After receiving approval from our university's Institutional Review Board, we disseminated recruitment materials for the study via our university's mass email system. Interested students first viewed an eligibility survey that included multiple items. This survey was only meant to assess if potential participants identified as Black. We did not screen for ethnic identity (e.g., African American, Jamaican, Nigerian). Those who endorsed a racial identity other than Black were thanked for their interest but were not allowed to continue. Eligible participants then viewed the consent form and selected the *next* button to consent to participate in the study. As mentioned above, participants were exposed to the three measures of interest via Qualtrics in counterbalanced order. We also used attention check items and did not include participants who failed these items or the aforementioned eligibility items (n

= 46). After completing all questionnaires, participants were able to enter a raffle for 1 of 5 \$20 gift cards via a separate survey not linked to their study data.

RESULTS

We conducted preliminary analyses before addressing our primary research questions. Across the entire sample, ratings of colorblind racial attitudes ranged from 1.00 to 5.30 ($M = 2.21$, $SD = 0.91$) and were positively skewed (1.20 , $SE = .25$). Most participants' ratings indicated low colorblind racial attitudes, a few participants ($n = 8$) provided ratings for which the average was a 4 or higher (i.e., *neutral to strongly agree*). Ratings of acceptability ranged from 1.00 to 5.29 ($M = 1.82$, $SD = 0.81$), and the *ARMS* was also positively skewed (1.53 , $SE = .25$). Almost all participants ($n = 96$) provided ratings on the *ARMS* indicating low acceptability of the microaggressive items (i.e., ratings less than 4). Results of correlational analyses indicated some significance, as participants' report of colorblind attitudes was positively correlated with ratings of acceptability, $r = .67$, $p < .001$. In other words, the more participants endorsed colorblind attitudes the more likely they were to rate microaggressions as acceptable.

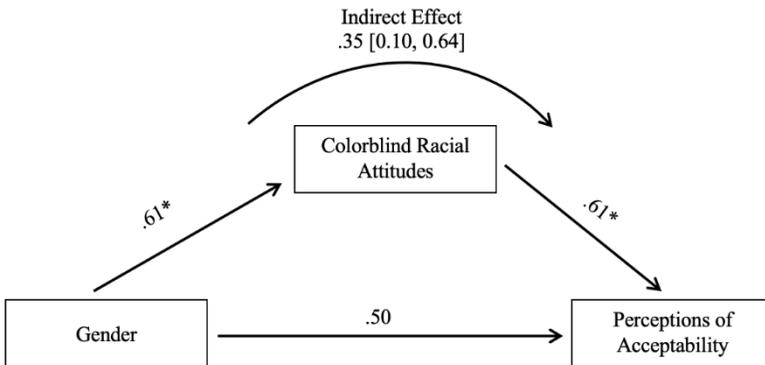
Lastly, we conducted preliminary analyses using Independent Samples T-tests to examine gender and status (e.g., student or faculty staff) differences for the colorblind racial attitude ratings. For these analyses, we entered gender i.e., (women = 1, man = 2) or status (i.e., faculty/staff = 1, student = 2) as the predictors, and the *CoBRAS* (Neville et al., 2000) as the outcome variable. Men ($M = 2.66$, $SD = 1.06$) in our sample were more colorblind than women ($M = 2.05$, $SD = 0.79$), $t(95) = -3.05$, $p = .003$, $d = -.70$. We did not find any significant differences in colorblind racial attitude ratings for students ($M = 2.19$, $SD = 0.91$) when compared to faculty/staff ($M = 2.29$, $SD = 0.91$), $t(95) = 0.47$, $p = .64$, $d = .11$. The same was true for acceptability ratings, as no differences were identified between student ($M = 1.82$, $SD = 0.81$) and faculty/staff participants ($M = 2.19$, $SD = 0.97$), $t(95) = 0.08$, $p = .93$, $d = .02$.

To address our primary questions surrounding the potential of colorblind attitudes as a mediator, we conducted several regression analyses to examine each component of our hypothesized model. First, we found that gender predicted acceptability ratings ($b = .50$, $t(95) = 2.78$, $p < .01$), as men in the sample rated microaggressions as more acceptable than women. Gender also significantly predicted ratings of colorblind racial ideologies ($b = .61$, $t(95) = 3.05$, $p < .01$), as men in our sample were more likely to endorse colorblind racial attitudes as compared to women. Lastly, colorblind racial attitudes, which we examined as the mediator variable, positively predicted acceptability of microaggressions ($b = .61$, $t(95) = 8.86$, $p < .001$), meaning participants who endorsed more colorblind racial ideologies were more likely

to perceive microaggressions as acceptable. Because we found that the a-path and b-path were both significant, we conducted mediation analyses using Hayes (2017) PROCESS macro for SPSS model 4 (Hayes, 2017). Specifically, we tested our hypotheses using a bootstrapping method (5000 resamples) with bias-corrected confidence estimates at 95% (MacKinnon et al., 2004; Preacher & Hayes, 2004). We entered gender as the predictor, the ARMS (Mekawi & Todd, 2018) as the outcome variable, and the CoBRAS (Neville et al., 2000) as the mediator. We found that the total effect of gender on acceptability, ($b = .50, t(94) = 1.01, p = .007$), was erased when accounting for colorblind racial attitudes, ($b = .35, CI = 0.10, 0.64$), indicating full mediation (see Figure 1). In other words, colorblind racial attitudes fully explained gender’s significant effect on perceptions of microaggressions as acceptable.

Figure 1.

Colorblind racial attitudes mediate the process by which gender predicts perceptions of acceptability



DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Research has extensively pointed to the deleterious effects of racial microaggressions, as exposure to these transgressions is associated with deficits in physiological, psychological, cognitive, and emotional functioning (Banks & Landau 2021; Mekawi & Todd, 2018; Nadal et al., 2014; O’Keefe et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2007). Black students, faculty, and staff at HWIs report daily exposure to racial microaggressions that contribute to their overall interpretation of the campus climate as hostile and not inclusive (Muñoz & Vigil, 2018; Ogunyemi et al., 2020; Solórzano et al., 2000). For students, these experiences may also lead to difficulties academically (Sanchez, 2019). Researchers have begun to explore how individuals interpret

these transgressions as acceptable or not, as Mekawi and Todd (2018) developed the *ARMS*, which is the first measure that examines perceptions of acceptability. As part of the current study, we were interested in using this measure to explore how gender impacts perceptions of acceptability for Black students, faculty, and staff at an HWI, and more specifically, if colorblind racial attitudes explain this relation between gender and acceptability.

Our sample of 97 Black individuals who were enrolled or employed at a Midwestern HWI responded to demographic items, the *ARMS*, and the *CoBRAS* (Neville et al., 2000). These data demonstrate that colorblind racial attitudes significantly mediated the relation between gender and ratings of acceptability. In other words, results of the current study suggest that colorblindness explains the relation between gender and acceptability or explains the process by which gender predicts acceptability ratings among Black people at an HWI. Our findings are consistent with prior research that has pointed to gender differences in acceptability independent of race and relevant to the significant relation between colorblind racial attitudes and acceptability (Banks & Horton, 2022; Mekawi & Todd, 2018). There, however, have been no studies to date that specifically focused on the attitudes of Black people. We sought to address this gap in the literature surrounding the particular experiences of Black people, and even more specific to individuals on historically white college campuses who are exposed to these transgressions daily. Results of the study support our hypothesis that colorblind racial attitudes explain how and why Black men rate microaggressions as more acceptable than Black women, as their attitudes that race does and should not matter account for gender differences in perceptions of racial microaggressions. This was the first known study to specifically examine colorblind and acceptability of microaggression attitudes for Black people enrolled and employed at HWIs.

We were able to show that colorblind attitudes explain the process by which gender predicts acceptability of microaggressions. However, more research is needed to explain *why* differences in colorblind racial attitudes exist for men and women broadly and specific to Black people on historically white campuses. It might be the case that women are more in tune with the colorblind nature of racism given their specific experiences with gendered racism. However, as mentioned earlier, Black men have specific gendered experiences with racism too. There does not exist any literature linking ideologies like racial identity or race consciousness to colorblindness or that suggests these concepts might explain differences in colorblindness. In fact, Simien and Clawson (2004) found that Black feminist ideologies (i.e., the understanding that Black women experience discrimination at the intersection of their race and gender) are significantly related to aspects of race consciousness and identified no differences in how Black men and women

endorsed the latter. Gonlin and Campbell (2017) argue that Black people who are more engaged socially with white people may hold these attitudes to reduce cognitive dissonance in an effort to adapt to whiteness. They specifically point to research on Black people who attend multiracial churches, and Tatum's (1997) research surrounding Black adolescents' struggles with racial identity development when enrolled at predominantly white schools is also relevant. Clearly, additional research is needed to understand the role of colorblind racial attitudes and why differences present for Black women and men.

LIMITATIONS

Although we argue that the results of our study address a major gap in the research literature, there exists limitations that must be considered. First, our sample of Black individuals was unique, in that we recruited participants from one Midwestern HWI where Black students make up less than 10% of the student population. It may be the case that students in higher education receive greater exposure to content relevant to racism and oppressive systems and the same is likely true of faculty and staff. Although the skew of both measures was not surprising, it is nonetheless a point worthy of mention when considering the potential of generalizability. Findings of our study should be interpreted with some caution, as results specifically speak to the experiences and attitudes of Black students, faculty, and staff at a specific HWI who generally do not hold colorblind attitudes and feel that racial microaggressions are unacceptable. We might argue that these trends are likely similar to the population of Black people in the U.S., given what we know about their socialization to racism. However, a replication of the current study that includes a community sample of Black individuals representing diverse identities and worldviews would be beneficial. Such an exploration might include increased diversity in gender, as the current sample were primarily women and only included a gender binary, and more intentional consideration of age and various ethnic backgrounds (e.g., African American, Jamaican, Nigerian).

Our sample size was also relatively low, considering the typical sample size of research that uses mediation analyses. However, Fritz and MacKinnon (2007) published a study surrounding required sample sizes to detect mediation effects. Given their analyses, samples where the *a*- and *b*-path coefficients are equal to or larger than 0.59 require low sample sizes ($n = 34$). In the case of the current study, coefficients for both of these paths ($b = 0.61$ and 0.61) were higher than recommended and the number of participants in our study ($n = 97$) also exceeded recommendation.

IMPLICATIONS

The current study has significant implications for the microaggression research agenda and practical efforts that are taken to address these transgressions. To the former point, research that expands on the results of the current study might consider the limitations mentioned above. Although we found support for full mediation, in that the total effect for the relation between gender and acceptability was nonexistent when controlling for colorblind racial attitudes as a mediator, future research might explore other potential factors, such as moderating variables that change the relation among the studied variables. As mentioned previously, this has been an understudied area in the literature, so analyses that continue to explore relations among these variables and others is needed. Most of the research on colorblind racial attitudes has explored such attitudes among white people, although some researchers have explored differences in these ideologies among racially minoritized people in interracial relationships (e.g., Gonlin & Campbell, 2017). Additional research is needed to understand differences in Black individuals and other racially minoritized groups endorsement of colorblind racial attitudes.

Many administrators on university campuses have undertaken efforts to familiarize the campus community with microaggressions and to provide students, faculty, and staff with strategies to avoid engaging in microaggressive behavior and tools to respond when they witness or receive these transgressions. In fact, there has been a great deal of research published that has examined results of such trainings that are not only relevant to higher education (e.g., Williams et al., 2020), but also speak to the experiences of those in K-12 schools (Banks et al., 2024), medicine (e.g., Sandoval et al., 2020), and generally in the workplace (e.g., Fattoracci & King, 2023). Facilitators of such trainings must not take a *one size fits all* approach, as individual difference variables inform how participants engage in these trainings. Specific to results of the current study, facilitators and administrators on university campuses might pay particular attention to addressing the colorblind racial attitudes of Black men (and other participants) prior to targeting responses to microaggressions. When individuals feel that race should not and does not matter, they may not be prepared to fully grasp the potential deleterious consequences of race-based microaggressions. As such, specific focus on addressing such factors may improve individuals' responses to such trainings.

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