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Political Activism and Mental Health Among Black and Latinx College Students

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Abstract

Objectives: The current study investigates the utility of political activism as a protective factor against experiences of racial/ethnic (R/E) discrimination that negatively affect stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms among Black and Latinx college freshmen at predominately White institutions. **Method:** Data come from the Minority College Cohort Study, a longitudinal investigation of Black and Latinx college

students ($N = 504$; 44% Black). We conducted multiple regression analyses for each mental health indicator and tested for interaction effects. **Results:** For Black and Latinx students, the relationship between R/E microaggressions and end of freshman year stress varied by political activism. For Black students, the relationship between R/E microaggressions and end of the year anxiety varied by political activism. There was a significant interaction effect for depressive symptoms among Latinx students. **Conclusions:** Political activism serves as a protective factor to mitigate the negative effect of R/E discrimination on stress and depressive symptoms for Latinx students. For Black students, higher levels of political activism may exacerbate experiences of R/E microaggressions and relate to more stress and anxiety compared with Black students who are less politically involved. Findings point to the need for a deeper understanding of phenomenological variation in experiences of microaggressions among R/E minorities and how students leverage political activism as an adaptive coping strategy to mitigate race-related stress during college.

Keywords

Black, college students, Latinx, mental health, political activism

One increasingly important pathway to adulthood is through higher education, as the “college for all” rhetoric intensifies and growing numbers of racial/ethnic (R/E) minority and low-income students enroll in college (Krogstad & Fry, 2014). In pursuit of personal growth and socioeconomic mobility through higher education, emerging adults experience social and contextual shifts that put their mental health at risk (Arnett, 2000; Institute of Medicine, 1994). In fact, approximately half of college students who visited campus clinics cited anxiety, depression, and/or stress as a health concern (Center for Collegiate Mental Health [CCMH], 2015). Fourteen percent of undergraduates reported seeking treatment for anxiety within the past year whereas 12% reported doing so for depression (American College Health Association, 2014). Black and Latinx college students are at an elevated risk for poor mental health and reported significantly more depressive symptoms and distress than White students (CCMH, 2015).

Black and Latinx students at predominately White institutions (PWIs) experience greater feelings of personal dissatisfaction, depressive symptoms, and social isolation than their White counterparts (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Hinderlie & Kenny, 2002). For Black and Latinx college students, these stressors increase the risk of depression and anxiety (Hwang & Goto, 2009; Neville, Heppner, Ji, & Thye, 2004; Prelow, Mosher, & Bowman, 2006; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007). Risks are further compounded for Black and Latinx college students who are less likely than White students to receive adequate mental health treatment due to cultural stigma and past negative experiences with mental health services (Gonzalez, Alegría, & Prihoda, 2005; Miranda, Soffer, Polanco-Roman, Wheeler, & Moore, 2015; Nadeem et al., 2007). Consequently, researchers have attempted to identify nonclinical aspects of campus life, such as political activism, that can act as adaptive coping strategies to promote positive mental health among R/E minority students (Hope & Spencer, 2017). In the current study, we investigate stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms among Black and Latinx college freshmen at PWIs and the utility of political activism as a protective factor against R/E discrimination, which negatively affects mental health.

Experiences of Black and Latinx Students Attending PWIs

Black and Latinx students are at increased risk for negative mental health outcomes, including stress, anxiety, and depression, when faced with racially hostile campus environments. Black and Latinx students at PWIs experience greater stigma, less institutional support, and less social support than White students, which makes it difficult to positively cope with competing stressors (Keels, 2013). Studies show that perceptions of a racially hostile campus climate are associated with a lower sense of belonging for Latinx college students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997), and perceived racial discrimination is associated with a greater prevalence of trait anxiety among Asian and Latinx college students (Hwang & Goto, 2009). R/E microaggressions—brief and common verbal or behavioral racial insults toward R/E minorities—are typical experiences for Black and Latinx students at PWIs (Harwood, Hunt, Mendenhall, & Lewis, 2012; Minikel-Lacocque, 2013; Sue et al., 2007). Students who express concern about racial stigma in their institutions are more likely to experience negative mental health and have lower grade point averages (GPAs) than students who are less concerned about racial stigma (Brown & Lee, 2005). Furthermore, experiencing racial microaggressions has been related to suicidal ideation via depressive symptoms (O’Keefe, Wingate, Cole, Hollingsworth, & Tucker, 2014). Research shows a clear connection among mental health, college performance, and college attrition (Eisenberg, Golberstein, & Hunt, 2009; Lindsey, Fabiano, & Stark, 2009), and scholars suggest that the major causes of attrition in first-year college students are emotional rather than academic factors (Pritchard & Wilson, 2003; Szulecka, Springett, & De Pauw, 1987). Given that only 40% of Black and 52% of Latinx students obtain a bachelor’s degree within 6 years of initial enrollment (Snyder & Dillow, 2015), we are in critical need of research on nonacademic factors, such as mental health and positive coping strategies, to support college persistence.

Political Activism and the College Transition

Political activism is a “critical” form of civic engagement that assumes action toward meaningful and systematic change to address social justice issues, and it may be particularly meaningful to Black and Latinx college students (Hope, Keels, & Durkee, 2016; Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011). Political activism includes mainstream political behavior (voting, contacting public officials), legal activism (boycotting, protesting), and illegal activism (civil disobedience, political violence; Ekman & Amnå, 2012). Although some research suggests that Black and Latinx youth participate less in traditional politics (Levinson, 2007), recent research finds that Black and Latinx youth comprise an increasingly larger share of the voting electorate and made up 35% of voters ages 18–29 years in the 2012 presidential election (CIRCLE, 2012; Rogowski & Cohen, 2012). Young Black Americans voted at higher rates than any other racial or ethnic group in 2008 and 2012 (CIRCLE, 2014). This increase in young Black voters runs counter to historical trends, and although it may be in part attributed to the presidential campaigns of Barack Obama, overall, young people have continued to vote in high numbers, with a record number of young voters casting ballots during the 2016 presidential primary season (CIRCLE, 2016). With increasing political participation among Black and Latinx emerging adults, it is important to understand how political activism is related to college students’ mental health.

Civic engagement, including political activism, among emerging adults is correlated with healthy development, including stronger bonds with peers, family, school, and local community (Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003; Jiménez, Musitu, Ramos, & Murgui 2009; Pancer, 2014); increased social, academic, cognitive, and vocational skills (Astin & Sax, 1998; Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999; Eccles, Barber, Stone, &

Hunt, 2003); and increased social capital (Duke, Skay, Pettingell, & Borowsky, 2009). Furthermore, among college students, participation in civic and political cocurricular activities has been shown to positively affect GPA, cognitive skills, and leadership skill development (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000). The effects may differ by race/ethnicity; participation in student government was negatively associated with GPA for Black students, but positively associated for Latinx students (Strayhorn, 2010). Our study will add to this body of research by being one of few to examine the relationship between political activism and mental health for Black and Latinx college students.

Political Activism as a Coping Strategy

Political activism may be a meaningful coping strategy for R/E minorities during the college transition by helping to buffer feelings of stress and isolation related to underrepresentation on campus, racial hassles, and R/E microaggressions (Hope, Hoggard, & Thomas, 2015; Hope & Spencer, 2017; Spencer, 2006). Through repeated engagement, political activism can become an actively acquired response to ecological stressors and resulting vulnerabilities. In this way, R/E marginalized youth leverage political activism to navigate sociopolitical conditions that create risk and alter these negative conditions to mitigate future risk (Hope & Spencer, 2017). There is evidence to support this claim because political activism can serve as an adaptive coping strategy in the face of environmental stress, leading to positive developmental outcomes for R/E minority youth (Berg, Coman, & Schensul, 2009). Youth who engage in political action to improve community health and well-being also experience positive individual well-being outcomes. For instance, Campbell and McPhail (2002) found that political interest and civic engagement provide youth with tools to improve their own health behaviors, such as HIV prevention. Furthermore, longitudinal analysis demonstrates that civic engagement is associated with higher life satisfaction, civic participation, and educational attainment for Black and Latinx youth (Chan, Ou, & Reynolds, 2014). Thus, engagement with sociopolitical systems promotes psychological well-being among Black and Latinx youth, in part through bolstering feelings of sociopolitical control and efficacy (Zimmerman, Ramirez-Valles, & Maton, 1999). It is also possible that political activism may further exacerbate poor mental health, particularly in a hostile sociopolitical environment. Although many studies have examined experiences of R/E discrimination among Black and Latinx students at PWIs (e.g., Harwood et al., 2012; Minikel-Lacocque, 2013; Nadal, Wong, Griffin, Davidoff, & Sriken, 2014), few studies consider political activism as a mechanism to reduce psychological consequences of R/E discrimination on college campuses. Our study addresses this through conceptualizing political activism as an adaptive coping strategy.

The Current Study

Although political activism positively affects the social and academic lives of R/E minority youth (Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Pacheco & Plutzer, 2008), less is known about the relationship between political activism and mental health. The literature on race and mental health indicates that research should consider life contexts and experiences that are linked to R/E group membership and are likely to adversely affect mental health (Cauce et al., 2002; Gibbs & Huang, 1989). Given research that suggests that racial discrimination affects Black and Latinx emerging adults' physical and psychological health (Hope et al., 2015; Molina, Alegría, & Mahalingam, 2013), research must examine how adolescent behaviors and characteristics related to health outcomes may persist into emerging adulthood (Keels, 2013; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). Thus, we account for the influence of demographic

variables traditionally investigated, including gender, first-generation college status, socioeconomic status (financial distress), political efficacy, and prior mental health. In this study, we examine

1. How is political activism during freshman year associated with Black and Latinx students' mental health at the end of freshman year?
2. How are R/E microaggressions experienced over freshman year associated with mental health at the end of freshman year?
3. Does political activism moderate the relationship between experiences of R/E microaggressions and mental health?

Method

Participants

Data come from the Minority College Cohort Study, a longitudinal investigation of Black and Latinx freshmen who began college in Fall 2013. Given our interest in R/E microaggressions, participants were excluded from the current analyses if they identified primarily as White ($N = 504$; 43.8% Black). Nine percent of Black ($n = 20$) and Latinx students ($n = 25$) reported being multiracial, with Black/African American or Latinx/Hispanic being a primary R/E identity. Approximately 75% of Black and 56% of Latinx participants were female; this is reflective of the gender imbalance in college enrollment (Keels, 2013; Lopez & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2014). The mean age of the sample at recruitment was 18.2 years ($SD = 0.47$). Forty-nine percent of Black students and 71% of Latinx students were first-generation college students. These students were recruited from five PWIs in the Midwest: two urban private institutions (22%), one urban public institution (36%), one rural public institution (13%), and one suburban public institution (29%). At all institutions sampled, except the urban public institution, White students made up more than 50% of the undergraduate student population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). At the two urban private institutions, Black students made up 8% and 4% and Latinx students made up 17% and 13% of the student body. The rural public institution undergraduate population was 16% Black and 14% Latinx, and the suburban public institution was 5% Black and 9% Latinx. The urban public institution was the most diverse, with an undergraduate student population that was 8% Black, 26% Latinx, and 36% White.

Procedures

Administrators at each university distributed an email containing a description of the research study and a link to the online survey during September of the 2013–2014 academic year. After following the link to the online survey, participants provided informed consent and completed a screening questionnaire. First-time college freshmen who identified as African American/Black or Hispanic/Latinx qualified for the study. Data collection took place during Fall 2013 (Wave 1), after winter break 2014 (Wave 2), and at the end of the Spring 2014 semester (Wave 3). Participants received a \$25 electronic gift card for completing the 45-min Wave 1 and 3 surveys and a \$15 electronic gift card for the 15-min Wave 2 survey. Data collection was managed using REDCap software hosted by the University of Chicago (Harris et al., 2009). Wave 1 consisted of 535 eligible students, and retention across Waves 2 and 3 was 95% and 93%, respectively. The host institutional review board approved all study procedures. Data from Waves 1 and 3 were used in the current study.

Measures

Mental health outcomes

Mental health outcomes were assessed during Wave 1 and Wave 3.

Stress

Participants completed the 14-item Perceived Stress Scale (PSS; Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983). Participants indicated frequency of stress over the past month on a 5-point Likert scale (0 = *Never*, 1 = *Almost Never*, 2 = *Sometimes*, 3 = *Fairly Often*, 4 = *Very Often*). Items included “Been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?” and “Been able to control irritations in your life?”. Positive items were recoded such that greater endorsement indicated more stress. Items were averaged to create a stress score and demonstrated good internal reliability at Wave 1 ($\alpha = .83$) and Wave 3 ($\alpha = .83$).

Anxiety

To assess anxiety, participants completed the Generalized Anxiety Disorder Screener–Symptoms Scale (Carroll & Davidson, 2000). Participants answered “yes” or “no” to 10 items regarding their experiences over the past 6 months. Sample items include “Most days I have trouble concentrating” and “Most days I cannot stop worrying.” Each “yes” response received 1 point and a sum score was created; scores ranged from 0 to 10. Items demonstrated high internal reliability at both Wave 1 ($\alpha = .88$) and Wave 3 ($\alpha = .89$).

Depressive symptoms

We assessed depressive symptoms using the Harvard Department of Psychiatry/National Depression Screening Day Scale (HANDS; Baer et al., 2000). Participants indicated frequency of depressive symptoms over the past 2 weeks using nine items of the HANDS scale (0 = *None or a little bit of the time*, 1 = *Some of the time*, 2 = *Most of the time*, 3 = *All of the time*). Given the sensitive nature, a question regarding suicidality was omitted. Sample items include “Had poor appetite” and “Been feeling hopeless about the future.” Items were averaged to create a depressive symptoms mean score. Items indicated high internal reliability at both Wave 1 ($\alpha = .92$) and Wave 3 ($\alpha = .93$).

Primary Predictors

Political activism

Political activism was assessed at Wave 3 using six items from the Youth Involvement Inventory (Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Alisat, 2007). Respondents reported how often they participated in each activity during freshman year (September 2013 to June 2014; 1 = *never*, 2 = *once*, 3 = *2 or 3 times*, 4 = *4–5 times*, 5 = *6–10 times*, 6 = *more than 10 times*). The six items were (a) join a protest, march, meeting, or demonstration; (b) participate in a boycott (not buying something because you dislike or disagree with the social or political values of the company); (c) participate in a buycott (buying a certain product or service because you like the social or political values of the company); (d) given money to or volunteered for a social or political action group; (e) donate money, toys, clothing, or other things to a charity or someone in need; and (f) worked or volunteered for a political campaign. Political activism has been measured as breadth (number of different activities; Chen, Propp, & Lee, 2015; Hope & Jagers, 2014; Hope et al., 2016) and intensity (amount of time spent with all of the activities; Ballard, 2015; Moore, Hope, Eisman, & Zimmerman, 2016). Given the proportion of participants who were not involved in any political activity and to reduce skewness in our data, we created a political activism

breadth score by counting the total number of activities completed, which ranged from zero to all six political actions. Of the six possible political activism items, 57% of participants had donated money, toys, clothing, or other things to a charity or someone in need; 37% had given money to or volunteered for a social or political action group; and 30% of participants reported joining a protest, march, meeting, or demonstration. Boycotting, buycotting, and campaigning all had a completion rate of less than 15%. Thirty-one percent of participants did not participate in any of the six forms of political activism. Analyses indicated moderate internal consistency ($\alpha = .74$).

R/E microaggressions

R/E microaggressions were assessed at Wave 3 using the seven-item Academic Inferiority subscale of the School-Based Racial/Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (SBREMA; Keels, Durkee, & Hope, 2017). The SBREMA is a brief tool that measures R/E microaggressions in school and academic settings on the basis of academic inferiority, expectations of aggression, and stereotypical misrepresentation. Given high correlation among the three SBREMA subscales ($r = .64-.70$), we focused on the Academic Inferiority subscale for these analyses. The Academic Inferiority subscale measures R/E insults and assaults that occur on college campuses and undermine students' academic ability and intellectual prowess. Items included "People on campus made me feel intellectually inferior at school because of my race/ethnicity." Participants reported their frequency of exposure to each microaggression during freshman year using a 4-point scale (1 = *Never*, 2 = *Rarely*, 3 = *Sometimes/A moderate amount*, 4 = *Often/frequently*). In this sample, more than 60% of participants reported that they had never experienced 10 of the 15 R/E microaggression items. Furthermore, a low proportion of the sample often or frequently experienced R/E microaggressions. Previous research with R/E microaggressions has found low frequencies among participants and created ordered categorical variables or other transformations to best reflect the observed response distribution (Mercer, Zeigler-Hill, Wallace, & Hayes, 2011; Torres-Harding, Andrade, Romero Diaz, 2012). Thus, following recommended data reduction procedures and to reduce skewness as a result of the low proportion of participants who often or frequently experienced R/E microaggressions, responses were recoded as 1 to indicate the microaggression was experienced and 0 to indicate the microaggression was never experienced. A sum score was computed for the Academic Inferiority subscale, and scores ranged from 0 (*no R/E microaggressions*) to 7 (*all possible R/E microaggressions*). Internal reliability was high for the subscale ($\alpha = .93$).

Control Variables

Gender

Participants indicated their sex and female was coded 1 whereas male was coded 0.

First-generation college status

Participants indicated the highest level of education completed by their mother and father on a 9-point scale (1 = *No school* to 9 = *Professional or grad school*). We coded participants as first-generation college students if both parents had not graduated from college. If either or both parents graduated from college, then participants were not coded as first-generation college students.

Financial distress

A previous study using these data revealed that financial distress was significantly associated with students' mental health (Keels, Durkee, Hope, & Goldrick-Rab, 2015); therefore, it is included as a control variable in all multivariate analyses. At Wave 3, participants reported if they were upset or

worried about not having enough money (1 = *Extremely upset* to 5 = *Not upset*), concerned that they would not be able to afford to complete their college degree (1 = *Extremely worried* to 5 = *Not worried*), and had difficulty paying bills (1 = *A tremendous amount of difficulty* to 5 = *No difficulty at all*). These items were averaged and reverse coded so that higher numbers indicated greater financial distress. Reliability among these three variables was high ($\alpha = .82$). To reduce skewness, financial distress was collapsed into three categories (low, medium, or high financial distress).

Political efficacy

Participants indicated their endorsement of internal political efficacy beliefs through a measure that combined two items from the Black Youth Project (Cohen, 2006) and three items from the Beliefs about Individual Action and Societal Change Scale (Gurin, Nagda, & Zuniga, 2013). These five items assessed how much youth believe that they can positively affect their community and participate in politics. Participants indicated their level of agreement on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*). Sample items include, "Even if it is hard, I still believe I can change my community" ($\alpha = .84$).

Data Analysis Plan

We conducted descriptive analyses to investigate bivariate relationships and mean R/E group differences among study variables. Next, we conducted multiple regression analyses for each mental health indicator. In Step 1, we regressed the control variables onto the Wave 3 mental health outcomes. In Step 2, we added freshman year political activism and R/E microaggressions. In Step 3, we tested whether the relationships between R/E microaggressions and mental health were moderated by political activism. Significant interaction effects were tested using simple slopes analyses as outlined by Aiken and West (1991). Green (1991) suggests that a sample size of 50 plus 8 times the number of predictors is required for multiple linear regression; our sample size exceeded this requirement and provided sufficient power for analyses.

To account for missing data, we conducted our analyses in STATA 14 using maximum likelihood with missing values estimation (also known as full information maximum likelihood) to retain all possible cases. We also used clustered robust standard error adjustments to account for nested variance within the five universities that the participants were sampled from. We conducted each set of regression analyses for the full sample and separately for each R/E group. The relationship patterns were different for Black and Latinx students; therefore, we describe the results separately for each group.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Preliminary analyses were conducted to evaluate means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations for all study variables (see Tables 1 and 2). On average, students experienced low levels of stress ($Mw1 = 1.81$, $Mw3 = 1.77$), anxiety ($Mw1 = 3.35$, $Mw3 = 3.18$), and depressive symptoms ($Mw1 = .85$, $Mw3 = .77$) during the Fall and Spring semesters of freshman year. Students participated in an average of one to two forms of political activism ($M = 1.59$, $SD = 1.58$) during freshman year. Students experienced an average of 2.45 ($SD = 2.70$) academic inferiority R/E microaggressions over the course of freshman year.

Table 1. *Bivariate Correlations of the Study Variables by Race/Ethnicity (N = 504)*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Gender	—	.02	.02	.04	.14*	.00	.11	.16*	.27***	.17*	.18**	.02
2. First-Generation	.12	—	.16	-.13	.09	.03	.02	.05	.09	.02	.08	.05
3. Financial Distress	.13*	.11	—	.04	.12	.21**	.20**	.23**	.22**	.26***	.32***	.25***
4. Political Efficacy	.22***	.01	-.01	—	.17*	-.09	.03	-.15	-.01	.06	-.04	-.01
5. Political Activism	.21***	-.02	-.04	.24***	—	.20**	-.02	-.11	.04	-.01	.13	.05
6. Microaggressions	.00	.08	.21***	.00	.21**	—	.09	.13	.08	.00	.15*	.10
7. Stress W1	.08	.08	.16*	.15*	.01	.17*	—	.49***	.58***	.45***	.65***	.41***
8. Stress W3	.09	.01	.29***	.06	.05	.19**	.50***	—	.35***	.45***	.37***	.53***
9. Anxiety W1	.21***	.06	.24***	.01	.09	.12	.63***	.41***	—	.63***	.71***	.43***
10. Anxiety W3	.18**	.01	.28***	.01	.02	.14*	.45***	.53***	.62***	—	.57***	.63***
11. DS W1	.12*	.10	.23***	.12	.01	.18**	.68***	.41***	.72***	.48***	—	.56***
12. DS W3	.14*	.02	.33***	.03	.12	.21**	.40***	.63***	.46***	.64***	.52***	—

Note. Bivariate correlations for Black students presented above the diagonal, and bivariate correlations for Latinx students presented below the diagonal. DS = Depressive Symptoms, W1 = Wave 1, W3 = Wave 3. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and Group Mean Difference by Race/Ethnicity (N = 504)

	Full Sample	Black students (N = 221)	Latinx students (N = 283)	
Variable	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	p
Gender (% female)	64%	75%	56%	<.001
First-Generation	61%	49%	71%	<.001
Financial Distress	1.89 (.86)	1.86 (0.86)	1.91 (0.86)	.51
Political Efficacy	3.62 (.83)	3.63 (0.86)	3.61 (0.81)	.72
Political Activism	1.59 (1.58)	1.81 (1.68)	1.41 (1.48)	.008
SBREMA	2.45 (2.70)	2.93 (2.79)	2.06 (2.57)	.001
Stress W1	1.81 (0.61)	1.82 (0.61)	1.80 (0.61)	.83
Stress W3	1.77 (0.57)	1.81 (0.54)	1.72 (0.59)	.09
Anxiety W1	3.35 (3.14)	3.37 (3.17)	3.33 (3.12)	.91
Anxiety W3	3.18 (3.23)	3.50 (3.34)	2.91 (3.12)	.06
DS W1	0.86 (0.72)	0.90 (0.75)	0.82 (0.70)	.23
DS W3	0.77 (0.75)	0.83 (0.75)	0.73 (0.74)	.19

Note. DS = Depressive Symptoms, W1 = Wave 1, W3 = Wave 3.

Political efficacy and political activism had a small positive correlation for Black ($r = .17, p < .05$) and Latinx students ($r = .24, p < .001$). For Latinx students, political efficacy had a low negative correlation with stress at Wave 1 ($r = -.15, p < .05$). For Black students, R/E microaggressions had a low positive correlation with depressive symptoms at Wave 1 ($r = -.15, p < .05$). For Latinx students, R/E microaggressions had a low positive correlation with all of the mental health indicators with the exception of anxiety at Wave 1. Political activism and R/E microaggressions had a low positive correlation for Black students ($r = .20, p < .01$) and for Latinx students ($r = .21, p < .01$). Mental health outcomes were all moderately and positively correlated with each other at Wave 1 and Wave 3 for both Black and Latinx students. Financial distress was also correlated with all mental health outcomes.

Analysis of variance revealed mean group differences in political activism and R/E microaggressions by race/ethnicity. Black students were engaged in more types of political activism ($M = 1.81, SD = 1.68$) than Latinx students ($M = 1.41, SD = 1.48$), $F(1, 442) = 7.17, p = .008$. Black students reported experiencing more R/E microaggressions during freshman year ($M = 2.93, SD = 2.79$) than Latinx students ($M = 2.06, SD = 2.57$), $F(1, 411) = 10.91, p = .001$. There were no mean group differences in mental health outcomes, financial distress, or political efficacy by race/ethnicity.

End of Freshman Year Stress

Stress and Black students

In Step 1, we entered each control variable into the regression model, which accounted for 27% of the variance in stress at the end of freshman year (see Table 3). Stress at the beginning of freshman year and financial distress were positively related to stress at the end of freshman year for Black students. In Step 2, we added political activism and R/E microaggressions to the model, which accounted for 29% of the variance in stress at the end of freshman year. Political activism was negatively related to stress; more political activism over freshman year was related to less stress at the end of freshman year. R/E microaggressions were positively related to stress; students who experienced more R/E microaggressions throughout freshman year reported more stress at the end of freshmen year. In Step 3, we tested the interaction between R/E microaggressions and political activism. The model accounted for 30% of the variance in stress at the end of freshman year and the interaction between political

activism and R/E microaggressions was significant (see Figure 1). Simple slope analyses were conducted to probe the interaction. The relationship between R/E microaggressions and stress was significant at 1 SD above the mean of political activism ($B = .06, p < .001$), at the mean level ($B = .04, p < .001$), and at 1 SD below the mean of political activism ($B = .02, p = .002$). For each level of political activism, experiencing more R/E microaggressions throughout freshman year was related to higher levels of stress at the end of freshman year. The relationship between R/E microaggressions and stress was stronger for students who participated in more types of political activism.

Table 3. Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Stress at the End of Freshman Year (Wave 3)

		Black students (N=221)		Latinx students (N=283)	
Step	Variable	B (SE)	B	B (SE)	β
1	Stress Wave 1	.40 (.06)	.45***	.45 (.08)	.46***
	Female	.13 (.08)	.11	.07 (.05)	.06
	First-Generation	.03 (.07)	.03	.11 (.04)	.09**
	Financial Distress	.08 (.04)	.13*	.15 (.04)	.22***
	Political Efficacy	-.02 (.04)	-.03	-.05 (.03)	-.07
	R ²	.27		.32	
2	Stress Wave 1	.39 (.08)	.45***	.44 (.08)	.45***
	Female	.11 (.09)	.09	.06 (.06)	.05
	First-Generation	.05 (.07)	.04	.11 (.04)	.09*
	Financial Distress	.08 (.02)	.13***	.14 (.03)	.21***
	Political Efficacy	-.01 (.07)	-.01	-.06 (.03)	-.08
	Political Activism	.04 (.02)	.13*	.02 (.02)	.04
	SBREMA	.02 (.01)	.10**	.02 (.01)	.07
	R ²	.29		.32	
	ΔR^2	.02		.00	
3	Stress Wave 1	.38 (.07)	.43***	.43 (.09)	.44***
	Female	.12 (.08)	.10	.05 (.06)	.05
	First-Generation	.05 (.06)	.05	.11 (.05)	.08*
	Financial Distress	.08 (.02)	.13***	.15 (.03)	.21***
	Political Efficacy	.00 (.07)	.01	-.06 (.04)	-.09
	Political Activism	.06 (.02)	.19**	.02 (.02)	.05
	SBREMA	.02 (.01)	.09**	.02 (.01)	.07
	Political Activism \times SBREMA	.01 (.00)	.12***	-.01 (.00)	-.06*
	R ²	.30		.32	
	ΔR^2	.01		.00	

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

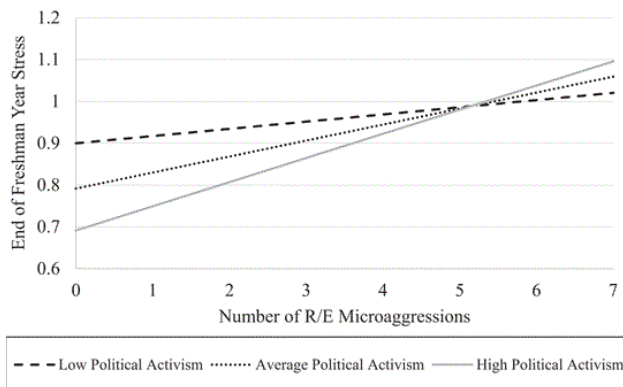


Figure 1. Political activism as a moderator of school-based R/E microaggressions (SBREMA) and end of freshman year stress for Black students.

Stress and Latinx students

The Step 1 model for Latinx students accounted for 32% of the variance in stress at the end of freshman year. Stress at the beginning of freshman year and financial distress were positively related to end of the year stress. In Step 2, the model accounted for 32% of the variance in end of the year stress. Political activism and R/E microaggressions were not significantly related to end of the year stress. In Step 3, the interaction between political activism and R/E microaggressions was statistically significant (see Figure 2). Simple slope analyses were conducted to probe the interaction at the mean and 1 SD above and below the mean. The simple slopes were not significantly different from zero, but they were significantly different from each other. For Latinx students who were involved in fewer forms of political activism, there was a positive relationship between R/E microaggressions and stress at the end of freshman year. The opposite was true for Latinx students involved in more political activism; the relationship between R/E microaggressions and stress was negative, indicating that experiencing more R/E microaggressions was related to less stress.

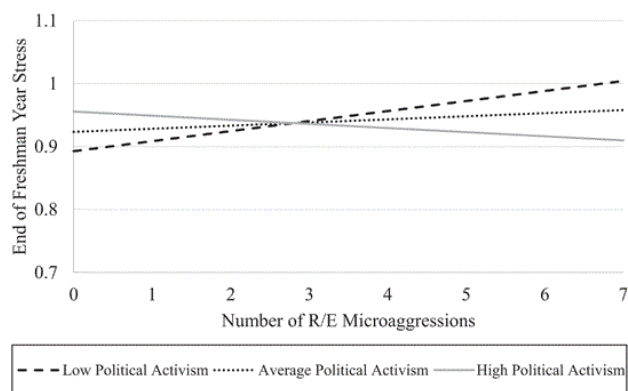


Figure 2. Political activism as a moderator of school-based R/E microaggressions (SBREMA) and end of freshman year stress for Latinx students.

End of Freshman Year Anxiety

Anxiety and Black students

The Step 1 model accounted for 44% of the variance in anxiety at the end of freshman year for Black students (see Table 4). Anxiety at the beginning of freshman year and financial distress were positively

related to end of freshman year anxiety. The Step 2 model accounted for 45% of the variance in anxiety. Neither political activism nor R/E microaggressions were significantly related to anxiety at Wave 3. In Step 3, the interaction between R/E microaggressions and political activism was statistically significant (see Figure 3). Simple slope analyses found that the slope at the mean and 1 SD above and below the mean were not significantly different from zero, but they were significantly different from each other. For Black students with below average political activism, more experiences of R/E microaggressions were related to less anxiety at the end of freshman year. For Black students who reported more political activism, more experiences of R/E microaggressions were related to more anxiety.

Table 4. Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Anxiety at the End of Freshman Year (Wave 3)

		Black students (N=221)		Latinx students (N=283)		
Step	Variable	B (SE)	B	B (SE)	β	
1	Anxiety Wave 1	.66 (.06)	.62***	.60 (.08)	.59***	
	Female	.02 (.21)	.00	.40 (.46)	.06	
	First-Generation	-.25 (.26)	-.04	-.34 (.13)	-.05**	
	Financial Distress	.56 (.12)	.14***	.49 (.17)	.13**	
	Political Efficacy	.04 (.22)	.01	.03 (.17)	.01	
	R ²	.44		.42		
	2	Anxiety Wave 1	.67 (.06)	.63***	.60 (.08)	.60***
		Female	-.07 (.18)	-.01	.60 (.39)	.10
First-Generation		-.19 (.23)	-.03	-.43 (.18)	-.06*	
Financial Distress		.63 (.12)	.16***	.39 (.16)	.11*	
Political Efficacy		.10 (.19)	.03	.12 (.20)	.03	
Political Activism		-.10 (.11)	-.05	-.27 (.14)	-.13	
SBREMA		.07 (.05)	.06	.10 (.05)	.08*	
R ²		.45		.44		
ΔR^2		.01		.02		
3		Anxiety Wave 1	.66 (.06)	.62***	.61 (.08)	.60***
	Female	.01 (.17)	.00	.62 (.38)	.10	
	First-Generation	-.16 (.23)	-.02	-.43 (.17)	-.06*	
	Financial Distress	.63 (.12)	.16***	.37 (.17)	.10*	
	Political Efficacy	.15 (.17)	.04	.14 (.21)	.04	
	Political Activism	-.20 (.13)	-.10	-.30 (.13)	-.14*	
	SBREMA	.09 (.05)	.07	.10 (.05)	.08*	
	Political Activism \times SBREMA	.06 (.02)	.10**	.03 (.03)	.04	
	R ²	.45		.44		
	ΔR^2	.00		.00		

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

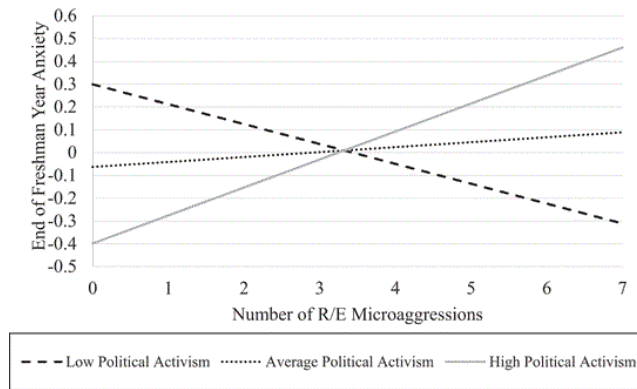


Figure 3. Political activism as a moderator of school-based R/E microaggressions (SBREMA) and end of freshman year anxiety for Black students.

Anxiety and Latinx students

Step 1 for Latinx students accounted for 42% of the variance in anxiety at the end of freshman year. Anxiety at the beginning of freshman year and financial distress were positively related to anxiety at the end of the year, and being a first-generation college student was negatively related to anxiety. In Step 2, the model explained 42% of the variance in end of the year anxiety. R/E microaggressions were positively related to end of the year anxiety. In Step 3, the interaction between political activism and R/E microaggressions was not statistically significant.

End of Freshman Year Depressive Symptoms

Depressive symptoms and Black students

In Step 1, the model accounted for 33% of the variance in depressive symptoms at the end of freshman year (see Table 5). Depressive symptoms at the beginning of freshman year were positively related to depressive symptoms at the end of freshman year. In Step 2, the model accounted for no additional variance in depressive symptoms; R/E microaggressions and political activism were not significantly related to end of the year depressive symptoms. In Step 3, the interaction between R/E microaggressions and political activism was not significant.

Table 5. Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Depressive Symptoms at the End of Freshman Year (Wave 3)

		Black students (N=221)		Latinx students (N=283)	
Step	Variable	B (SE)	B	B (SE)	β
1	Depressive Symptoms Wave 1	.55 (.09)	.55***	.49 (.04)	***
	Female	.16 (.07)	.09*	.13 (.07)	
	First-Generation	.03 (.11)	.02	.11 (.05)	*
	Financial Distress	.07 (.10)	.08	.18 (.05)	***
	Political Efficacy	-.01 (.09)	-.01	-.09 (.03)	**
	R ²	.33		.34	

2	Depressive Symptoms Wave 1	.56 (.09)	.56***	.48 (.04)	.46***
	Female	.18 (.08)	.10*	.10 (.09)	.07
	First-Generation	.04 (.10)	.03	.11 (.03)	.07**
	Financial Distress	.07 (.10)	.07	.18 (.04)	.21***
	Political Efficacy	.01 (.09)	.01	.11 (.03)	.12***
	Political Activism	.02 (.02)	.06	.06 (.02)	.12***
	SBREMA	.00 (.01)	.01	.01 (.01)	.05
	R ²	.33		.35	
	ΔR ²	.00		.01	
3	Depressive Symptoms Wave 1	.55 (.08)	.55***	.46 (.05)	.44***
	Female	.16 (.08)	.09*	.09 (.09)	.06
	First-Generation	.06 (.10)	.04	.10 (.04)	.06**
	Financial Distress	.07 (.09)	.07	.19 (.05)	.22***
	Political Efficacy	.03 (.09)	.03	.12 (.03)	.13***
	Political Activism	.06 (.04)	.13	.07 (.02)	.15***
	SBREMA	-.00 (.01)	-.00	.01 (.01)	.05
	Political Activism × SBREMA	.02 (.01)	.15	.02 (.00)	.11***
	R ²	.35		.36	
	ΔR ²	.02		.01	

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Depressive symptoms and Latinx students

For Latinx students, the model accounted for 34% of the variance in depressive symptoms at the end of freshman year. Depressive symptoms at the beginning of freshman year and financial distress were positively related to end of the year depressive symptoms. Political efficacy was negatively related to depressive symptoms. In Step 2, the model accounted for 35% of the variance in end of the year depressive symptoms. Political activism was positively related to depressive symptoms; students who were involved in more types of political activism reported more end of the year depressive symptoms. R/E microaggressions were not related to end of freshman year depressive symptoms. In Step 3, the interaction between political activism and R/E microaggressions was statistically significant (see Figure 4). Simple slope analyses were conducted to probe the interaction. The relationship between R/E microaggressions and depressive symptoms was significant at 1 *SD* above the mean of political activism ($B = -.04, p = .01$) but not at the mean ($B = -.01, p = .32$) or 1 *SD* below the mean of political activism ($B = .01, p = .17$). For Latinx students who participated in more types of political activism, the relationship between R/E microaggressions and depressive symptoms was negative, indicating that students who experienced more R/E microaggressions reported few depressive symptoms at the end of freshman year.

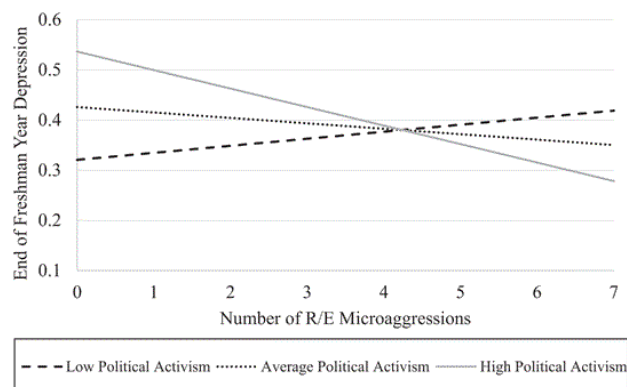


Figure 4. Political activism as a moderator of school-based R/E microaggressions (SBREMA) and end of freshman year depressive symptoms for Latinx students.

Discussion

Mental health and well-being is a growing concern on college campuses (CCMH, 2015), particularly for Black and Latinx college students because they face an increased risk for stress, anxiety, and depression given hostile racial environments at PWIs (Ancis et al., 2000; Hinderlie & Kenny, 2002). Scholars have proposed political activism—taking actions to address social injustice—as one potential mechanism to lessen the negative effects of racial discrimination on mental health (Hope & Spencer, 2017). In this study, we tested that assertion and examined the utility of political activism as an adaptive coping strategy against the negative effect of R/E microaggressions on mental health for Black and Latinx college students. Over the course of freshman year, Black and Latinx students reported experiencing several microaggressions that have been reliably linked to negative emotional arousal and cognitive appraisal reactions, precursors for more severe mental health issues (Noh, Kaspar, & Wickrama, 2007; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Despite this and the general stressors associated with adjusting to college life, participants in our study reported low levels of stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. In this regard, there are differences between stated stressfulness and derived stressfulness (Huynh, Devos, & Dunbar, 2012); much of the impact of racism and microaggressions on psychological health may be beyond one’s immediate awareness. Although some individuals do not report stated stressfulness—immediate distress in response to subtle racism—there may be evidence of long-term significance as an indication of derived stressfulness (Torres-Harding & Turner, 2015). Thus, despite low average levels of stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms, our results point to the importance of understanding the differences between Black and Latinx students’ R/E collegiate experiences in relation to mental health outcomes. Although there were no R/E differences in mental health at the beginning or end of freshman year, results suggest some differences in how political activism and R/E microaggressions relate to stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms among Black and Latinx college students.

Experiencing academic inferiority-based R/E microaggressions on campus had mental health consequences for Black and Latinx students; for Black students, this manifested as higher levels of stress and for Latinx students this was evidenced by higher levels of anxiety. Although prior qualitative research has uncovered differential patterns in how Black and Latinx students experience and respond to R/E microaggressions on college campuses (Solórzano et al., 2000; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009), the current study extends this work by relating R/E microaggression experiences to mental health

outcomes. Just as Black and Latinx students experience R/E microaggressions in unique ways, the relationship between R/E microaggressions and mental health is different by race/ethnicity.

Political activism had a differential and opposite relationship to mental health outcomes for Black and Latinx students; Black students who were more politically active during freshman year reported less stress at the end of freshman year whereas Latinx students who were more politically active during freshman year reported more depressive symptoms at the end of freshman year. Furthermore, political activism moderated the relationship between R/E microaggressions and mental health indicators in different ways for Black and Latinx students. For Black students who were the most politically active, R/E microaggressions were related to more stress and more anxiety. For politically active Latinx students, the relationship was reversed; more R/E microaggressions were related to less stress and less depressive symptoms. For Latinx students, there is evidence to suggest that political activism might help to reduce the negative mental health implications of experiencing R/E microaggressions on college campuses. However, for Black students, high levels of political activism might exacerbate the negative effects of R/E microaggressions on mental health outcomes. It is important to note that after accounting for mental health at the beginning of freshman year, political activism and R/E microaggressions account for a small proportion of variance in mental health at the end of freshman year; thus, the findings, although statistically significant, are small. However, given the prevalence and consequence of race-related stress (Hope et al., 2015; Molina et al., 2013), combined with the growing political participation among Black and Latinx young people (CIRCLE, 2014), these findings do provide some empirical evidence toward considering youth civic engagement as a tool toward individual and community health (Ballard & Syme, 2016; Hope & Spencer, 2017).

Bolger and Zuckerman (1995) conceptualize exposure to and reactivity to stressful experiences as two mechanisms that differentially affect individual mental health outcomes. In the current study, R/E microaggressions provide exposure to a stressful event and political activism functions as reactivity to a stressful experience. Thus, the R/E differences in our data may be attributed to differences between Black and Latinx students in exposure and reactivity. Black students were more politically active and experienced more R/E microaggressions on campus than Latinx students. For Black students, greater exposure to negative race-based campus interactions can be deleterious to mental health. Perhaps this race-related stressor combined with more opportunities for political activism could change their reactivity to negative R/E events, thus creating differential outcomes for Black students' mental health. In essence, for Black students, exposure to a racially hostile campus changes and even disrupts the protective effect of political activism, which was related to lower levels of stress for Latinxs. However, for Latinx students, exposure to R/E microaggressions and reactivity via political activism relates to positive mental health outcomes.

Limitations and Future Directions

Our study has limitations and directions for future research. First, the number of Black men in the sample was relatively low (10% of the sample). The sample size contributed to a lack of power to analyze differences in a way that acknowledges the intersectionality of several social identities (Cole, 2009). Although this gender imbalance is reflective of the national gender imbalance in college enrollment (Keels, 2013; Lopez & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2014), it still posed a challenge in investigating race/ethnicity by gender differences. In addition, although we controlled for socioeconomic stress, first-generation

college status, and gender, there may be more nuanced variation in college experiences and coping processes related to identification with multiple social groups (e.g., Latinx and working class).

Furthermore, the amount of variance in mental health outcomes that is accounted for by political activism and the effect sizes were small; thus, our findings should be interpreted with that in mind. In this study, we focused on political activism as one form of civic engagement and relied on a count of activities (i.e., breadth of involvement) rather than intensity of involvement in activities or the quality of those experiences. Students may be engaged in system-level change through other types of civic engagement, and the quality of the engagement may vary. Research should consider other dimensions of civic engagement (Ekman & Amnå, 2012) and how participation and nonparticipation may support adaptive mental health outcomes. Furthermore, research should consider whether and how political activism on college campuses puts students at increased risk, particularly when contending with a hostile or unresponsive administration. Finally, future research should examine the relationships between political activism, mental health, R/E microaggressions, and long-term effects on GPA, college attrition, and graduation for Black and Latinx students. Research in this area could lead to key insights for university administrators in the context of mental health concerns on college campuses and the particular issues for R/E minority students (CCMH, 2015). By understanding the relationships between race-based campus experiences, political action, and mental health, practitioners can support students in their efforts to create a positive learning environment in ways that do not threaten mental health or the primary objective for students—graduation.

Conclusion

As college students contend with racially hostile campus environments, it is important to investigate the psychological risks and rewards associated with experiencing discrimination and engaging in activism to address social injustices. When students contend with stress, anxiety, or depression during college, their ability to persist in the face of academic and sociopolitical challenges is also at risk because they have difficulty negotiating competing academic demands, making long-term decisions, and maintaining realistic future expectations (Mowbray et al., 2006). To successfully navigate the college environment, students need adaptive coping skills, but adaptive coping skills are difficult to maintain while facing mental health challenges. Black and Latinx college students face greater risks for depression, stress, and other mental health concerns in response to R/E microaggressions, and these challenges are even higher for R/E minority students who attend PWIs. Our study emphasizes how contextual social experiences at PWIs, specifically R/E microaggressions and political activism, are differentially associated with mental health outcomes for Black and Latinx students. Through this line of research, we can further understand how political activism mitigates or exacerbates mental health-related risks for marginalized populations and identify underlying psychological processes that predict whether political activism functions as an adaptive or maladaptive coping strategy.

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