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Navigating COVID-19 and racial trauma as a Black student at predominantly White institutions

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Abstract

Black students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) contend with racial microaggressions that can lead to negative mental health and academic outcomes. The physical and mental health consequences of the novel coronavirus pandemic are well-known. What remains unknown is how targeted racial hate during a pandemic might have a compounded effect on Black essential workers. The current study examines how future essential workers in helping professions cope with dual crises as they navigate mostly White universities. Study participants were Black university students attending PWIs in the United States enrolled in social work, public health, or psychology programs during the 2020–2021 academic year. Participants completed an online survey that measured racial microaggressions, COVID distress, sense of belonging, engagement in activism, and well-being. Hierarchical regression models revealed COVID distress predicted poorer well-being. Also, COVID distress interacted with racial microaggressions to predict well-being. Findings have implications for developing decolonized learning communities with a liberation pedagogy in community psychology and other helping professions.

KEYWORDS

antiracism, Black college students, COVID-19, political activism, racial microaggressions

Highlights

- The study demonstrates the need for predominantly White institutions to prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion strategic priorities.
- There is a combined negative effect of COVID stress and racial trauma for Black American students.
- Study has implications for future research on emergent societal stressors on student well-being.

The murder of George Floyd in 2020 and the ongoing state-sanctioned murder of Black people has ignited some of the latest iteration of social protests throughout the United States. In these protests, students have demanded that colleges and universities confront and eradicate systemic and structural racism that has led to hostile campus climates for Black students and other students of Color (Koo, 2021; Thompson, 2021). Students are demanding inclusive curriculums that also reflect the lived experiences of people of Color, not as an add-on, but ensuring that courses decenter Whiteness and are taught from nondominant perspectives (Tran & Reilly, 2019). Students also are demanding an increase in faculty and staff of Color and more diverse student bodies (Thompson, 2021). These demands are intended to make college campuses more equitable and welcoming for students of Color.

At the same time, the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) and the resulting disease, COVID-19, was ravaging cities and towns throughout the United States causing university and college shutdowns, shifting all students to virtual/online platforms. As the disease continued to spread, there was increasing coverage that COVID-19 was hitting Black, Latino, and Native American communities harder than White communities (Dyer, 2020). Studies reported that Black people are at increased risk within every aspect of the COVID-19 disease life span (i.e., exposure infection rates, severity of the illness, access to care, hospitalizations, quality of healthcare, and death) resulting from structural and systemic racism (Devakumar et al., 2020; Lopez et al., 2021; Stuijfzand et al., 2020). In some cities across the nation, Black people are three times as likely to be diagnosed with COVID-19 as their White counterparts—and almost six times as likely to die from COVID-19 (Dyer, 2020). Data on risk factors associated with contracting the disease shows that Black communities have less access to health information and resources, tend to live in crowded conditions, and are more likely to have jobs that cannot be performed remotely (Alobuia et al., 2020; Polyakova et al., 2021). However, racism, *not race*, is the true risk factor for the spread of COVID-19 in communities of Color (Milano, 2021). According to a statement issued by the Harvard School of Public Health, "the killing of George Floyd and the disproportionate impact that COVID-19 has had on people of Color are only the two latest examples of how structural racism can lead to devastating outcomes" (para.1).

The compounded effects of racism in colleges and universities across the United States, disproportionate prevalence and incidence of COVID-19, and the state-sanctioned violence against Black people can result in racial trauma which negatively impacts Black people's health and well-being. Racial trauma is defined as "the events of danger related to real or perceived experience of racial discrimination, threats of harm and injury, and humiliating and shaming events, in addition to witnessing harm to other ethno-racial individuals because of real or perceived racism" (Comas-Diaz, 2016, p. 249). Racial trauma is unique in that it involves ongoing individual *and* collective injuries due to exposure and re-exposure to racism-based stress (Comas-Diaz, Hall, & Neville, 2019). The cumulative, dehumanizing effects of racial trauma leaves scars that can make it difficult for Black people to heal. This possibility has real implications for Black students who are in school to become community psychologists, social workers, public health practitioners, and other helping professionals on the front lines of dealing with the human cost of a health and social crises. The global health crisis converged with broadcast anti-Black police violence and ignited a national conversation about systemic and structural racism in the United States and forced the nation to reckon with the deeply entrenched nature of oppression and inequity in our criminal justice, healthcare, and economic institutions.

The current study's aim was to examine the impact of dealing with daily racism on the well-being of Black students in predominantly White institutions (PWIs), and how the COVID-19 pandemic might have exacerbated the effect. This study also explored the potential protective influence of school belonging and antiracist activism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Racial trauma, microaggressions, race-based stress, and race-based traumatic stress have been used interchangeably and are synonymous in that they all describe ongoing events that harm people of Color and negatively affect their overall well-being overtime (Bryant-Davis, 2007; Carter, 2007; Comas-Diaz et al., 2019). Racial trauma are adverse psychological and physical effects that result from direct, indirect, or vicarious experiences with racial or ethnic bias, discrimination, or racism (systemic, cultural or interpersonal) (Anderson & Stevenson, 2019; Clark et al., 2012; Truong et al., 2016). Williams, Printz, and DeLapp (2018) define racial trauma as a "traumatic response to the accumulation of negative race-related experiences" (p. 736). Finally, other scholars define racial trauma as the ongoing experiences of overt or covert racial maltreatment, which often include threats to safety, life, or personhood, emotional reactions stemming from the event, and feeling invalidated or having no safe place to process or avoid triggering experiences of racism (Williams et al., 2018). What all these definitions have in common is that racial trauma focuses on the cumulative effects of experiences of racism.

Racial microaggressions and sense of belonging on campus

Racial trauma among Black students often stems from hostile campus climates, racial prejudice, and discrimination (Brunsma et al., 2017; Truong et al., 2016). Studies have found that racial trauma among students on university campuses can stem from experiences of racial microaggressions or "everyday racism" (Nadal et al., 2014). Racial microaggressions are insidious forms of bias, discrimination, and "othering" based on a person's race or ethnicity (Nadal et al., 2014). Sue et al. (2007) described microaggressions as taking on three forms: microassaults (explicit verbal or nonverbal racial attacks meant to harm the target), microinsults (rude or insensitive communications meant to demean or diminish the target's racial identity or racial heritage), and microinvalidations (communications that exclude or

negate the thoughts, feelings, or experiences of a person of Color).

Racial microaggressions often go unaddressed and persist on college campus for a myriad reasons. The insidious nature of racial microaggressions at times resulted in underreporting racist incidents on college campuses (Shammas, 2015). Conversely, when egregious racial bias or discrimination incidents were reported, colleges and universities often failed to use this data to make a sustained commitment to institutional changes that address equity, diversity, and inclusion and shift campus climate to be safer and more welcoming for students of Color (Gay, 2004; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Truong et al., 2016). Whether racial microaggressions are covert or overt, racially minoritized students often are adversely affected by experiences, events, and hostile or indifferent campus climates (Solorzano et al., 2000). Moreover, studies have found that some students experience backlash from speaking out against racial microaggressions and other injustices. According to Sue et al. (2019), "calling out someone on a hurtful comment or behavior in public may provoke defensiveness or cause an ugly backlash that does not end microaggressions but increases them" (p. 139).

While microaggressions can serve as a primary predictor of racism on college and university campuses, it is imperative that structural racism is also acknowledged. According to Johnson and Joseph-Salisbury (2018), "academe is deeply implicated in maintaining and perpetuating the conditions that give rise to racial microaggressions" (p. 143). Most colleges and universities in the United States was not created, designed, or intended to cater to diverse groups of individuals from marginalized and underrepresented populations (Burke, 2020). Therefore, institutions of higher learning in the United States must acknowledge and confront structural forces that legally and systematically subjugate and exploit marginalized populations that deny them entry and access, adversely affect their ability to thrive, or regulates them to subordinate positions (Burke, 2020).

There is a need for colleges and universities to make structural changes within institutions. An important area for change is the underrepresentation of cultural, racial, ethnic, and social diversity among students and faculty members, which can exacerbate racial trauma on campus (Truong et al., 2016), and negatively influence Black students' sense of belonging on college campuses. Colleges and universities that lack such diversity fail to provide culturally relevant academic and social support systems resulting in students' limited participation in substantive, intellectual activities rooted in diverse, broad knowledge and traditions (Curtin et al., 2013; Gay, 2004). The lack of diversity on college campuses also can result in tokenism, which is "the processes through which individuals suffer the negative social and psychological outcomes of being underrepresented in their social context" (Billings, 2021, p. 241). Black students report that race often was a topic that was considered taboo and therefore was rarely discussed, or Black students were expected to be "the expert" on topics that covered the experiences of racially, ethnically, or culturally marginalized populations (Griffith et al., 2019; Mwangi et al., 2018).

Students of Color report other incidents of cultural insensitivity from White students and faculty resulting in them feeling out of place and like they do not belong, "like a guest in someone else's house" (Solorzano, 1998; Turner, 1994). Black students experienced ongoing stereotypes rooted in beliefs that they were intellectually inferior and, therefore, were less likely to be considered a "serious academic" (Brunsma et al., 2017). Consequently, faculty report lower expectations of students of Color (Solem et al., 2009; Solorzano, 1998). According to George Mwangi (2016), "negative beliefs about [students of Color] can reinforce prevailing racial stereotypes, reduce one's sense of belonging, and lead to perceptions of the campus as cold and uncaring" (p. 1028). Students of Color were more likely than White students to report that their departments were hostile, lacked collegiality, the felt isolated and unsupported, and left students wondering if they should continue pursuing their education (Solem et al., 2009). Such microassaults, -insults, and -invalidations have implications for the overall well-being of Black and other students of Color.

Impact of racial trauma on student well-being

There is substantial research demonstrating that racial microaggressions can lead to racial trauma (Kanter et al., 2017; Torres & Taknint, 2015; Truong et al., 2016;). Studies have found that racial trauma affects students' psychological and emotional well-being and overall sense of belonging on college campuses (Clark et al., 2012). Students of Color have reported dissociative symptoms, anxiety, fear, depression, difficulty sleeping, and psychosomatic illnesses (Cloitre et al., 2009; Torres et al., 2010). Students of Color also have expressed aggression, anger, and racial battle fatigue all of which compromised their health and well-being (Cloitre et al., 2009; Pizarro & Kohli, 2020). Finally, racial trauma is associated with adverse academic outcomes for students of Color. Racial trauma contributes to higher attrition rates, poorer academic performance, and a decreased likelihood of students of Color persisting in academic programs compared to White students.

Coping with racial trauma

We use stress–strain-coping theory (SSCT) to understand how racially minoritized Americans deal with racial trauma (Endler & Parker, 1999). According to SSCT, people use both or either inadequate or constructive

coping strategies to manage stress. Inadequate coping strategies like avoidance result in more stress or new stressors, while constructive coping strategies like problem-oriented coping are associated with decreased stress and improved psychological well-being (Endler & Parker, 1999). Students of Color employ both positive and negative coping strategies to deal with racial trauma including disengagement, cultural mistrust, seeking psychological help, and alcohol use (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Truong et al. (2016) found that students of Color avoided school activities while others became overly involved, exaggerating their visibility to ensure they would not be discounted or ignored as way to deal with racial trauma. Other coping mechanisms students used were censoring themselves, creating supportive peer networks, and engaging in collective advocacy, all of which helped deal with racial trauma (Truong et al., 2016).

Activism through student groups, as a coping mechanism, has been found to help Black students deal with ongoing racial trauma (Brunsma et al., 2017). "Beyond giving students a stronger political voice, such groups provided students with opportunities to depersonalize their racialized experience, gain a deeper understanding of how racism works in their department, and support one another through graduation" (Truong et al., 2016; p. 241). Student activism included identifying resources that could help them be resilient in the face of racial trauma and seeking out Black faculty and staff support (Brunsma et al., 2017). Students also engaged in political activism to cope with racial trauma and negative racial climate on campus (Truong et al., 2016). For example, when students heard of incidents of racial trauma on campus, they joined coalitions, advocated for themselves and their peers and brought their concerns to faculty and administrators (Truong et al., 2016). For some students, however, advocacy led to increased incidents of racism while pursuing their graduate degrees (Truong et al., 2016). Black college students' involvement in political activism may exacerbate experiences of racial microaggressions and result in increased stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms (Hope et al., 2018; Ogunyemi et al., 2020). Given the equivocal evidence for activism as a coping mechanism for Black students experiencing racism, the current study explores this interactive relationship in a sample of Black students attending PWIs during and after the 2020 racial justice uprisings.

Gaps in the literature

Black students face unique challenges and barriers in their higher education pursuits, particularly as it relates to experiences with racism on US college campus. The pandemic and widespread protests for racial justice in the United States uncovered that there is still much to learn about the confluence of social, cultural, political, and environmental factors that can influence the success and well-being of Black students in the helping professions and other disciples with social justice and empowerment as part of their missions. According to Brunsma et al. (2017), the career trajectories of students of Color are profoundly impacted by racial trauma stemming from experiences at the college and university levels. Black communities are bearing a significant burden of COVID-19.

Additionally, Black people are 3.23 likely to be killed by the police. In some US cities with high concentrations of Black people, such as Chicago, were 650% more likely to be killed by police than White Chicagoans (Schwartz & Jahn, 2020). Over the last couple of years, Black students have been dealing with all three simultaneously. There is a need to understand how racial trauma may overwhelm the system of Black students who already must contend with racism on US college campuses.

The current study aimed to address gaps in the knowledge base about how Black students in helping profession disciplines successfully navigate their academic trajectory through tumultuous, stressful, and potentially racially traumatic social and community contexts during the COVID-19 pandemic. We hypothesize that stress related to COVID-19 and racial microaggressions experienced in the university setting would negatively affect Black students' overall well-being (Hypothesis 1). We also hypothesize an interaction between COVID distress and racial microaggressions, where students experiencing both high racial microaggression *and* COVID distress would have poorer well-being than those with lower racial microaggressions and/or COVID distress (Hypothesis 2). Finally, we hypothesize that student sense of belonging in their academic program or engagement in antiracism activism would act as buffers to the negative influence of racial microaggressions on student well-being (Hypotheses 3 and 4).

METHODS

The study researchers used a cross-sectional survey research design to examine the hypothesized relationships between COVID distress, racial microaggression, and mental well-being in Black university students. Participants were recruited from two PWIs in the southern region of the United States. Inclusion criteria included students in undergraduate or graduate degree programs during the 2020–2021 academic year. All participants identified as Black or African American. Participants completed an online survey that measured experiences of racial microaggressions in school, COVID distress, sense of belonging in one's university program, engagement in racial justice activism during the summer of 2020, and well-being. We tested hypotheses of the exacerbating effect of COVID distress on experiencing racial microaggressions and well-being and the buffering

effect of participating in racial justice activism and sense of belonging on campus in the same relationship.

Participants

The target population included Black/African American students attending PWIs, 18 years and older, with a primary major in the following disciplines: counseling, education, law, medicine, psychology, public health, and social work. There were no exclusion criteria regarding gender or ethnicity. Two hundred and ninety-five ($N = 295$) participants fitting these criteria enrolled in the study. Among the enrolled participants 74% ($n = 217$) identified as Black or African American. The remaining 26% identified as Asian/Asian American, Native American/Indigenous, White, or mixed race. This latter group was excluded from study analyses to examine the specific experiences of students who identify as Black or African American.

Of the Black/African American participants, 8% identified ethnically as Hispanic/Latino. As for the sample's gender distribution, 77% identified as female, 21% as male, and 2.4% identified as transgendered male or female, gender nonbinary or nonconforming, or preferred not to answer. Thirty six percent of the sample were in the first year of their undergraduate or graduate studies, 26% were in their second year, 18% were in their third year, and 12% were in their fourth year. Eight percent of the sample was five or more years in their academic programs. A third of the sample were social work majors with the next most frequent majors being education (11%) public health (11%), psychology (9%), and medicine (9%).

Measures

Well-being

The primary outcome variable in the study was general well-being measured with the shortened version of the Warwick and Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (SWEMWBS). The SWEMWBS is a scale of seven (7) items, with five response categories from 1 (*none of the time*) to 5 (*all of the time*), specifically designed to measure both the feeling and functioning aspects of positive mental well-being (Koushede et al., 2019). Example items are "I've been feeling optimistic about the future" and "I've been feeling relaxed." The SWEMWBS in the current study had acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$).

Racial microaggressions

The predictor variable, experiences of racial microaggressions, was measured with Nadal's (2011) Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS). The REMS was designed to measure quantitatively the microaggressions people of Color experiences in their daily lives (Nadal, 2011). Respondents indicate on a scale from 0 (*0 times*) to 5 (*5 or more times*) the number of times they experienced a particular microaggression over the past 6 months (Nadal, 2011). The REMS has six subscales reflecting a taxonomy of racial microaggressions reported by Sue et al. (2007): Assumptions of Inferiority, Second-Class Citizen and Assumptions of Criminality, Microinvalidations, Exoticization/Assumptions of Similarity, Environmental Microaggressions, and Workplace and School Microaggressions. The current study used the Workplace and School Microaggressions (*I was ignored at school or at work because of my race*) and Microinvalidations (*I was told that people of Color do not experience racism anymore*) subscales. Although the microinvalidations subscale items are not specific to school-based settings, we used these items to have a more robust measure of racial microaggressions. The 14-item scale used in the current study had acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$).

COVID-19 distress

Emotional distress attributed to COVID-19 was predicted to moderate the relationship between racial microaggressions and well-being. We measured COVID-19 distress with 19 items from the COVID-19 Adolescent Symptom and Psychological Experience Scale, a self-report measure assessing experiences and exposures related to COVID-19 (Ladouceur, 2020). We used only the subscale assessing emotional affect due to the COVID-19 pandemic in the current study. Participants responded to the following prompt using a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*not at all*) to (*extremely*): *Please indicate to what extent the emotions or feelings below describe how you have been feeling in the past 7 days, including today, because of the COVID-19 pandemic?* Example emotional affect descriptors included *sad, angry, irritable*, and *stressed*. The scale had acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$). COVID distress was tested as a predictor of well-being and as a moderator of the relationship between racial microaggressions and well-being.

Sense of belonging

Participants' sense of belonging within in their academic programs was also modeled as a moderator in the relationship between racial microaggressions and well-being. The Sense of Belonging Scale (SOBS) was used to measure aspects of student belongingness in a college setting in three subscales consisting of a total of 21 items: perceived peer support (*If I miss a class, I know students*

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics and psychometric properties for study variables.

Variable	*M*	*SD*	Range	Skewness	Kurtosis	Cronbach's *α*
Well-being	21.72	5.88	7.00–35.00	−0.059	0.514	.84
Racial microaggressions	2.23	0.92	1.00–5.00	0.614	−0.214	.93
COVID distress	2.80	0.69	1.21–4.79	0.122	0.388	.86
Sense of belonging	3.23	0.73	1.00–5.00	−0.158	0.373	.91
Antiracism activism	2.340	0.84	1.00–5.00	0.504	−0.247	.92

Abbreviation: SD, standard deviation.

who I can get notes from), perceived faculty support/comfort (*I feel that a faculty member would be sensitive to my difficulties if I shared them*), and perceived classroom comfort (*I feel comfortable asking a question in class*) (Hoffman et al., 2002). All three subscale scores were totaled to get an overall SOBS score. The overall SOBS scale had good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$) and was included in the model as a moderator of the relationship between racial microaggressions and well-being.

Antiracism activism engagement

The Antiracism Action Scale (ARAS) is an 18-item assessment designed to measure the likelihood of engaging in antiracism actions following training in antiracism activism (Aldana et al., 2019). The ARAS consists of three subscales: Interpersonal Action (*Defended a friend who is the target of a racial slur or joke*), Communal Action (*Joined a club or group working on issues related to race, ethnicity, discrimination, and/or segregation*), and Political Change Action (*Attended a protest on an issue related to race, ethnicity, discrimination, and/or segregation*). The current study used the ARAS to measure likelihood of engaging in antiracism actions following publicized anti-Black violence in the United States during the summer of 2020 and the racial and social justice uprisings that followed. The ARAS used in the current study had good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$) and was included in the model as a moderator of the relationship between racial microaggressions and well-being.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through on-campus communications (email, social media posts, and electronic fliers on student association web pages). A direct link to the survey was included in all recruitment communications along with details about the study purpose, risks and benefits, and voluntary nature and contact information for the study principal investigators.

The survey was administered using Qualtrics, an encrypted and password-protected cloud-based survey and data management platform. Participants received a link that connected directly to the survey through recruitment communications. The survey's landing page was where participants provided electronic informed consent before proceeding to survey items. Participants had the option to exit the survey if they declined consent to participate. After consenting, participants saw survey items on racial microaggressions, psychological well-being, COVID distress, sense of belonging, antiracist activism, and racial centrality.

At the end of the survey, participants were asked to provide an email address if they wanted further information about participating in the qualitative portion of the study (not reported here). The email addresses were stored on a password-protected database only accessible by the study's principal investigators and a research assistant to protect the privacy of participants' identities. The first authors' university review board approved the study protocol.

RESULTS

We recruited study participants from October 2020 through January 2021. The study sample included 295 participants. Study variables included well-being as the outcome variable, racial microaggressions as the predictor variable, and COVID distress, sense of belonging, antiracism activism, and racial centrality as moderators. All measures used to create study variables had acceptable internal consistency as measured by Cronbach's alpha (see Table 1). The outcome variable was also normally distributed as demonstrated in skew and kurtosis statistics in Table 1. The first author performed a missing value analysis using expectation-maximization method in IBM SPSS 27 statistical analysis package. Little's chi-square statistic for missing completely at random data was not statistically significant ($X^2 = 32.728$, $df = 35$, $p = .578$). Thus, we used pairwise deletion for missing data in the study variables.

TABLE 2 Correlations among study variables.

Variable	*n*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Gender	217	—						
2. Year in college	217	0.04	—	—				
3. Well-being	217	−0.02	0.04					
4. Racial microaggressions	212	0.11	0.10	−0.10	—			
5. COVID distress	211	0.06	−0.01	−0.24**	0.30**	—		
6. Sense of belonging	213	−0.09	−0.03	0.51**	0.01	−0.05	—	
7. Antiracism action	248	0.14	0.03	−0.02	0.63**	0.43**	0.07	—

**$p < .01$.

TABLE 3 Regression model tested.

Effect	Standardized coefficient	*SE*	*p*
Main effects			
Racial microaggressions	0.050	0.059	.420
COVID distress	−0.172	0.059	.006
Sense of belonging	0.538	0.057	.000
Antiracism activism	−0.139	0.081	.090
Interaction effects			
RM × COVID	0.130	0.049	.030
RM × Belong	0.047	0.050	.461
RM × ARA	0.137	0.065	.096

Abbreviations: ARA, antiracism activism; RM, racial microaggression.

Descriptive findings

The study sample reported average well-being ($M = 21.72$, standard deviation [SD] = 5.88). On average, students experienced racial microaggressions between one and three times over the past 6 months ($M = 2.23$, $SD = 0.92$) with a quarter of the sample reporting four to six experiences with racial microaggressions during that time. The sample reported moderate COVID-19 distress over the past week ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 0.69$), and they reported an average sense of belonging in their academic programs over the past 6 months ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 0.73$), while their engagement in antiracism activism since the summer of 2020 was low, engaging in only one or two actions on average since summer 2020 ($M = 2.34$, $SD = 0.84$).

Correlations among all study variables are illustrated in Table 2. COVID distress was negatively correlated with well-being, where students reporting greater COVID distress tended to have poorer well-being ($r = -24$, $p < .01$). However, there was no statistically significant relationship between racial microaggressions and well-being. Correlation analysis also showed racial microaggressions were positively associated with COVID-19 distress ($r = .21$, $p < .01$) and antiracism action ($r = .63$, $p < .01$). Students reporting more experiences with racial microaggressions tended to report more COVID-related distress and greater involvement in antiracism actions. Experiencing more COVID distress was also related to more antiracism actions ($r = .35$, $p < .01$). Also, students reporting a sense of belonging in their academic program reported better mental well-being ($r = .51$, $p < .01$).

Regression findings

Using hierarchical linear regression in IBM SPSSS 27 statistical analysis package, we examined the direct effect of racial microaggressions on students' mental well-being and the moderating effect of COVID distress, sense of belonging, and antiracism action. The model tested was as follows: $\hat{y} = b_0 + b_1X_1 + b_2X_2 + b_3X_3 + b_4X_4 + b_5X_1X_2 + b_6X_1X_3 + b_7X_1X_4$, where ŷ is predicted well-being, X_1 is racial microaggression, X_2 is COVID-19 distress, X_3 is sense of belonging, and X_4 is antiracism action. We entered all main effects first, and all two-way interactions between racial microaggessions and COVID distress, belonging, and were entered second, which enabled examination of change in variance explained (see Table 3). Note, there were no control variables entered because neither of the demographic characteristics of the sample (i.e., gender and year in college) were significantly correlated with well-being.

Hypothesis 1

The full model tested was statistically significant and explained 30% of the variance in student well-being ($F = 13.36$, $df = 204$, $p < .001$; $\Delta R^2 = 0.02$, $p < .05$). We observed partial support for hypothesis one: a negative direct effect of COVID distress on well-being and racial microaggressions on well-being. There was a statistically

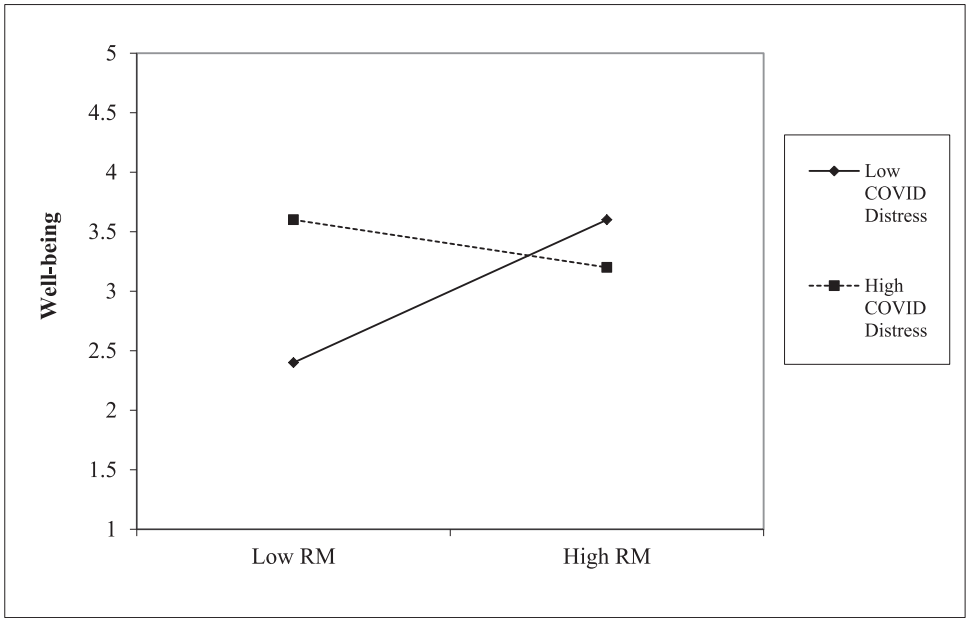

FIGURE 1 Moderating effect of COVID-19 distress on racial microaggressions (RM) and well-being.

significant main effect for COVID distress ($\beta = -.17$, $p < .01$), where COVID distress predicted poorer well-being. However, there was no direct effect of racial microaggressions on well-being. Results did show a main effect for sense of belonging ($\beta = .50$, $p < .001$), where sense of belonging predicted better well-being.

Hypothesis 2

We found support for the second hypothesis that there would be an interactive effect of COVID distress and racial microaggressions on student well-being that COVID distress would exacerbate the negative influence of racial microaggressions on well-being. We observed a statistically significant interaction between racial microaggression and COVID distress ($\beta = .13$, $p < .05$). Students with high COVID distress tended to report poorer well-being as racial microaggressions increased (see Figure 1). Though not hypothesized, we also observed that students with low COVID distress tended to report better well-being as racial microaggressions increased. Simple slopes tests showed that slopes for students with low COVID distress ($t = 7.48$, $p < .001$) and high COVID distress ($t = -5.41$, $p < .05$) were statistically significant.

Hypotheses 3 and 4

We tested exploratory hypotheses of the buffering effect of sense of belonging and antiracism action on the relationship between racial microaggression and student well-being. Neither of these interaction effects were statistically significant; however, the interaction between racial microaggressions and antiracism action approached statistical significance ($\beta = .14$, $p < .10$).

DISCUSSION

COVID-19 continues to have a disparate impact on Black populations. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC's) COVID-19 case data and surveillance reveals that racism is a risk factor for the underlying health conditions that increase the chance of negative effects of COVID (CDC, 2022). Blacks are two times more likely to be hospitalized and twice as likely to die due to COVID compared to White, non-Hispanics (CDC, 2022). Symptoms of depression, anxiety, and other stress disorders continue to be associated with fear of virus exposure, job loss, social isolation, and disconnection due to COVID (Jia et al., 2021). These stressors can pose an even greater threat for Black communities who are already at higher risk for negative psychological and emotional outcomes attributable to racial trauma. In the current study, the researchers examined whether Black university students attending PWIs experience a syndemic effect of COVID stress and racial trauma while matriculating their degree programs during and after the 2020 racial uprisings at the height of COVID-19 lockdowns. Study researchers measured Black student experiences with racial microaggressions and COVID distress as predictors of student well-being and tested the interactive effect of both predictors on well-being. We also explored the influence of having a sense of belonging in one's academic institution and engaging in antiracism activism. Overall, we found that COVID distress negatively affected student well-being.

Additionally, students who reported more racial microaggressions also tended to report greater COVID distress.

Study findings also showed that COVID distress exacerbated the negative influence of racial microaggressions on student well-being when COVID distress was also high. Stressors like negative life events, chronic strain, and trauma can have a substantial impact on physical and mental health outcomes. In a review of over a decade of sociological stress research, Thoits (2010) found that Black Americans and other populations of Color are additionally burdened by discrimination stress. In the current sample, emotional distress stemming from COVID-19 intensified the negative effect of racial microaggressions. How students appraise racial microaggressions can influence how those experiences ultimately affect their well-being and other outcomes (Lui et al., 2020). People on the receiving end of racial microaggressions vary in their sensitivity and reactivity to racialized occurrences (Lui et al., 2020). Therefore, students in the high COVID distress group may have been more likely to appraise racial microaggressions as harmful which in turn negatively affected their well-being. Future research should examine cognitive appraisals of stressors like racial trauma to understand better its influence on psychological outcomes.

Interestingly, the interactive effect of racial microaggressions and COVID distress also showed that students reporting low COVID distress reported better well-being as racial microaggressions increased. University students' ability to structure their on-campus environments and ability to call-out racism may have diminished the negative effect of microaggressions. The sense of empowerment of speaking out against racial microaggressions could lead to positive outcomes for Black students (Keels et al., 2017; Watson-Singleton et al., 2021). Thus, the well-being of Black students in the current study reporting low COVID distress simultaneously reporting better well-being and high racial microaggressions experiences may have been protected by widespread public actions against anti-Black racism on university campuses and in cities and towns across the United States in the summer of 2020.

Notably, reports of racial microaggressions experienced by the current sample were low, with students reporting only one to three racial microaggressions on average over the past 6 months. The study period covered the time of COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020, where many students across the United States attended school virtually. Therefore, student interactions with classmates, faculty, and other university communities were done through digital media (e.g., Zoom) or were reduced altogether. This reality could have influenced the frequency and intensity of student exposures to racial microaggressions, which in turn, reduced the potential negative effect of microaggressions on their well-being. Given the substantial evidence for the negative impact of racial microaggressions on students of Color, future research should examine qualitatively how microaggressions might manifest in digital, virtual learning, and socially and physically distant academic spaces.

We also hypothesized that student sense of belonging in their academic program and engagement in antiracism activism would act as buffers to the negative influence of racial microaggressions on student well-being. Although a sense of belonging was directly associated with better well-being, there was no evidence of it serving as a buffer between racial microaggressions and well-being. This finding could also be understood by the relatively low reports of racial microaggressions experienced in school settings by the study sample. Fewer experiences of racial microaggressions on campus could have also been affected by the increased attention to anti-Black racism and calls for racial equity and inclusion at universities and other US institutions following George Floyd's murder.

Although there was no relationship between antiracism activism and well-being, students reporting more racial microaggressions tended to engage in more antiracism action. However, antiracism action did not emerge as a buffer in the influence of microaggressions on well-being. Research examining political and racial justice activism as a protective factor or buffer for Black Americans experiencing racism has demonstrated equivocal evidence for the relationship. Some studies have found that students engaged in activism and advocacy report poor psychological health and wellness outcomes (Linder et al., 2019); while other studies suggest student activism can produce positive self-esteem and increase academic retention (Brunsma et al., 2017). Still other studies find that the relationship between activism and psychological outcomes for Black students is more complex. Expressive political activist behaviors like voicing one's political opinion was associated with feeling less happy among Black students (Ballard et al., 2020). In the same study, Ballard et al. (2020) found no other relationships between various types of political activism and psychological well-being outcomes among Black students in their sample. Future research should investigate the diverse contexts (at PWIs, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, or other communities where Black students live and have social connections) and the various forms Black student activism, resistance, and advocacy take. Future studies must also examine the support resources that are in place to protect Black student activists' safety, physical health, and mental health in their pursuit of justice and equitable treatment in their institutions of higher education.

Limitations

The current study is limited by low endorsement of some measures, a restricted sampling frame, and data collection

during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020. Given the low mean score of some of the measures in our study, it is likely that our correlation and regression analyses might have underestimated the magnitude of the relationships between racial microaggressions, antiracism activism, and well-being. The study sample recruited were Black American students attending PWIs, given the study's focus on racial microaggression in predominantly White settings. This inclusion criterion limited the generalizability of findings to all Black college students. It is likely that observed racial microaggressions, sense of belonging, and antiracism activism may be different for Black students attending a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) or a racially diverse university. Future research should examine these relationships in a sample of Black students from an HBCU or 2-year college where the student body is predominantly non-White.

Finally, data collection for the study lasted from October 2020 to January 2021. Many universities and colleges around the United States were holding classes virtually or through hybrid, virtual and in-person formats, due to COVID-19 safety protocols. Many universities also suspended or held virtually most campus activities and events. The limited in-person interactions during this time could have inadvertently decreased Black students' exposures to racial microaggressions. Similarly, Black students in the sample may have been less likely to engage in in-person antiracism political actions for fear of risk of COVID-19 exposure, as there were numerous protests, marches, and other in-person direct actions involving large crowds of people at this time.

Implications

The ongoing epidemic of racism in the United States and the global COVID pandemic moved many institutions across the United States to reckon with structural oppression within their own organizations and communities. Institutions of higher education were no exception. An unknown, though undoubtedly large, number of US college and university leaders issued statements in support of Black Lives Matter, anti-Black racism, equity, and racial justice in the wake of the publicized killing of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and several other Black Americans in 2020. Though these statements were criticized by many as being words with no actions, universities have been committing resources to policy and procedural changes like recruiting and retaining more faculty and students of Color; mandating administrator, faculty, and staff training in antiracism and anti-Blackness; removing financial barriers to college attendance to students from lower-income households; and changing the names of buildings and other structures on campus named for historical figures who profited from slavery and genocide. Departments and smaller units within universities also issued calls to action to achieve more equitable, diverse, and inclusive learning environments for students who are often marginalized and victimized because of their race, ethnicity, gender or sexual identity, or ability status.

Community psychology with its roots in social justice, systems perspectives, empowerment frameworks, and action-oriented scholarship, is positioned to lead the charge in decolonizing academia and promoting a liberation pedagogy that is authentically equitable and inclusive. Moreover, community psychology and other social and behavioral science disciplines are preparing students to work with and advocate for Black communities, families, and individuals who are most likely to be placed at risk for poor physical and psychological health. To produce an effective social and human service workforce, the current study's findings suggest that PWIs educating Black American students must acknowledge and address the combined impact of racial microaggressions and ongoing COVID-related stressors on Black student well-being and their academic experiences. PWIs and other universities serving these students should be placing greater emphasis on and resources to promote Black student mental wellness while matriculating through inequitable and oppressive institutions (Didham et al., 2011).

CONCLUSIONS

Upon graduation, community psychologists, social workers, and public health practitioners will be integral to the frontline response to global crises like COVID-19. They will be responsible for providing support and intervention to individuals, families, and communities impacted by loss, unemployment, illness, and stress resulting from health pandemics and social epidemics like poverty and racism. Black American students in these disciplines likely will face additional stressors due to racism and oppression that their White counterparts will not; thus, student mental well-being should be among the priorities of university justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion agendas. Community psychology must have a role in transforming campus communities to promote better outcomes for Black American students.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The research protocol for the study described in this manuscript was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at Tulane University.

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