

# The acceptance of sexuality-based microaggressions towards White, Black, and Asian gay and lesbian couples

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## Abstract

The area of discrimination research has been primarily focused on Black and Latino male populations, and racial groups like Asian populations are often overlooked (Matthews et al., 2022). The purpose of this research is to expand the field of discrimination research by examining both well studied groups (Black and Latino men) and understudied groups (Asian men and women, Black Women, and Latino women) in regard to microaggressions. These two studies were able to find that there are significant differences in how heterosexual White men and women perceive Black, Latino, and Asian gay and lesbian couples towards, and there are differences in the level of acceptance they have towards sexuality-based microaggressions when the victims are Black or Asian gay and lesbian couples compared to white gay and lesbian couples. These results reveal that future discrimination research should not combine different minority groups into one population, as they are perceived differently by the majority.

## Introduction

The term "microaggression" was first coined in the 1970s by Chester Pierce, a Harvard Psychiatrist, who defined the term as an interaction between a Black and White individual in which the White individuals consciously "puts down" the Black individual (Pierce, 1974). This definition of microaggression has expanded greatly since its initial conception. Now microaggressions encompass both conscious and unconscious actions in which a member of any minority group is "put down" by a member of any majority group (Williams, 2019). Microaggressions have been linked to a broad range of negative mental health impacts (Jackson et al., 2022). The purpose of these experiments is to investigate how individuals in a majority position view those who are both a racial and sexual minority, and how those individuals may react in a situation when they witness those of intersecting minority identities experience a microaggressions.

There are three types of microaggressions: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Microassaults are unconscious microaggressions that stem from misinformation about a minority group (Wong et al., 2014; Singh et al., 2021; Nadal, 2018). An example of a microassault would be assuming that all gay men must act in a feminine way. Microinsults are conscious direct expressions of a person's biases against a minority (Wong et al., 2014; Singh et al., 2021; Nadal, 2018). An example of this type of microaggression is confronting a queer couple about them raising a child. Microinvalidations are when a person ignores the injustices that a particular group faces, whether consciously or unconsciously (Wong et al., 2014; Singh et al., 2021; Nadal, 2018). An example of this would be when people make insensitive jokes about a minority group, without

realizing that those jokes are rooted in prejudice. The field of microaggression research is still at its early stages, however, we do know they play a role in the different struggles that minorities face.

Queer POC have been found to have higher rates of mental health problems including, but not limited to, depression, anxiety, and distress (Jackson et al., 2022; Sutter & Perrin 2016; Le et al, 2016). Sexual minorities in general are more likely to attempt suicide compared to heterosexual population, but queer POC populations have significantly higher rate of suicidality compared to their white queer counterparts (Jackson et al., 2022; Sutter & Perrin 2016; Le et al., 2016; Kaur et al., 2023). One possibility for this could be from growing up in a culture where gay and lesbian identities are less likely to be accepted (Connell 2016). Also, a separate study has found that sexuality-based microaggressions are particularly dangerous as queer POC are more likely to have a higher rate of suicidality when exposed to sexuality-based microaggressions than other microaggressions (Sutter & Perrin, 2016). However, most of this work has been done focusing exclusively on Black and Latino male populations, meaning there is little understanding of how sexuality-based microaggressions impact other racial minorities, or how they impact women. Specifically Asian Americans are one of the many understudied racial groups (Matthew et al., 2022).

To address this gap in literature the current experiments will focus on two understudied population, Asians and lesbians, as well as one well studied group, Black gay men. In experiment one, perceptions of relationship quality amongst White, Black, and Asian gay and lesbian couples were examined. It was hypothesized that individuals will be more likely to view Black and Asian, gay and lesbian couples as having a

lower relationship quality compared to White gay and lesbian couples. In experiment two, majority group acceptance of microaggressions against White, Black, and Asian gay and lesbian couples were examined. It was hypothesized that people would be more likely to accept microaggressions when they were against Black and Asian, gay and lesbian couples, compared to white gay and lesbian couples.

### **Experiment 1**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this experiment is to determine if gay or lesbian, Black and Asian couples have a lower perceived relationship quality compared to white gay and lesbian couples. Couples were chosen so participants would not have to assume, or be told, that the stimuli were homosexual. Homosexual couples are also more prone to being publicly shamed than a homosexual individual. One study found that gay couples walking down the street and holding hands were more prone to receiving negative looks compared to an individual gay person walking down the street (Nadal et al., 2016). Previous literature has also around found that Black heterosexual couples are associated with negative stereotypes and perceptions (Kelly & Floyd, 2001), so it is likely similar in homosexual Black couples. However, not much research has been done on perceptions of Asian couples, which is why it is important to contribute to this area of study.

#### **Method**

##### *Participants.*

Data was collected from 141 White heterosexual men and women using Cloud Research. The experiment took approximately ten minutes, and the participants were compensated with \$1.50. Thirty-Four participants had to be removed from the analysis due to low quality data (e.g., failing an attention check).

##### *Materials.*

There were three sets of four pictures that the participants could be shown. Each set consisted of one of the three racial groups, White, Black, and Asian. In each set there were an equal number of gay and lesbian couples. One of each picture was intimate (e.g., kissing), and the other was nonintimate (e.g., smiling into the camera).

The Couple Perception Scale was designed by the researchers. A six-item scale designed to measure the perceptions of couples. Items included "The couple appears committed to one another," "This couple seems happy," "This couple is likely to share secrets with each other," "This couple is likely to express deep thoughts to one another," "It is unlikely that this couple will cheat on one another," and "This couple is unlikely to judge other couples' relationships." An additional item was added to ensure participants attention. The item asked participants to select a specific number. Each item was rated on a sliding scale between negative thirty and thirty. Negative thirty being strongly disagree and positive thirty being strongly agree.

##### *Procedure.*

Consent was given at the beginning of the form. Participants are asked to respond to a series of demographic questions. Each participant randomly saw only one set of the four possible sets of pictures. The participants then responded to the Couple Perception Scale after viewing each picture.

#### **Results**

To test the hypothesis that participants would perceive gay and lesbian, Black and Asian couples to have lower relationship quality compared to that of White gay and lesbian couples, a series of mixed Anovas were conducted, with race as the between subjects variable, and couple type (intimate or nonintimate; gay or lesbian) as within subjects. In regard to commitment, results showed no significant main effect for race ( $F(2, 109)=3.034, p=.052$ ). Results showed a significant main effect for couple type ( $F(3, 327)=10.373, p<.05$ ) as well a significant interaction between couple type and race ( $F(6, 327)=5.117, p<.05$ ). When examining the perception that the couple would be likely to share secrets with one another, results showed no significant main effect for race ( $F(2, 209)=.547, p=.565$ ). There was however a significant main effect between couple type ( $F(3, 327)=2.852, p<.05$ ). When examining perceptions of happiness between the couples there was no significant main effect for race ( $F(2, 109)=1.067, p=.348$ ) or for couple type ( $F(3, 327)=2.474, p=.062$ ). However, there was a significant interaction between race and couple type ( $F(6, 327)=9.110, p<.05$ ). In regard to the perception that the couple would be likely to share deep thoughts with one another there was no significant main effect for race ( $F(2, 109)=2.525, p=.085$ ). There was a significant main effect for couple type ( $F(3, 327)=2.87, p=.037$ ), and a significant interaction between race and couple type ( $F(6, 327)=5.681, p<.05$ ). For the

likelihood that the couple would cheat there was no significant main effect for race ( $F(2, 109)=2.158, p=.121$ ) or for couple type ( $F(3, 327)=2.09, p=.101$ ). Lastly, for the perception on if the couples would be likely to be judgmental of other couples, the results showed no significant main effect for race ( $F(2, 109)=.186, p=.831$ ) or couple type ( $F(3, 327)=1.003, p=.392$ ). See Table 1 for descriptive statistics. (Tables may be accessed by following the QR code at the end of this manuscript).

## Discussion

Contrary to the hypothesis, white couples did not have the highest perceived relationship quality. A general pattern was found between most items, showing that Black couples had the highest perceived relationship quality, white couples had the next highest, and then Asian couples had the lowest.

## Experiment 2

### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate if there is a difference in the acceptance of sexuality-based microaggressions when the victims are Black or Asian, gay or lesbian couples, compared to if the victims are White gay or lesbian couples. When individuals have intersecting minority identities it has been found that their experiences are often unique compared to individuals with a single minority identity (Singh et al., 2021; Cochran et al., 2007). Evidence has specifically found that POC queer individuals are a lot more likely to face discrimination and scrutiny in their neighborhood compared to White queer individuals (McConnell et al., 2018). Considering the fact that sexual minorities already have a significantly higher rate of suicide attempts, as well as the higher rates of mental health issues in those with intersection sexual and racial minority statuses (Azra et al., 2023; Jackson et al., 2022; Sutter & Perrin 2016; Le et al, 2016), it is essential to investigate the possible different sources of these issues.

### Method

#### Participants.

Data was collected from 299 White heterosexual men and women using CloudResearch. The survey took approximately ten minutes to complete, and the participants were compensated with \$1.50 for their time. Twenty-one participants had to be removed from the analysis due to low quality data (e.g., failing an attention check).

#### Materials.

Six pictures were used from study one. These consist of two same-sex White couples, two same-sex Black couples, and two same-sex Asian couples. Each group consisted of one gay couple and one lesbian couple. All pictures depict the couple in an intimate moment (e.g., kissing).

Three different scenarios were used. The microinsult scenario depicted someone confronting a gay or lesbian couple about how they should not be raising a child. The microassault scenario depicted a friend of a gay or lesbian couple accidentally making an inappropriate comment towards the couple. The microinvalidation survey depicted someone making a comment towards a gay or lesbian couple about how they do not believe that the queer community still faces discrimination.

The Microaggression Acceptability Scale was designed by the researchers. A four-item scale designed to measure a person's acceptance of microaggressions. These items include "how likely it for these actions to have resulted in a change in behavior for the couple," "how likely is it for these actions to have impacted the emotional well-being of the couple," "how likely is it that you would have intervened had you had witnessed this event unfold," and "how frequently do you believe that this couple experiences similar situations." One item was added to ensure the participants were paying adequate attention to the survey, asking them to choose a specific number. Each item is rated on a sliding scale from negative thirty to positive thirty. Negative thirty being strongly disagree, and positive thirty being strongly agree.

#### Procedure.

Consent is given at the beginning of the form. Participants are asked to respond to a series of demographic questions. Each group sees each of the three scenarios. Each participant was randomly assigned both a racial group and sexuality group (gay or lesbian) for each scenario to respond to. After reading each scenario the participant is tasked with responding to the Microaggression Acceptability Survey.

### Results

To test the hypothesis that people would be more accepting of sexuality-based microaggressions when the victims are either Black or Asian compared to White victims, a mixed Anova was run with race as the between subjects variable, and the type of microaggression (microassault, microinsult,

microinvalidation) as the within subject's variable. No significant main effects were found for the within-subjects variable.

No significant main effect was found for the type of microaggression when participants were asked the likelihood that they believed the couple would change behavior due to the microaggression ( $F(2, 544)=.940, p=.391$ ). A significant main effect was found for the type of microaggression when participants were asked how damaging the microaggression was towards the couples wellbeing ( $F(2, 544)=32.751, p<.05$ ), how likely the participant would have been to intervene in the situation ( $F(2, 544)=14.222, p<.05$ ), as well as how frequently the participants believed the couple may experience similar situations ( $F(2, 544)=6.934, p<.05$ ). See table 2 (QR code at the end of this manuscript) for descriptive statistics.

When participants read the scenario depicting a microassault, no significant main effect was found between races for likelihood that the participant would have intervened in the situation ( $F(5, 272)=1.72, p=.130$ ), or how frequent the participant believed the couple experiences these types of situations ( $F(5, 272)=1.25, p=.283$ ). A significant main effect was found for the likelihood that the participant believed that the couple would change their behavior due to the microassault ( $F(5, 272)=3.56, p=.004$ ), and if the microassault would impact the couple's emotional wellbeing ( $F(5, 272)=3.15, p=.009$ ).

When participants were asked if the couples would be likely to change their behavior due to the microassault, LSD post-hoc comparisons showed that there was a significant difference between White men and White women ( $p=.004$ ). As well as a significant difference between Black men and White women ( $p=.000$ ), Black women ( $p=.014$ ), Asian men ( $p=.036$ ), and Asian women ( $p=.044$ ). When participants were asked if the microassault would impact the emotional wellbeing of the couples, LSD post-hoc comparisons showed a significant difference between White men and White women ( $p=.044$ ), and Asian women ( $p=.044$ ). There was also a significant difference between Black men and White women ( $p=.002$ ), Black women ( $p=.05$ ), Asian men ( $p=.007$ ), and Asian women ( $p=.002$ ). When the participants were asked if they would have intervened in the event of the microassault, LSD post-hoc comparisons showed a significant difference between Black men and White men ( $p=.04$ ), White women ( $p=.015$ ), and Asian women ( $p=.02$ ). Lastly, when asked how often the participants believed the couples to experience microassaults, LSD post-hoc comparisons showed no significant differences. See table 3 (QR code at the end of this manuscript) for descriptive statistics.

When participants were tasked with responding to a microinsult, no significant main effect was found between races for the likelihood that the couple would change behavior due to the microaggression ( $F(5, 272)=1.479, p=.197$ ), the likelihood that the participant would have intervened in the situation ( $F(5, 272)=1.591, p=.163$ ), the participants perception that the couple experiences the microaggression frequently ( $F(5, 272)=.967, p=.438$ ), or for how damaging the participants believed the microinsult to be on the couples emotional wellbeing ( $F(5, 272)=1.591, p=.086$ ).

When participants were asked if the microinsult would have been likely to result in a change in the couples' behavior, LSD post-hoc comparisons showed a significant difference between White women and White men ( $p=.048$ ), Black men ( $p=.028$ ), and Asian women ( $p=.033$ ). When participants were asked if the microinsult would impact the emotional wellbeing of the couple, LSD post-hoc comparisons showed a significant difference between White men and White women ( $p=.021$ ), Black women ( $p=.041$ ), and Asian women ( $p=.047$ ). There was also a significant difference between White women and Black men ( $p=.039$ ).

When participants were asked if they would have intervened after witnessing the microinsult, LSD post-hoc comparisons showed a significant difference between Black men and White women ( $p=.047$ ), Asian men ( $p=.030$ ), and Asian women ( $p=.012$ ). Lastly, when participants were asked how frequently they believed the couples to have experienced similar microinsults, LSD post-hoc comparisons showed a significant difference between White men and White women ( $p=.042$ ). See table 4 (QR code at the end of this manuscript) for descriptive statistics.

When participants were tasked with responding to a microinvalidation, no significant main effect was found between races for the likelihood that the couple would change behavior due to the microinvalidation ( $F(5, 272)=2.114, p=.064$ ), the likelihood the participant would have intervened because of the microinvalidation ( $F(5, 272)=1.238, p=.292$ ), or how frequent the participants believed the couples experience microinvalidations ( $F(5, 272)=.749, p=.588$ ). A significant main effect was however found for the likelihood that participants believed the couples' emotional wellbeing was impacted due to the microinvalidation ( $F(5, 272)=3.211, p=.008$ ).

When participants were asked if they thought the microinvalidation was likely to change the couples' behavior, LSD post-hoc comparisons found a significant difference between White women and White men ( $p=.019$ ), Black men ( $p=.017$ ), and Asian

Women ( $p=.004$ ). When participants were asked if they thought the microinvalidation was likely to impact the couples' emotional wellbeing, LSD post-hoc comparisons found a significant difference between Black men and White men ( $p=.036$ ), Black women ( $p=.004$ ), Asian men ( $p=.001$ ), and Asian women ( $p=.001$ ). There was also a significant difference between White women and Black women ( $p=.026$ ). When participants were asked how likely they would be to intervene if they had witnessed the microinvalidation, LSD post-hoc comparisons found no significant difference between any of the races. Lastly, when participants were asked how frequently they believed the couples experience microinvalidations, LSD post-hoc comparisons found no significant difference between races. See table 5 (QR code at the end of this manuscript) for descriptive statistics.

## Discussion

This experiment was able to find that those that hold majority identities in sexuality and race were more likely to view microinsults as the least acceptable of the three types of microaggressions and did not feel as though microinvalidations were damaging. This experiment was also able to show that those that hold majority identities in sexuality and race were more likely to be accepting of sexuality-based microaggressions when the victims are Black men, and least accepting when the victims are White women.

## General Discussion

The purpose of the two studies was to investigate the difference between the perceptions of gay and lesbian, Black and Asian couples, to gay and lesbian White populations, as well as to analyze if people are more accepting of sexuality-based microaggressions when the victims are Black or Asian compared to White. While the hypothesis was not fully supported, the experiments were able to provide partial support. These experiments were able to provide many interesting findings that could contribute to the study of sexuality-based microaggressions, and microaggressions in general on these populations. The experiment one result that the Black couples had the higher perceived relationship quality, does go against most previous research, however this could be due to the specific photos that were used. The experiment two showed in almost all cases there was a difference in the acceptability of microaggressions with race, especially with the Black gay couples. The participants were less likely to believe that the microaggressions would have as many negative effects on the Black gay couples. There was also evidence that showed participants seemed less

accepting of the microaggressions when the victims were either women or Asian. Participants seemed to view both groups as more likely to be impacted by the microaggression, especially the White lesbian couples.

As noted, most research on microaggressions has been either conducted solely on Black and Latino male populations, or mixed all POC populations into one group (Matthews et al., 2022; Loiacano et al., 1989; Dias et al., 2001). To try and expand this field, these studies focused on one population that has been well researched, being the Black gay and lesbian population, and one population that has been understudied, being the Asian gay and lesbian population. When examining the perceptions people have of queer POC couples, experiment one found that the Black and Asian populations each had different perceptions associated with them. Experiment two was able to find particular patterns in the ways in which people accept microaggressions. These studies have been able to show that it is not correct to cluster every POC population into a singular group, but instead it is important to analyze each race individually, in order to better understand the discrimination that each group faces. These studies were also able to give valuable insights into the discrimination of lesbian women of color, as them also being a gender minority could have potentially influenced the ways in which participants responded to the microaggression scenarios when the couple they were presented was a lesbian person of color.

Neither experiment had more than one photo for each couple type, so the possibility exists that the participants may have been more influenced by the specific photo instead of the race of the subjects. Future research should focus on trying to replicate the results of these experiments, but with more than one photo for each race and couple type. While the studies did not support the experiment one hypothesis, and only partially supported the experiment two hypothesis, it has the potential to advance the ways in which research on the discrimination that queer POC face is conducted. Moving forward, there should be an investigation as to if similar patterns arise when examining the perceptions and acceptance of sexuality-based, on other minority races (e.g. Latino and Native) couples, compared to white gay and lesbian couples. The more people are educated on these issues the less likely they are to commit a microaggression (Midgette & Mulvey, 2021), so it is important to continue to advance this field of research and continue to educate the public.

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