How Experiences of Racism Impact Sense of Belonging and Imposter Syndrome in College Students

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Abstract

Prior studies have examined discrimination and racism in higher education. Racism impacts sense of belongingness and imposter syndrome. Studies have focused on minority students only. To address the gap in the literature, this project focused on comparing the experiences of Students of Color with White students. 24 Students of Color were matched with 24 White students. They completed three surveys assessing perceived discrimination, sense of belonging, and imposter syndrome. A series of independent samples t-tests revealed significant differences for lifetime discrimination (t=2.32, p<.01), daily discrimination (t=1.90, p<.05), and university belonging (t=3.07, p<.01). This study demonstrated the importance of examining the experiences of White students along with Students of Color on a university campus. More research is needed to understand the psychological experience of White students and Students of Color.

Introduction

Prior studies have examined discrimination and racism in higher education. Various individual factors have been considered, such as being a first-generation student (e.g., Gopalan & Brady, 2019), race/ethnicity (e.g., Newman, Wood, & Harris, 2015), and economic status (e.g., Sánchez-Connally, 2018).

Racism impacts sense of belongingness and imposter syndrome. Studies have focused on minority students, including Hispanic students (Brigette, 2015) and Black male students (e.g., Newman, Wood, & Harris, 2015).

To address the gap in the literature, this project focused on comparing the experiences of Students of Color with White students.
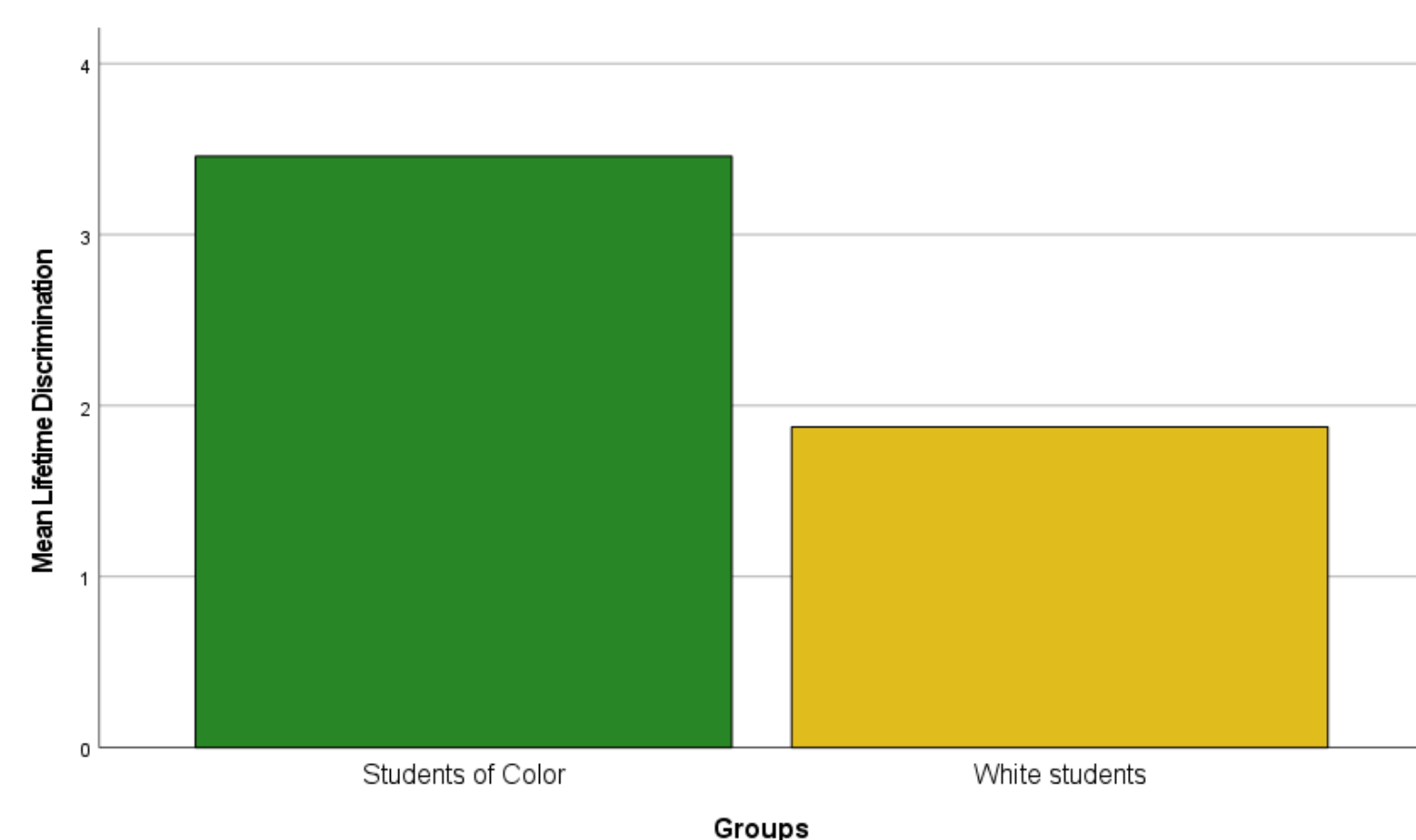
Method

Participants
48 undergraduate students selected from pool of 125
- 24 Students of Color; 24 White students
  - White students matched on gender, age, major/school, and credits earned

Instruments
- Perceived Discrimination Scale (Williams, Yu, Jackson, & Anderson, 1997)
- Sense of Belonging questionnaire (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007)
- Imposter syndrome questionnaire (Mak, Kleitman, & Abbott, 2019)

Procedure
- Undergraduate students invited to participate through email with link to Survey Monkey
- Survey data analyzed through SPSS (t-test)

Results

A series of independent samples t-tests revealed significant differences for lifetime discrimination (t=2.32, p<.01), daily discrimination (t=1.90, p<.05), and university belonging (t=3.07, p<.01).

Students of Color reported higher lifetime discrimination (M=3.46, SD=2.52) than White students (M=1.88, SD=2.19).

Students of Color reported higher daily discrimination (M=22.75, SD=7.01) than White students (M=19.13, SD=6.22).

Students of Color reported higher university belonging (M=24.46, SD=3.19) than White students (M=20.33, SD=5.77).
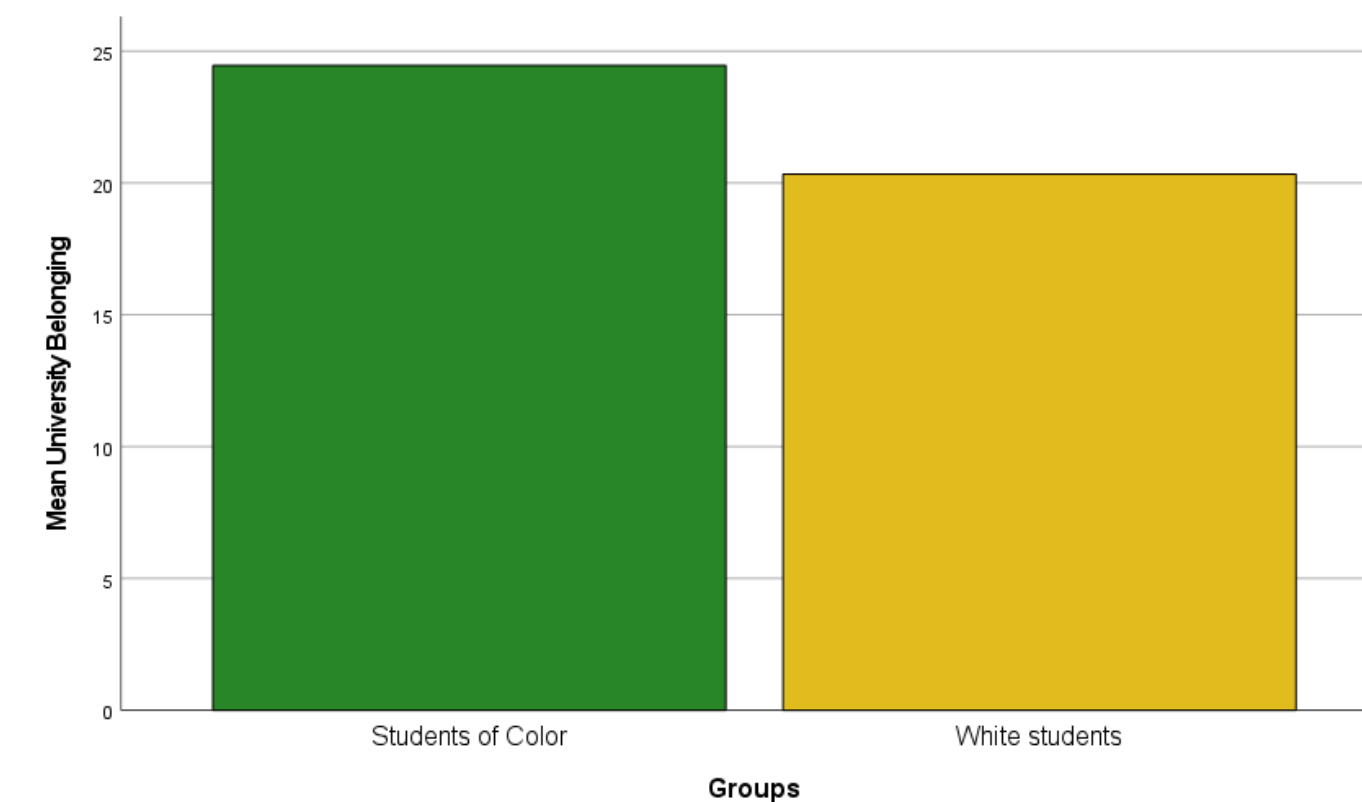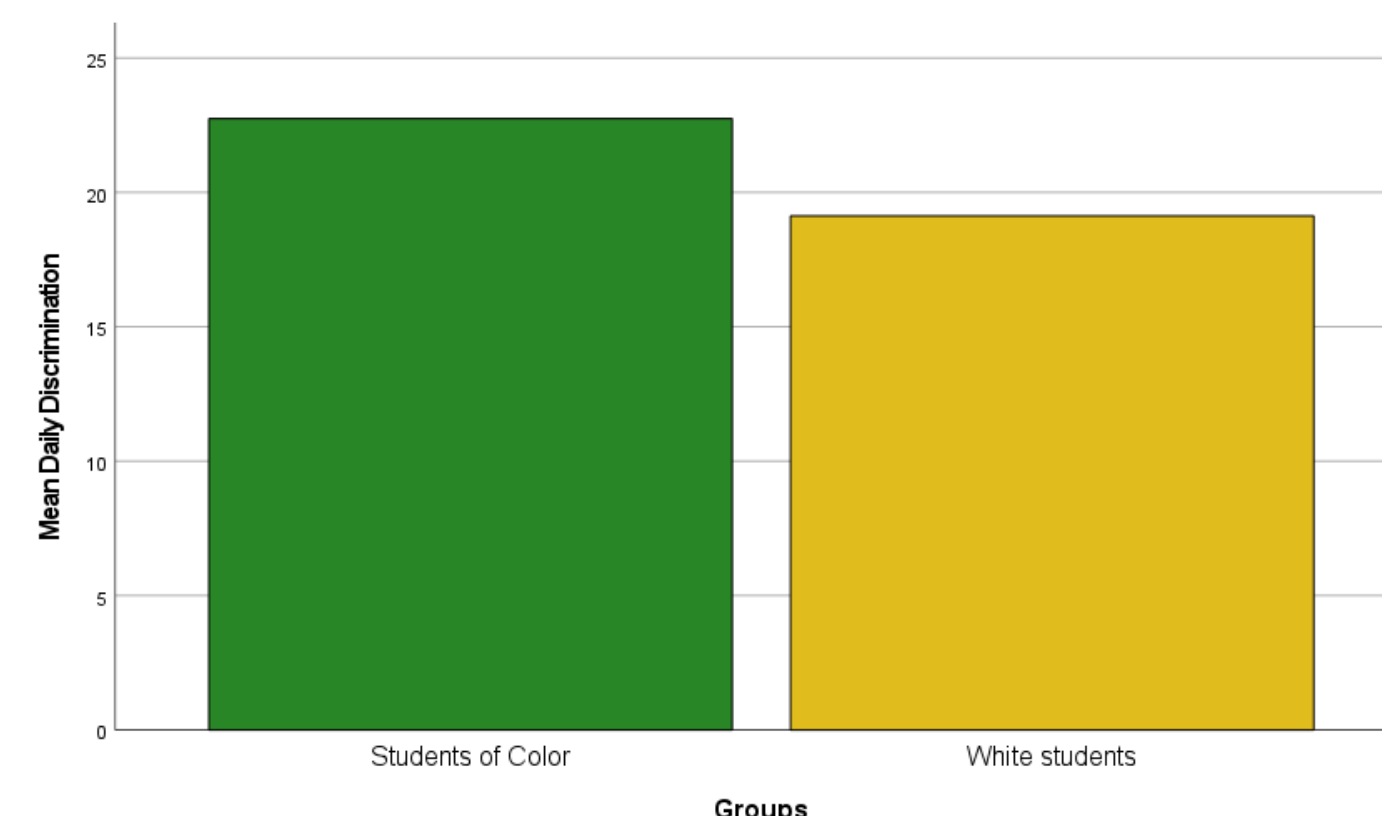
Discussion

It was expected that Students of Color would report different perceptions than White students through the survey measures. Data analysis confirmed that Students of Color reported significant more perceived discrimination, both lifetime discrimination and daily discrimination, than White students. In contrast to hypotheses, there were no significant differences in ratings of the Imposter Syndrome scale. Interestingly, Students of Color reported a significantly higher sense of university belonging than did White students. There were no significant differences on the other belonging scales of social acceptance or professor caring.

Prior research suggested that students would have different perceptions based on their ethnic/racial identify. For example, in a study conducted by Sánchez-Connally (2018), Hispanic/Latinx students experienced feelings of imposter syndrome due to their immigration status and economic background. In another study, Brigette (2015) found that minority students did not feel a sense of accomplishment. The study showed how imposter syndrome was experienced by these minority students.

This study demonstrated the importance of examining the experiences of White students along with Students of Color on a university campus. More research is needed to understand the psychological experience of White students and Students of Color. Ethnic/racial identity and experiences of identity are complicated and further study is needed to understand their impact.

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