Psychosocial Stressors Latinas Face in Education

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Abstract

Over the past twenty years, researchers have explored how collective identities influence various aspects of psychological functioning, including self-esteem, psychosocial development (Pacheco, 2018), self-actualization, and the use of psychological defenses (Borjian, 2018). Despite these efforts, a significant crater remains in understanding how racial-cultural and gender identities affect psychological functioning (Barker, 2015) and experiences of sexism, especially among women of color (Jakub et al., 2018). This study investigates the mediating effects of racial-cultural and gender identities on the relationship between sexism and psychological distress. The research involved 196 Latina college students who completed several measures, including the Schedule of Sexist Events, the Visible Racial Identity Attitude Scale for Hispanics, the Womanist Identity Attitude Scale, the Brief Symptom Inventory, and a demographic questionnaire. Findings yield to the revelation that gender and racial-cultural identities mediated the relation between sexism and psychological distress among Latina university learners. Integration of gender and racial-cultural identities into therapeutic interventions are of paramount importance for ensuring culturally competent counseling practices.

Keywords: Culturally Competent Counseling, Sexism, Psychological Distress, Latinas

Introduction

Latina college learners are sparsely represented in all the literature on college learner mental health (Barker, 2015). Latina college learners experience high levels of social exclusion, psychosocial stressors, and microaggressions associated (Barker, 2015) with their immigration status (Kumi-Yeboah & Smith, 2016), and these encounters ensue at the beginning of their academic journey and continue throughout their time in higher educational settings (Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013). In the past three decades, several studies have examined the relationships of collective identities (e.g., race, gender, culture) with various aspects of psychological functioning (Vedder et al., 2006), such as self-esteem, psychosocial development (Barker, 2015), positive social relations (Razum & Spallek, 2014), self-actualization, and the use of psychological defenses. Significant relations were indicated for people of color, White/Euro-Americans, and all genders (Jakub et al., 2018). These findings provide solid support regarding the importance of collective identities to the overall psychological functioning of many people. Conceptualizations around identity development have begun incorporating various dimensions that sometimes serve as beneficial mediators between critical events and their ensuing psychological impact. However, few studies have examined the impact that racial-cultural identity and gender identity might have on psychological functioning and the experience of sexism, particularly for women of color (Razum & Spallek, 2014). Indeed, although research indicates the negative psychological impact that sexism can have on women, little research exists exploring whether collective identities based on culture and gender might affect the relationship between experiences with sexism and psychological distress. I explored the extent to which racial-cultural identity and gender identity mediated the relationship of sexism and psychological distress among Latina college students. I examined the contributions of racial-cultural identity and gender identity to psychological distress. The relationships of sexism to racial-cultural identity and gender identity were also tested in their respective models. I hypothesized that both types of collective identities would mediate the direct effect of sexism on psychological distress.

Method

Participants included 196 self-identified Latinas recruited from a Hispanic-serving university in the Northwestern United States. Each participant completed a packet of questionnaires consisting of:
- Schedule of Sexist Events (SSE; Klonoff & Landrine, 1995);
- Womanist Identity Attitude Scale (WIAS; Ossana et al., 1992);
- Visible Racial Identity Attitude Scale for Hispanics (VIAS; Miville & Helms, 1996);
- Brief Symptom Inventory 18 (BSI-18; Derogatis, 2000); and
- Demographic data sheet.

Results

The mean age of participants was 33.27 (SD=6.75). Most participants (85%) were social sciences and education graduate students. In addition, most of the women (85%) worked full-time. Approximately 76% of participants' parents completed up to a high school education. Forty-nine percent of participants grew up in a rural setting, and the remainder of the sample was split evenly between growing up in suburban and urban settings. Approximately 89% of the sample grew up in areas composed of at least 77% ethnic-minority people. The vast majority (97%) of the sample were United States citizens. Half of the sample (51%)

identified themselves as bilingual/multilingual, whereas 47% identified English as their primary language.

Sexism, psychological distress, and statuses for racial-cultural and gender identity were significantly correlated. Because sexism was found to be significantly related to racial-cultural and gender identity statuses and psychological distress, I tested two models involving racial-cultural identity and gender identity as mediators, respectively, in the association between sexism and psychological distress. Racial-cultural and gender identity variables were treated as latent variables, with the VIAS and WIAS subscales as their respective indicators.

Regarding the racial-cultural identity mediation model, fit statistics for the path model demonstrated an adequate fit to the data [X^2 (8)=4.10, p=.85; CFI=1.00; NFI=.99; TLI=1.00; RMSEA=.00]. The path between sexism and psychological distress was significant and positive (β=.40, p<.05), indicating that higher levels of perceived sexism were linked with higher levels of psychological distress for Latina college women. The path between sexism and racial-cultural identity was also significant and positive (β=.16, p<.05), indicating that higher levels of perceived sexism were linked with higher levels of racial-cultural identity statuses. Finally, the path between racial-cultural identity and psychological distress was positive and significant (β=.14, p<.05), indicating that higher levels of distress were linked with racial-cultural identity.

Regarding the gender identity mediation model, fit statistics for the path model demonstrated an adequate fit to the data [X^2 (13)=18.81, p=.13; CFI=.99; NFI=.99; TLI=.99; RMSEA=.05]. The path between sexism and psychological distress was significant and positive (β=.36, p<.05), indicating that higher levels of perceived sexism were linked with higher levels of psychological distress for Latina college women. The path between sexism and gender identity was also significant and positive (β=.31, p<.05), indicating that higher levels of perceived sexism were linked with higher levels of racial-cultural identity statuses. Finally, the path between gender identity and psychological distress was positive and significant (β=.22, p<.05), indicating that higher levels of distress were linked with gender identity.

Conclusion

Results indicated the complex relationships that exist among racial-cultural and gender identity with experiences of sexism and psychological distress for Latina college women. These findings indicate the potential impact that collective experiences (e.g., thoughts and feelings about being Latina or female or both) have on notable events in the lives of Latinas. One such event, experiencing sexism, is a sadly all too common occurrence for many college women of color, including Latinas. Such experiences may lead to distrust of others and lower self-esteem. Results here indicated that both racial-cultural and gender identities may play a role in negotiating such events, particularly if Latinas are experiencing crisis and conflict regarding their collective identities. Counselors and Counselor Educators need to ensure that Latina college students obtain supportive and effective services at a critical juncture in their psychological development. Results from the study indicate that racial-cultural and gender identity is crucial to consider when serving Latinas dealing with painful experiences arising from sexism. I hope the results can be used to develop more culturally competent interventions with Latinas and the systems with which they interact. Counseling professionals must be aware of the importance of Latina college learners 'mental well-being due to the significant increase in college learner populations. Further discovering the needs of Latina

college learners is paramount, as a welcoming and understanding campus climate is essential for Latina learners to succeed in higher education.

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