

## Examining Psychological Correlates and Indirect Effects of Forgiveness on Racial Discrimination among Polynesian American Emerging Adults

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**Abstract:** There is a lack of research on the effects of racial discrimination on the mental health of emerging Polynesian American adults. Broadly, the aim was to examine the intersections of racial discrimination, depression, anxiety, stress, self-esteem, anger, forgiveness, and satisfaction with life in a sample of 423 Polynesian emerging adults through an online Qualtrics survey. Specifically, this study also sought to examine the effects of racial discrimination and the indirect effects of forgiveness on mental health among this Polynesian American group. Elevated experiences of racial discrimination were linked to increased levels of anger as well as negative psychological outcomes including depression, anxiety, and stress. Furthermore, experiences of racial discrimination were inversely correlated with forgiveness and self-esteem. Participants with a high school education or less were more likely to report experiences of racial discrimination. Forgiveness mediated the relationship between racial discrimination and depression, anxiety, stress, and satisfaction with life. Implications are provided regarding psychological impacts of racial discrimination among Polynesian emerging adults.

**Keywords:** racial discrimination, forgiveness, psychological health, Polynesian emerging adults.

Racial discrimination has been defined as negative and oppressive life events specific to an individual's culture or racial group (Chou et al., 2012; Gee et al., 2007; Lee et al., 2019; Yip et al., 2008). These events include "actions, practices, and/or behaviors by members of socially dominant groups that have a differential and negative impact on members of socially subordinate groups" (Broman, 1997, p. 37). Racial discrimination has been linked to negative mental health outcomes among a variety of minoritized groups across the United States (Brown-Rice; 2013; Chou et al., 2012; Cokley et al., 2017; Gee et al., 2007; Grollman, 2012; Lee & Ahn, 2011; Polanco-Roman & Miranda, 2013; Torres & Ong, 2010; Yip et al., 2008).

Research suggests that emerging adults, aged 17-29, are among those experiencing discrimination (Eaton & Rios, 2017; Grollman, 2012; Polanco-Roman & Miranda, 2013). Emerging adulthood is a stage described in developmental theory as when young adults postpone normative adult roles and expectations to pursue higher education and career development (Arnett, 2000). Perceived discrimination against emerging adults has been associated with increases in anxiety, depression, hopelessness, and helplessness, as well as decreases in self-esteem and ethnic identity (Burns & Garcia, 2017; Grollman, 2012; Johnson-Lawrence et al., 2019; Polanco-Roman & Miranda, 2013; Seaton et al., 2009; Stokes, 2019). Discrimination is likewise associated with

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diminished physical health and heightened sensitivity to discrimination (Eaton & Rios, 2017; Grollman, 2012; Oh et al., 2019; Polanco-Roman & Miranda, 2013). Sensitivity to discrimination may also be attributable to an increased exposure to discriminatory events (Pérez et al., 2008). In addition, emerging adults are less likely to have a range of effective coping skills to help them deal with discrimination (Allen et al., 2017; Oh et al., 2019; Torres & Ong, 2010). Emerging adults are also more likely to be exploring their ethnic identity and solidifying their self-concept, which may increase their cognizance of ethnic discrimination and bias (Torres & Ong, 2010).

Emerging adults from minoritized groups face an increased risk of exposure to racial discrimination in the workforce. Despite efforts to improve academic and workplace opportunities for minoritized groups, inequality and prejudice persist (Burns & Garcia, 2017; Kuppens & Spears, 2014). These include disparities include hiring disadvantages, wage inequality, and exclusion in social settings (Oh et al., 2019; Wingfield & Chavez, 2020). Benevolent discrimination also perpetuates inequality by creating settings where often overqualified minority individuals are positioned as being inferior and expected to remain as such (Romani et al., 2019). However, research has shown that higher levels of education have been shown to provide individuals with better coping skills, problem solving skills, and develop better resources for coping with discrimination (Pittman, 2011).

### **Discrimination Effects Among Polynesians**

Like members of other minoritized groups, Polynesian Americans experience discrimination and its effects (Allen et al., 2017; Garcia, David, & Mapaye, 2018). Polynesians originate from various South Pacific Islands, including Hawai'i, Fiji, New Zealand, Samoa, Tahiti, and Tonga (Allen & Heppner, 2011). As a result of social disparities such as holding low paying jobs, being undereducated, and residing in poor living conditions, Polynesian Americans generally report feeling stigmatized and socially alienated (Allen et al., 2017). Microaggressions are a particularly difficult challenge for many Polynesian American college students. These casual, offensive, and often unintentional comments and actions can make students feel unimportant and incompetent (Allen et al., 2016a). Among Polynesians, racial discrimination has been linked to increases in depression, anxiety, stress, and anger (Allen et al., 2017). Research also suggests that racial and ethnic discrimination negatively influences self-concept, self-esteem, and self-efficacy among Polynesians (Allen et al., 2013; Allen et al., 2016a).

The native people of New Zealand, often referred to as Pasifika or Maori, report similar findings when it comes to racial discrimination and psychological well-being (Cormack et al., 2018; Crengle et al., 2012; Houkamau et al., 2017). Although Maori people are native to New Zealand, they report higher prevalence of racial discrimination and are more likely to experience racial discrimination in a variety of forms in comparison to other ethnic groups in the country. This discrimination is associated with poor physical and mental health and low satisfaction with life (Cormack et al., 2018). A study of Maori high school and university students revealed that students felt inadequate and discriminated against when teachers expressed surprise or disbelief over academic success (Houkamau et al., 2017).

Native Hawaiians report similar experiences of racial discrimination and negative psychological effects (Kaholokula et al., 2017; Mossakowski et al., 2017). A study examining the effects of perceived racism on Native Hawaiians revealed that discrimination is linked to increased symptoms of depression (Kaholokula et al., 2017). Discrimination is a chronic stressor and has been found to have a greater negative impact on an individual than a single major discriminatory event (Mossakowski et al., 2017).

Studies have shown that discrimination is linked with increased anger (Allen et al., 2017). Though anger is a common reaction to stressful events, anger expression mediates the relationship between perceived discrimination and psychological distress in minorities (Kaholokula et al., 2017). A study on the effects of racism experienced by Native Hawaiians showed that higher levels of perceived discrimination are related to passive coping styles. These include venting as a form of anger expression and behavioral disengagement, an indicator of learned helplessness (Kaholokula et al., 2017). These passive coping styles do not produce effective stress management and are likely to lead to higher levels of psychological distress (Kaholokula et al., 2017).

### **Buffering Variables Among Polynesians**

Self-concept and self-esteem may buffer the negative effects of racial discrimination for Polynesians (Allen et al., 2017; Kane et al., 2021). Research suggests that Polynesians with higher self-esteem have higher satisfaction with life. Encouraging healthy self-concept and teaching positive self-esteem could help the Polynesian population by buffering the negative effects of racial discrimination (Allen et al., 2017).

Polynesians may also use religion and spirituality to minimize the effects of racial discrimination on health (Allen & Heppner, 2011; Allen & Smith, 2015). Many Polynesians who move to the United States belong to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) which, much like Polynesian culture, emphasizes the importance of family values and interconnectedness. The LDS Church's focus on forgiveness and love may affect the impact of discrimination on Church members (Chen et al., 2019). Research suggests that forgiveness is an important factor in the development of religious commitment, which can lead to greater well-being (Kane et al., 2021). Forgiveness has been shown to mediate the relationship between religious commitment and self-esteem, but not mediate the relationship between religious commitment and satisfaction with life (Kane et al., 2021). Research by Allen and Heppner (2011) examining religiosity, coping, and psychological well-being among a sample of LDS Polynesians found that overall, the sample obtained a much higher mean religious commitment score than those reported on the development of the Religious Commitment Inventory. These findings underscore the importance of religious commitment and spiritual beliefs to LDS Polynesians. Allen and Heppner's (2011) work also identified the use of collectivistic coping strategies, including family support and religious/spiritual coping among LDS Polynesians. The current study looks to further investigate the use of religious and spiritual coping strategies, such as forgiveness, and how it buffers the effects of racial discrimination.

### **Forgiveness Effects on Racial Discrimination and Mental Health Outcomes**

There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that forgiveness acts as a buffer for the mental and physical effects of discrimination on minoritized groups. Toussaint, Shields, Dorn, & Slavich (2016) have defined forgiveness as "the release of negative feelings, emotions, and behaviors toward an offender" (p. 1005). Forgiveness has been linked to lower levels of depression, anxiety, and other psychological disorders and increased acceptance, empathy, well-being, mood, self-compassion and satisfaction with life (Breen et al., 2010; Burrow & Hill, 2012; Sheehan et al., 2019; Toussaint et al., 2012). The ability to forgive can also reduce stress and anger (Breen et al., 2010; Macaskill, 2012; Toussaint, Shields, & Slavich, 2016). Conversely, unforgiveness has been associated with poor mental health, anger, and lower satisfaction with life (Macaskill, 2012).

Research suggests that interpersonal forgiveness may have psychological healing benefits for those facing racial discrimination (Powell et al., 2017). A study of the effects of lifetime stress on mental health revealed that forgiveness is a strong predictor of mental and physical health and moderates the impact of stress on health (Toussaint, Shields, & Slavich, 2016). Lower levels of forgiveness were associated with poor mental health outcomes (Kim, 2017; Toussaint, Shields, & Slavich, 2016). Forgiveness was shown to reduce the impact of racial discrimination on depressive symptoms, suggesting its potential as an effective coping strategy to experiencing discrimination (Brooks et al., 2021; Powell et al., 2017).

Although the literature suggests a link between forgiveness and mental and physical health, some studies submit there is no association (Macaskill, 2012). This may be attributable to an unclear relationship between stress, forgiveness, and mental health (Toussaint, Shields, & Slavich, 2016). A study by Burrow and Hill (2012) found that individuals with higher levels of forgiveness were less likely to perceive discrimination in a scenario describing a discriminatory event. These results may suggest that the benefits of forgiveness on health may be influenced by the nature of the discriminatory event (Burrow & Hill, 2012; Kim, 2017). Further research is needed to understand how forgiveness influences perceptions of discrimination and health outcomes among minoritized groups.

## **Rationale of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to analyze the effects of racial discrimination and forgiveness on the mental health (i.e., depression, anxiety, stress, self-esteem, anger, and satisfaction with life) of Polynesian American emerging adults. Current literature and research related to these variables is more common with other minoritized groups such as African Americans, Latinx, Asian Americans, and Native Americans than with Polynesian Americans. This current study aims to contribute to the limited Polynesian American research and to add to the existing literature on emerging adult minorities. This research is needed because Polynesian Americans are underrepresented in literature related to mental health and more information contributing to our understanding on the effects of discrimination and forgiveness on this population is important for mental health professionals to provide effective culturally sensitive services. This study hopes to provide information on the effects of discrimination and how forgiveness can buffer or explain possible negative or positive outcomes so that professionals can provide adequate services and resources to this group of Polynesian Americans.

## **Research Questions**

1. Is there a significant relationship between racial discrimination and depression, anxiety, stress, anger, self-esteem, forgiveness, and satisfaction with life among Polynesian American emerging adults?
2. Does forgiveness buffer against the negative effects of racial discrimination and mental health among Polynesian American emerging adults?
3. Is education level associated with racial discrimination among Polynesian American emerging adults?

## Method

### Participants

Using an archival data set from a previously administered survey, four hundred and twenty-three ( $N = 423$ ) individuals participated in the study (246 females, 177 males;  $M_{\text{age}} = 23.55$ ; age range = 17–29 years). The total sample size of 423 participants, a specific age group of emerging adults related to the purposes of our study, is a subsample of a larger dataset of Polynesian individuals that participated from various places across the U.S. Participants were recruited from California, Nevada, Utah, Washington, Arizona, Missouri, and Hawai'i. A large majority ( $n = 396$ , 93.6%) of the participants reported their religious affiliations as Latter-day Saints (LDS). The participants' Polynesian heritage was Native Hawaiian ( $n = 37$ , 8.8%); Tongan ( $n = 158$ , 37.5%); Samoan ( $n = 84$ , 20.0%); Tahitian ( $n = 14$ , 3.3%); Maori ( $n = 12$ , 2.9%); Fijian ( $n = 27$ , 6.4%); Multiracial Polynesian ( $n = 80$ , 19.0%); and Other ( $n = 9$ , 2.1%). Participants reported the following education levels: less than high school/received a high school diploma/GED ( $n = 74$ , 17.4%); attended some college ( $n = 188$ , 44.4%); 2-year college degree ( $n = 55$ , 13.0%); obtained a 4-year degree ( $n = 94$ , 22.2%); earned a master's degree ( $n = 10$ , 2.4%); and earned a professional degree ( $n = 2$ , .5%).

### Procedures

In an effort to reach a large population of Polynesian American emerging adults, opportunities to participate were communicated through personal and social media, as has been an effective strategy in another research (Allen et al., 2016b). We invited Polynesian emerging adults via nationwide social media such as Facebook and email to various Polynesian/Pacific Islander clubs and organizations to participate in the study. The survey was completed through Qualtrics online. At the beginning of the survey the participants were able to read the informed consent and agree to continuing the survey. Participants were incentivized and provided a \$10 gift card upon completion of the survey. Two Polynesian doctoral and one Polynesian master's student posted the link to the survey on their Facebook pages. These Polynesian students had over 80% of Polynesian friends on their Facebook profiles. The participants' responses were tracked via Facebook, where they were directed to send a message to the students informing them whether they completed the questionnaire. The completion rate for those participants via Facebook resulted in 84%. We were unable to get a completion rate of those who received the link to the survey via email distribution.

### Instruments

**Racial Discrimination.** The Daily Life Experience subscale of the Racism and Life Experience Scale (Harrell, 1994) was used in this study. Participants' experiences with racial discrimination related to microaggressions were assessed using this 18-item scale that asked how often they may have experienced racial hassles during the past year (Harrell, 1994). The reported normative sample for this measure was racial minority groups in the United States: more specifically African Americans. Sample items include: "Others reacting to you as if they were afraid or intimidated," "Being insulted, called a name or harassed," "Today, I was ignored, overlooked, or not given service," and "Not being taken seriously." Participants were asked to rate each racial hassle they had experienced using a 6-point response scale assessing how often the

event occurred over the past year (0 = never; 5 = once a week or more; \_\_\_ .89; Harrell, 1994). The Cronbach's alpha for this study was .94.

**Trait Forgivingness Scale (TFS;** Berry et al., 2005). The TFS is a 10-item measure of an individual's proneness to forgive interpersonal transgressions. Individuals are asked to rate the degree to which they agree or disagree with statements on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree). Examples of some of the statements include, "people close to me probably think I hold a grudge too long", "I can forgive a friend for almost anything", and "If someone treats me badly, I treat him or her the same". Classical item statistics and Rasch scaling procedures were used to determine internal validity, with results indicating Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging between .74 and .80. In the current study, Cronbach's alpha was .73.

**Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale – 21 (DASS-21).** The DASS-21 self-reported questionnaire, developed by Lovibond and Lovibond (1995), contains three subscales: Depression, Anxiety, and Stress. The DASS includes 21-items that are designed to measure the severity of symptoms common of Depression and Anxiety. The Depression subscale contains 7 items that assess self-depreciation, lack of interest/involvement, hopelessness, states of dysphoric moods, and anhedonia (e.g., "I felt downhearted and blue"). The Anxiety subscale includes 7 items where it measures automatic arousal, anxious affect, and muscular tension (e.g., "I felt I was close to panic"). The Stress subscale (7 items) is described to look for general tensions and negative emotions in response to stressors (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). The DASS-21 is rated using a Likert-type scale; 0 = Did not apply to me at all, 1 = Applied to me to some degree, or some of the time, 2 = Applied to me to a considerable degree, or a good part of time, and 3 = Applied to me very much, or most of the time. This study's Cronbach's alpha for DASS-21 full-scale is .95.

**The Trait Anger Scale (TAS).** The TAS (Spielberger et al., 1983) is a 15-item self-report scale assessing anger as a personality trait in terms of the frequency of angry states experienced over time (1 = almost never, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often, 4 = almost always). The reported normative data for this measure was based on two samples: college students and Navy recruits. Sample items include: "I have a fiery temper," "I am quick tempered," "I fly off the handle," and "It makes me furious when I am criticized in front of others. The alpha coefficient among college student participants was reported at .87. Among Navy recruits, alpha coefficient was .87. The Cronbach's alpha for this study was .92.

**Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory (RSE).** The RSE questionnaire measures self-esteem and is often used among racially and ethnically diverse individuals. The RSE Inventory includes 10 Likert-type items that ranged from one to four (i.e., 1 = *Strongly disagree*, 2 = *Disagree somewhat*, 3 = *Agree somewhat*, and 4 = *Strongly Agree*). Participants were asked to rank statements such as, *I feel I do not have much to be proud of*, *I certainly feel useless at times*, *I take a positive attitude toward myself*, and *I wish I could have more respect for myself*. According to a study conducted by Allen and colleagues (2013) Cronbach's alpha for the full-scale scores with the same population was .86. For this study, the full-scale Cronbach's alpha is .84.

**Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS).** The SWLS (Diener et al., 1985) is a 5-item Likert-type instrument ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) designed to assess global cognitive judgments of satisfaction with one's life (i.e., "I am satisfied with my life"). The normative sample for this measure consisted of both college students and elderly persons but did not report the racial background of participants or any other demographical data. The internal consistency of the SWLS and alpha coefficients have repeatedly exceeded .80 in various studies (Pavot & Diener, 1993). In Diener and colleagues' (1985) original study, they found an alpha coefficient of .87 (Allen & Wang, 2014). The Cronbach's alpha for this study was .85.

## Data Analysis

The final sample size was 423 Polynesian American emerging adults. Descriptive analyses assessing means and standard deviations of study variables are provided. Initial analyses included Pearson product correlations for continuous (Likert-type scale items) variables to analyze between the independent variable (i.e., racial discrimination) and dependent variables (i.e., depression, anxiety, stress, anger, self-esteem, satisfaction with life). Additionally, mediation analyses with Hayes PROCESS macro bootstrapping were conducted to examine indirect effects of forgiveness between racial discrimination and psychological outcomes. Correlation analyses were also conducted between education level and racial discrimination as it is also hypothesized that higher education level would be positively correlated with more experiences of racial discrimination. Given that education is a categorical or nominal variable (i.e., dichotomous; high school vs. graduate school) and racial discrimination is measured on a continuous variable (i.e., interval/ratio; Likert-type scale), the analysis of choice was a point-biserial correlation to generate a coefficient estimate between a categorical variable (education) and a continuous variable (racial discrimination).

## Results

Respondents who failed all three validity check items (e.g., “Please click ‘Strongly Agree’ for this question; this is a validity question check ensuring that you are answering the questions to the best of your ability and in a consistent manner”) or had missed over 5% of the items were removed from the data set. The remaining 628 participants comprised the sample from the original 924. As missing data of less than 5% is considered inconsequential (Schafer, 1999), missing values at the item level were replaced using series means in SPSS by calculating the mean for that item across participants (Allen et al., 2017). The data for the current study originated from the larger dataset of 635 Polynesian American individuals, ages 17 to 76. For this particular study, we analyzed individuals described as emerging adults which consists of ages 17-29. After cleaning the data by removing participants from the study due to substantial missing values, we conducted a preliminary analysis consisting of frequency tests to examine descriptive statistics on 423 completed participant scores (e.g., means, standard deviations, skewness, kurtosis; Table 1). Pearson correlations were also conducted to examine the relationships between racial discrimination and negative psychological effects (i.e., depression, anxiety, stress, anger, and self-esteem) as well as trait forgiveness (Table 2).

**Table 1**

*Means and Standard Deviations of Study Variables*

Measure	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
DLE	2.95	.93	.31	-.08
TFS	3.53	.56	-.05	.26
DASSD	1.79	.67	.89	.17
DASSA	1.82	.68	1.00	.48
DASSS	2.01	.62	.55	.19
TAS	1.92	.59	.99	1.18
RSE	3.02	.46	.05	-.64
SWLS	4.98	1.24	-.67	.19

*Note.* DLE = Daily Life Experience; TFS = Trait Forgiveness Scale; DASSD = Depression Subscale; DASSA = Anxiety Subscale; DASSS = Stress Subscale; TAS = Trait Anger Scale; RSE = Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale; SWLS = Satisfaction with Life Scale

In addressing the first research question, we analyzed how racial discrimination is correlated with depression, anxiety, stress, anger, self-esteem, and forgiveness. We first conducted a Pearson correlation examining the relationship between Racial Discrimination (RD) and psychological outcome variables (i.e., Depression, Anxiety, and Stress). Results showed that RD was significantly positively correlated with Depression ( $r = .252, p < .001$ ), Anxiety ( $r = .261, p < .001$ ), and Stress ( $r = .275, p < .001$ ). These findings showed that experiences of racial discrimination have moderately strong associations with depression, anxiety and stress. We also found that RD is significantly negatively correlated with Self-esteem (SE) ( $r = -.199, p < .001$ ) and Trait Forgiveness (TFS;  $r = -.164, p = .002$ ), while RD was positively correlated with Trait Anger (TA;  $r = .298, p < .001$ ). Table 2 summarizes the correlations that were conducted.

**Table 2**  
*Pearson Bivariate Correlations of the Study Variables*

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Alpha
1. DLE	—								.94
2. TFS	-.16**	—							.71
3. DASSD	.25**	-.30**	—						.96
4. DASSA	.26**	-.24**	.80**	—					.96
5. DASSS	.28**	-.31**	.82**	.83**	—				.96
6. TAS	.30**	-.32**	.25**	.23**	.29**	—			.92
7. RSE	-.20**	.31**	-.61**	-.50**	-.54**	-.24**	—		.80
8. SWLS	-.08	.13*	-.16**	-.06	-.09	-.18**	.28**	—	.85

*Note.* DLE = Daily Life Experience; TFS = Trait Forgiveness Scale; DASSD = Depression Subscale; DASSA = Anxiety Subscale; DASSS = Stress Subscale; TAS = Trait Anger Scale; RSE = Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale; SWLS = Satisfaction with Life Scale

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

### Indirect Effect Analysis

The SPSS macro PROCESS (Hayes, 2013) was used to conduct the indirect analysis. PROCESS offers bootstrap estimates to calculate bias-corrected confidence intervals for the indirect effects. This bootstrapping method has been recommended as the method of choice for testing indirect effects because of its advantages over the causal steps approach (Baron & Kenny, 1986) and the Sobel (1982) test (Allen & Wang, 2014; Hayes, 2009). The procedure involves resampling several times and estimating the sampling distribution from all of the resamples. This enhances estimation accuracy of the indirect effects (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). In this study the mean of 95% confidence intervals (CI) of indirect effects derived from 10,000 bootstrap samples was estimated. The presence of an indirect effect can be concluded with 95% confidence if the upper and lower bounds of the CI do not include zero (Allen et al., 2017).

Therefore, related to the second research question, we examined the indirect effects of forgiveness on racial discrimination and the outcome variables (depression, anxiety, stress, anger, self-esteem, satisfaction with life). The only significant mediating indirect effect variable found was forgiveness between racial discrimination and satisfaction with life (see Table 3). Bootstrapping results indicated that forgiveness had an indirect effect on the link between racial discrimination and satisfaction with life (95% CI (.03, .50); indirect effect = .26, SE = .12,  $Z = 2.21, p = .027$ ; total effect = -.11, SE = .07,  $t = -1.47, p = .14$ ; direct effect = -.08, SE = .07,  $t = -1.09, p = .27$ ). In other words, forgiveness may mediate the relationship between racial



discrimination and satisfaction with life. All other outcome variables (depression, anxiety, stress, anger, and self-esteem) were not significantly mediated by forgiveness.

**Table 3**

*Hayes PROCESS for Bootstrapping Results*

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Outcome model (DV = depression)	4.28	.50	8.48	.000
Constant	-.08	.07	1.09	.27
Racial Discrimination	.26	.12	2.21	.03
Forgiveness				
Indirect effect	Effect	Boot SE	95% CI	
1 SD below	-.03	.02	[-.06, .00]	

*Note.* *N* = 423. All *p* values, two-tailed. DV = dependent variable; CI = confidence interval.

### Education Level

For the third research question, we analyzed how level of education may be correlated with experiences of racial discrimination. A point-biserial correlation was conducted analyzing racial discrimination (RD) and seven variables which represent different levels of education. These education levels included less than high school/high school degree/GED, some college, two-year college degree, four-year college degree, master's degree, doctoral degree, and professional degree. Results indicate that not completing high school or only obtaining a high school degree/GED is positively correlated with experiences of racial discrimination (RD) ( $r = .14, p = .003$ ). All other education levels were not significantly correlated with an increase or decrease of experiences of racial discrimination. These results suggested that those with less than a high school degree and no college experience are more likely to report experiencing racial discrimination. Table 4 summarizes the correlations that were conducted.

**Table 4**

*Point-Biserial Correlations of the Education Level Variables*

Measure	Racial Discrimination
1. LHS/HS	.14**
2. SC	-.07
3. 2C	-.05
4. 4C	.00
5. MD	-.09
6. PD	-.01

*Note.* LHS/HS=Less Than High School or High School Degree/GED, SC=Some College, 2C=Two-Year College Degree, 4C=Four-Year College Degree, MD=Master's Degree, and PD=Professional Degree

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

## Discussion

This study adds to research focused on the negative effects of racial discrimination among minoritized groups and expounds on the unique experience of the understudied group of Polynesian young adults. The effects of racial discrimination among Polynesian young adult's psychological health were similar to findings among other racial minority groups (Brown-Rice, 2013; Chou et al., 2012; Cokley et al., 2017; Lee & Ahn, 2011). Consistent across previous research, our results also conclude that experiences of racial discrimination are linked to an increase in depression, anxiety, and stress (Cokley et al., 2017; Grollman, 2012; Stokes, 2019). These aversive experiences are also correlated with lower levels self-esteem and an increase in anger (Miller, 2009; Urzúa et al., 2019). Unique to our study, it was found that experiences with racial discrimination were negatively correlated with trait forgiveness among Polynesian American young adults. This emphasizes and supports the ongoing investigations related to the negative effects of racial discrimination across minoritized groups, but more specifically adding these disturbing effects to another minoritized group—Polynesian Americans.

Mediation results suggested that trait forgiveness mediated the relationship between racial discrimination and satisfaction with life in this Polynesian American sample. This finding could lead us to think that trait forgiveness may be a direct result of higher satisfaction with life when one may experience racial discrimination. This may provide valuable insight on the importance of teaching and developing the trait of forgiveness starting at a young age. Polynesian American families may consider encouraging strong relationships within the family (Allen & Smith, 2015) by fostering an attribute of forgiveness as it could possibly be a method to cope and increase well-being in the face of racial discrimination experiences. Mental health professionals can also help Polynesian American emerging adults to identify and possibly utilize the factor of forgiveness as they serve this population (Alaedein-Zawawi, 2015; Eaton & Rios, 2017; Grollman, 2012; Oh et al., 2019; Toussaint, Shields, Dorn, & Slavich, 2016). Although it is important to note that justice and fairness are also needed when dealing with experiences of racial discrimination, forgiveness is a variable that seems to be relevant and helpful for the Polynesian American population when in the face of racial discrimination. It is important to continue to advocate for change and an end of racial discrimination and injustices and exercising the trait of forgiveness is just one way to heal from these experiences (Powell et al., 2017).

The effect of education level on experiences and perceptions of racial discrimination was also considered. It was hypothesized that the more formal and advanced education a person received, the more experiences with discrimination they would encounter. The reasoning behind this is the potential that as one pursues their education, it may be likely that they are more frequently the minority in higher education, which in may lead to more experiences with racial discrimination. On the contrary, the point biserial correlational results showed that having less than a high school education is significantly correlated with increased experiences of racial discrimination. This finding is similar to research done by Kuppens and Spears (2014) who found that education can increase awareness about discrimination but implicit prejudice in highly educated people is not much lower than those that are not as educated. Another possible reason for this finding is because as an emerging Polynesian American adult receives education past high school, they become more knowledgeable and have access to resources and coping strategies to deal with incidents of racial discrimination in their own life. This finding is important to consider in regard to counseling of young students and adults along mental health professionals when working with Polynesian American emerging adults.

In previous research among other minoritized groups, racial discrimination was negatively correlated with satisfaction with life (Cormack et al., 2018). The current study also did not find forgiveness to be a successful mediator for anger and self-esteem as criterion variables. In previous research it was found that those with greater levels of forgiveness reported more self-compassion and acceptance (Breen et al., 2010; Kim, 2017; Toussaint et al., 2012). This was not conclusive in the current study and would be valuable to examine in future research. The current results also found that possessing the trait of forgiveness does not decrease feelings of anger when dealing with discrimination. This finding was mixed in previous research. Some studies found that forgiveness can buffer the effects of anger (Breen et al., 2010; Toussaint, Shields, & Slavich, 2016) while others found that having higher levels of trait anger can predict an unwillingness to forgive (Kim, 2017; Macaskill, 2012). Possessing and fostering the trait of forgiveness may allow an individual to better work through feelings of anger which can lead to a greater satisfaction with life, but forgiveness does not immediately resolve negative feelings regarding experiences of racial discrimination. The relationship between anger and forgiveness appears to be complicated in regard to experiences of discrimination and warrants further research.

## **Limitations**

Although this study adds valuable information on the perceptions of discrimination and effects of psychological health among Polynesian emerging adults there are some limitations to consider. The majority of the participants ( $n = 396$ , 93.6%) were affiliated with a specific religious group, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). Because of the lack of religious diversity among participants, these findings might not be an accurate representation of all Polynesian American emerging adults. Forgiveness and religious commitment are often correlated and looked at simultaneously in research. Having a highly religious participation group might not be an accurate representation of how all Polynesian American emerging adults would report trait forgiveness. Because the concept of forgiveness is taught extensively throughout the LDS religion, these participants might have more experiences developing and learning about forgiveness than those who are not religious or have a different background. Thus, the results may not be generalizable to the general population, but possibly resonate with Latter-day Saint Polynesian American emerging adults.

Because additional questions were not included that could have expanded the relationship between education level and racial discrimination, we were not able to rule out other possible factors that could influence experiences of discrimination such as socioeconomic status (SES). It would be important to more fully understand the effects of education on racial discrimination in future research among Polynesian Americans.

## **Implications for Future Research**

The results from this study offer several clinical and research directions for future studies. It perhaps can be a foundational framework from which other studies can further the intersection of discrimination and psychological well-being among Polynesian Americans. For example, below are some considerations for this population and future research.

- Additional research can look at the effectiveness of specific interventions that target and encourage forgiveness among Polynesian American emerging adults to examine how effective it is as a buffer when put into practice.

- Future research can also consider comparing the experiences of emerging Polynesian American adults to an older age demographic to see what psychological differences occur due to racial discrimination.
- Further investigation into the protective factor of education for Polynesians against the negative effects of discrimination may be essential.
- Additional promotion and advocacy towards Polynesians completing high school and pursuing higher education.

## Conclusion

Research regarding the psychological effects of racial discrimination among Polynesian American emerging adults and the buffering effects of forgiveness requires more attention. The results have contributed to the vast research (Cokley et al., 2017) that attributes negative psychological outcomes to experiences of racial discrimination among minoritized groups, including Polynesian American emerging adults. These findings in the specific population of emerging Polynesian American adults contributes to the limited research of this minoritized group. The results have increased the understanding of how the negative psychological effects like depression, anxiety, and stress relate to experiences of racial discrimination in this population, as well as the potential safeguard of fostering development of trait forgiveness to counter the effects (Kane et al, 2021; Oh et al., 2019). Findings from this study may have implications for other minoritized groups in the face of racial discrimination.

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