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Intimate racism from one's partner in young intercultural couples

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Abstract

Racism from one's partner is a highly sensitive phenomenon that has received little research attention. The current research introduces the concept of "intimate racism" to refer to racism from close others. The manifestation of intimate racism in intercultural romantic relationships was explored with a sample of 92 racialized minorities who were currently, or previously, in an intercultural relationship. An online survey enquired about the experience of racism from their partner, and responses were coded and analyzed using thematic content analysis. More than 50 different manifestations of intimate racism emerged and these were grouped into eight categories: explicit racism, microinsults, microinvalidations, positive stereotypes, racial fetishization, partner abuse, defensiveness, and others. Co-occurrence analyses revealed links between intimate racism with negative, neutral and positive experiences, which were connected to participants' responses to racism (e.g., confronting, disengaging) and to stressful identity experiences. The present work opens a new field of study to examine intimate racism and its implications.

INTRODUCTION

There is virtually no research probing into the deleterious experience of racism from those that are closest to relationship partners: family members, friends, and the partners themselves. One might ask, "how can people who are intimately involved be racist toward each other?" Given the non-conscious nature of implicit prejudice (Banaji & Hardin, 1996) and subtle racism (Sue et al., 2007), people may believe that they cannot be racist if they love someone or are romantically involved with someone from a different cultural group. Furthermore, although intergroup contact has been shown to decrease prejudice (e.g., Pettigrew et al., 2011), it has sometimes been found to be ineffective or exacerbating (e.g., Schäfer et al., 2021), and this includes domains of contact such as friendship (see Jackman & Crane, 1986). Racism is pervasive in every facet of society (Feagin, 2013) and prior work on multiracial individuals has shown that racism can even be experienced from loved ones (Nadal et al., 2013). The current qualitative research directly explores the experience of intimate racism from one's intimate partner within intercultural romantic relationships.

Intercultural romantic relationships

Intercultural relationships are romantic relationships in which partners come from different ethnic, cultural, or racialized backgrounds (Bystydzienski, 2011). These relationships are on the rise within increasingly diverse North American societies, with 4.6% of Canadian couples (Statistics Canada, 2011) and 10.8% of American couples (Rico et al., 2018) being intercultural. Relationships that go beyond cultural boundaries have been stigmatized and subject to social disapproval throughout history (e.g., Killian, 2003; Skinner & Hudac, 2017). Intercultural relationships also serve as a site of intergroup contact, with potential for stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination. Whereas much of the research on stigmatization and intercultural couples assumes that racism against partners in intercultural relationships comes from those outside the relationship (see Killian, 2003; Lehmiller & Agnew, 2006), the current work explores how racism toward racialized minorities in intercultural relationships can come from one's intimate partner.

Racialized minorities

This research focuses on the experiences of racialized minorities. Racialized minorities are people who have been socially constructed as non-white (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Hall, 1992); they include groups such as Black, Indigenous, Asian, Arab, Latin American, and mixed-heritage individuals. Racialized minorities are also cultural minorities, as they belong to groups that have cultural meaning systems and markers that are not held by the majority (Barth, 1998); these can often be tied to religious affiliations (in Canada, minority religious groups are non-Christian) (Hall, 1992; Husain, 2021).

Intimate racism

We have created the term "intimate racism" to refer to racism from close others, drawing inspiration from the term "intimate partner violence" (e.g., Bailey, 2021). Intimate partner violence

can occur within couples; similarly, racism can also manifest in intimate relationships. Intimate racism may take the form of stereotyping, prejudice, and discriminatory behavior. We propose that intimate racism can be experienced by racialized minorities in various types of close relationships, but the current study is focused on racialized individuals in intimate intercultural relationships, in which at least one of the individuals in the couple belongs to a racialized group.

Racism, explicit racism, and microaggressions

In order to situate intimate racism within our understanding of racism more broadly, we need to offer an overview of the many forms of racism. Racism is vast, complex, and multifaceted. It is systemic, existing as a power structure embedded across social institutions in which racialized white majority members are favored over racialized minorities (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). This structural oppression is rooted in the colonial construction of a racial hierarchy, in which people from colonizing Western European powers were racialized as "white" and were deemed human, while all other groups were dehumanized (Hall, 1992). White supremacy, which was maintained through colonial imperialism, slavery, genocide, and exploitation, still persists today as evidenced by discrimination against non-whites across social institutions (e.g., justice, education, healthcare) (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Kim, 2021).

Extending beyond racialization, cultural racism targets minorities on the basis of differences in practices, cultural expression, and values (Balibar et al., 1991). More specifically, cultural racism takes the form of misunderstanding and misconstruing racialized minorities' cultural practices and perspectives as inferior and "backwards," as well as framing current inequities between racialized majority and minority group members as a result of minorities' "inferior" cultural norms rather than as a result of centuries of ongoing unjust treatment (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Mills, 2007). Cultural racism extends to discrimination against religious minority groups, and encompasses Islamophobia and anti-Semitism (Husain, 2021).

The present study includes cultural and anti-religious racism within the larger operationalization of racism as they are among the many means by which racialized minorities are othered, demeaned and targeted within the broader context of systemic racism (Grosfoguel & Mielants, 2006). As a result of living within racist social structures, racism manifests at the intergroup and interpersonal level. Racist bias against members from racialized groups can be observed through individually held and interpersonally enacted stereotyped perceptions, prejudiced attitudes, and discriminatory behavior (Fiske, 1998).

Racism can be explicit or subtle. Explicit racism consists of conscious, intentional and obviously negative attitudes and behaviors toward racialized outgroups (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986), whereas subtle racism consists of expressions of negative and prejudiced attitudes that are implicit and sometimes ambiguous in their presentation (Crocker & Major, 1989). Subtle discrimination has been elaborately outlined in the framework of microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007), which are indirect, often unintentional, expressions of prejudice that are brief and ubiquitous. They manifest through (1) direct/indirect insults against one's cultural groups, practices and identities (microinsults); (2) invalidations of one's minority experiences and group memberships (microinvalidations); and (3) systemic social inequalities. Examples of microaggressions include treating one's cultural practices or beliefs as "backwards" or inferior, or denying one's cultural membership to either mainstream or heritage cultural groups (Sue et al., 2007). Previous work has established that both explicit racism and microaggressions are detrimental for physical and mental health (Nadal et al., 2014; Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009).

Racism between racialized minority groups

Given their status as the privileged racialized majority group within the structures of systemic racism, those who are racialized as white are more likely to enact racist discrimination. At the same time, racist discrimination can also be enacted upon racialized minorities by other racialized minorities (Kim, 2021; Mills, 2007). Colonialism and white, western imperialism have shaped attitudes toward, but also between, racialized minorities. In the colonial construction of a racial hierarchy, certain racialized groups were placed in a superior position to Black and Indigenous peoples, including, but not limited to, those classified as Asian (e.g., Chinese) and Arab (e.g., Lebanese) (Hall, 1992). At the same time, those groups positioned above Black and Indigenous peoples were also perceived as perpetually foreign and unable to be integrated into majority white society (Kim, 1999).

Debasing representations of racialized minorities, in conjunction with material oppression, have been used by colonial powers to pit groups against each other as part of a "divide and rule" strategy, which fueled the internalization and endorsement of racist ideation, attitudes and treatment between racialized minority groups as a means of maintaining dominance over them (Morrock, 1973; Wahab, 2007).[1] The repercussions and perpetuations of the divide and rule strategy of colonialism can currently be observed in a number of different contexts. Anti-Black racism exists in Latin America (Busey & Coleman-King, 2020), India (Sambaraju, 2021), and China (Castillo & Amoah, 2020), and in diaspora ethnocultural minority communities (Bonifacio, 2022). Furthermore, colorism, or the favoring of fairer skin tones and stigmatization of darker skin tones, is an ongoing issue within and between racialized communities (Burton et al., 2010; Hunter, 2007). The present study accounts for some of this complexity by examining intimate racism from all racialized sources, including majority White people and racialized minorities.

Evidence of intimate racism

Microaggressions can occur in intimate contexts. "Friendly" intergroup contact between White people and racialized minorities can function to maintain racial dominance through paternalism, persuasion and coercion within the relationship dynamic (Jackman, 1994). Moreover, White people in friendships with Black people may still maintain stereotypes about Black people as well as maintain political opinions that favor anti-black discrimination (Jackman & Crane, 1986). Similarly, ambivalent sexism theory (Glick & Fiske, 1997) posits that benevolent sexism functions to maintain men's dominance over women, and research has established that overt and subtle gender discrimination manifests in couple interactions (e.g.'s Chen et al., 2009; Pulice-Farrow et al., 2017). Relationships research has also demonstrated that dehumanization can occur from one's romantic partner (Bastian et al., 2013; Pizzirani et al., 2019). In terms of racism, Nadal et al. (2013) found that family members, including family members who are racialized minorities, may ostracize multiethnic children, exhibit favoritism based on lighter skin color, deny the children's multiethnic experiences, or perceive multiethnic children as threats to the continuity of their cultural heritage. Interracial friendship and romantic partners may also hold negative stereotypes

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[1] It should be noted that racial dominance outside of white and western supremacy structures has also been evidenced in other histories, including Japan's history of representing Japanese peoples as a superior race relative to other East and Southeast Asian peoples (Fukurai & Yang, 2018). These existing structures were often absorbed and exploited within western colonial frameworks.

and attitudes toward their partner and their racialized group (Lemay & Teneva, 2020). Interviews with young adult multicultural Canadians (Yampolsky et al., 2013), Black and white interracial couples (Killian, 2013), and Asian-American college students (Chou et al., 2015) further revealed that minority partners report being sexually exoticized by their casual and committed relationship partners. While these works draw our attention to the existence of intimate racism, we still do not have a clear understanding of how intimate racism manifests in the context of intercultural romantic relationships, nor do we understand how this racism might impact individual partners and their relationships.

Intimate racism and relationship quality

Most people expect that they can depend on their partner for support, kindness, and security rather than harm. The experience of intimate racism, however, is a form of harm that can threaten the connection to one's partner. Relationship quality is the extent to which partners feel that their relationship is a positive part of their lives, and can be unpacked into several core factors: commitment, trust, satisfaction, intimacy, passion, and love (Fletcher et al., 2000). The literature on the potential impact of racism for couples demonstrates that it is detrimental to relationship quality. Racial discrimination from outside the couple is experienced as a source of stress and strain for intercultural couples to manage (Killian, 2003, 2013; Seshadri & Knudson-Martin, 2013). The research directly studying the impact of societal racism for racialized monocultural couples shows that greater overt and subtle racism predicts lower relationship quality (Kelly & Floyd, 2006; Trail et al., 2012). The current study explores how intimate racism from one's own partner is related to one's experience of the relationship.

Intimate racism and cultural identity

Cultural identities are rooted in racialized, ethnic and cultural group memberships, and their related histories and experiences (Benet-Martínez et al., 2006). In the context of relationships, prior work demonstrates that being in an intercultural couple influences how we see our own personal and cultural identities (Afful et al., 2015). Prior work on the impact of racism has shown that racism predicts negative evaluations of one's devalued racialized and cultural identities (Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002). As a result, cultural minorities have been found to dis-identify with either the majority or minority cultural group (Grant, 2007; Lalonde et al., 1992). Prior work also demonstrates that discrimination predicts identity conflict (Cheng & Lee, 2009, 2013; Perozzo et al., 2016) and the compartmentalization of identities within multicultural individuals (Yampolsky & Amiot, 2016). Furthermore, stigmatization of one's intercultural relationship predicts divided identities for partners in intercultural couples (Yampolsky et al., 2020). The current study explored how intimate racism from one's partner is related to one's racialized identification.

Objectives and research questions

Intimate racism from one's partner constitutes a highly sensitive phenomenon that has received little research attention. The purpose of the current research was to explore the forms that it could take and how it is experienced by racialized minorities on the receiving end. As such, in this

exploratory qualitative study, our principal research question was: "what are the different forms of intimate racism from one's partner?" We also explored how intimate racism from one's partner was experienced by the racialized minority partner targeted by this racism, and how they felt about their relationship and their identities.

METHODS

Data collection and participants

Participants who were racialized minorities and had been in an intercultural romantic relationship (past or current) were recruited through a research participant pool at York University in Toronto. In order to participate, participants needed to be racialized minorities who were in, or who had been in an intercultural relationship; thus, the recruitment materials and consent form indicated that "Intercultural couples are increasing in our more diverse social contexts. In order to gain greater scientific knowledge about the experience of these couples, we are conducting a qualitative study with individuals who are cultural minorities[2] that are currently involved, or have been in an intercultural couple." We defined racism for the participants in this way: "The purpose of this project is to explore your experiences of stereotypes, prejudice and racism in your intercultural couple. These can be defined as intentional or unintentional manifestations of stereotypes, prejudices or micro-aggressions from your partner(s). Our goal is to understand how these manifest within intimate relationships with current or former romantic partners."

The current study sought to explore and establish the nature of the experience of intimate racism and not its prevalence, and therefore those who wrote that nothing happened, or "N/A" as their response (n = 37) were removed from the sample. Ninety-two students (66 cisgender women, 24 cisgender men, two non-binary individuals) completed the study. Participants were 21.14 years of age on average (ranging from 17[3] to 43 years old). Their ethnocultural backgrounds[4] included mixed heritage (e.g., Filipina-Italian; n = 32), Middle Eastern/West Asian (n = 17), South Asian (n = 12), East Asian (n = 12), Southeast Asian (n = 7), Black/African/Caribbean (n = 8), and Latin American (n = 4).[5] Forty-five participants referred to their current relationship, 12 referred to a past relationship, and 35 did not indicate whether they referred to a past or current relationship.

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[2] When recruiting individuals, we used the term "cultural minority" so as to capture a wide variety of individuals who may not consider themselves for the study if we only used the term "racialized" or "person of color," since many folks who are mixed-heritage or from regions that would be classified as "Caucasian" (i.e., Turkey) would potentially exclude themselves from the sample. Further, since this study was conducted in Canada, the use of the term "racial group" is neither common nor understood in the same way as it is in the United States, particularly with the policies and rhetoric of multiculturalism. By using the term "cultural," we were able to recruit individuals that met our criteria using language that was accessible to the population we were sampling from.

[3] At York University, the age of consent to participate in minimal risk research without requiring parental consent is 16 years of age or older (https://www.yorku.ca/research/guidelines-research-involving-minor-age-participants/)

[4] Among the respondents were 26 white participants: 11 from Western Europe/North America, five Southern Europeans, four Eastern Europeans, and six Mixed Heritage. The white participants were removed from the sample because their experience as white individuals would be that of the dominant majority group and as a result they are not subject to racial oppression. Additionally, we sought to capture and center the experiences of individuals who are racialized minorities. We analyzed the white experiences separately (see online supplement).

[5] Though we assessed participants' ethnocultural backgrounds, we did not assess their partner's background with a separate question. Only six participants reported their partner's ethnicity; the ethnicities reported for the partner were:

Participants completed an online questionnaire with four open-ended questions about an experience of stereotyping, prejudice and racism with a past or current partner within an intimate intercultural relationship. The first critical question was as follows: "Please tell us about a time when your partner said or did something to you that was culturally insensitive. This could involve some form of stereotyping, prejudice, or racism that was directed at you or your cultural group. This culturally insensitive event could have been obviously racist, or it could have been something more subtle. Please describe the event in detail from beginning to end. We find that describing the context helps people better remember the details of a past experience." The framing of this first question was kept broad since microaggressions are often ambiguous in their presentation and may not be as easily recognized compared to explicit racism (Sue et al., 2007). Rather than have participants exclude themselves as a result of thinking that we were referring solely to explicit racism, we used several terms such as "culturally insensitive," "stereotyping" and "prejudice" alongside "racism" to ensure that we were able to capture as many incidents as possible. Following this, participants were asked to write about how they were impacted by the event with the following questions: "How did this experience make you feel?," "How did this experience make you feel about your relationship?" and "How did this experience make you feel about your ethnic/cultural identities?"

Coding and analyses

The results were coded using inductive and deductive thematic content analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) coding steps. Coders first familiarized themselves with the data. Next, the codes were generated based on the ideas that emerged from the data, and these individual codes were grouped into subcategories, categories and themes. The names of the codes, subcategories and themes were generated based on inductive observation of participants' discourses as well as deductive processes where labels from existing theoretical constructs and frameworks were referenced (e.g., microaggressions from Sue et al., 2007). The data were coded and analyzed using constant comparison analysis, which is an iterative process (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Using QDA Miner software (Version 5; Provalis Research, 2020), two independent coders (the second and third author) progressively coded the data and met regularly with the first author, who participated in clarifying any ambiguities in order to reach consensus about the coding and the emerging categories and themes. Reliability was established through consistency between coders, which is built through the multiple group discussions (Richards, 2015). As per the intention of this exploratory work, a great diversity of experiences was reported by participants, and saturation of themes was achieved for the purposes of identifying and organizing the phenomenon of study.

The first, second and fourth author conducted more in-depth thematic analysis to examine the structure of participants' answers. To do so they used co-occurrence analyses, which is one of the analysis tools offered by the QDA Miner software, to examine and interpret the relationships between the themes. "Reciprocal co-occurrence is when two terms within a determined space of the text (e.g., a sentence) show the same level of 'attraction' for each other" (Scholz, 2019, p. 138). Such an analysis is applied to the codes (or categories of codes) of a coded corpus, making it possible to bring out the relations between these codes. This is one of the recognized advantages

Southern European (Portuguese; n=1), Black/African/Caribbean (n=3), Middle Eastern (Afghan; n=1), and South Asian (n=1).

of using qualitative data analysis software for "data linking": connecting relevant data segments with each other, forming categories, clusters, or networks of information (Miles et al., 2014, p. 59, Display 2.9). Such an analysis allows the relationship structures between codes to emerge (Scholz, 2019). Subsequently, the value of these co-occurrences is verified through returning to the data and interpretation; what matters is the meaning carried by the co-occurrences that are highlighted by the software and not the numbers associated with this statistical measure. This measure could be "high" for certain co-occurrences, but have no meaning with regard to the phenomenon under study when examining participants' discourse, or on the contrary, be considered as "low," but show an interesting relationship relevant to the research objectives. Examining the co-occurrences is an aid to orient the researcher's gaze toward the data in a way that enables one to detect meaningful patterns, which is one of the fundamental objectives of qualitative research (Hatch, 2002; Miles et al., 2014). In this research, it is precisely the links between the manifestations of intimate racism and the experiential, identity and relationship consequences of this racism that were explored with this tool.

RESULTS

The codes were grouped into five themes: (1) the different manifestations of intimate racism; (2) the participants' emotional and cognitive experiences of the racism; (3) the responses of the participants toward their partners, and their relationship, following the racism experience; (4) the responses of the partners toward the participants; and (5) the identity experiences of the participants in relation to the racism event. The presentation of the results includes participant citations; each quotation is accompanied by the participant number as well as their socio-demographic characteristics (i.e., age, gender, racialization) to situate the speaker.

Manifestations of intimate racism from the partner

All 92 participants reported experiences of intimate racism. A total of 52 codes were used to characterize the different manifestations of racism that emerged from participants' responses. These were organized into eight large categories, each with their own sub-categories: explicit racism, and the microaggressions of microinsults, microinvalidations, positive stereotypes, racial fetishization, partner abuse, defensiveness, and other microaggressions (see Table 1).

Explicit racism consists of overtly hostile and unfair treatment based on ethnicity and racialization, and was present in participants' responses. This category was divided into two sub-categories: *insults*, including verbal attacks such as slurs and anti-religious statements, and *system justification* (Jost & Banaji, 1994), consisting of upholding and justifying the status quo of racial inequality, such as endorsing colonialism and approving of another group's suffering. To illustrate the insults subcategory, one participant wrote about his partner using a racial slur: "She thought it would be fine to say the n-word especially because we had been together for months." (M16, 20, Black[6]). Another example of an explicit insult was reported by one participant: "My previous partner once said 'dirty Indians' without knowing I was Indian as well [...]" (W76, 19,

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[6] The first letter indicates the participant's gender: M for cis-gender men, W for cis-gender women and NB for non-binary participants. This letter is followed by the participant's number. The next number that follows is the participant's age. Their racialized group is named at the end.

TABLE 1 Categories and subcategories for the different manifestations of intimate racism

Racism category	Subcategories	Definitions	Number of participants (n = 92)
Explicit racism		Overtly hostile and unfair treatment based on racialization.	17
	Insults	Verbal attacks based on racialization (e.g., name-calling, ethnic slurs, etc.).	13
	System justification	Defending, upholding and justifying the status quo for racial inequality.	5
Microaggressions		Indirect, often unintentional, expressions of prejudice that are brief and ubiquitous.	
Microinsults		Derogatory and debasing assumptions and behaviors toward one's ethnic and racialized identity or group.	65
	Inferiority/racial hierarchy	Comment or behavior that implies that the partner or their community is inferior (lower class, social status, job standing, education, intelligence, competence, etc.). This also includes presuming that the partner or their community is more criminal, dangerous, or deviant.	15
	*Stereotyping relational practices	Stereotypical and reductive comments on relational practices, cultural values, customs and social norms of a cultural or racialized group.	16
	Targeting cultural/religious practices	Insulting and demeaning comments or behavior about the partner's religious or cultural practices or community.	11

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Racism category	Subcategories	Definitions	Number of participants (n = 92)
	*Targeting body	Insulting, reductive or insensitive comments about certain characteristics (odor, phenotype) of the partner's body; expectations about the partner's appearance.	8
	Targeting self-presentation/expression	Comments, attitudes or behaviors that diminish or mock the partner or their community.	31
	Targeting identity	Comments that denigrate or diminish the cultural identity of the partner.	14
Microinvalidations		Denying and undermining one's identities and their value; denying one's experience as a racialized minority	22
	Ignoring identity and racism issues	Comments that invalidate and ignore the partner's experience as a racialized minority.	15
	Targeting identity	Comments that contest and deny the partner's cultural identity and experience.	8

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Racism category	Subcategories	Definitions	Number of participants (n = 92)
	Positive stereotypes	Stereotypes that appear to elevate a minority group by perceiving more "positive" qualities, but reduce the group to this stereotype, create false markers of belonging, and reinforce the power distance between White people and other people of color.	6
	*Racial fetishization	Sexual stereotyping and dehumanization of racialized minorities.	1
	*Partner abuse	Experience of intimate partner violence (physical and psychological) with cultural and racial stereotypes included in the abusive behavior.	1
	Defensiveness	Aggressively defending one's racism, one's position and good intentions when confronted with one's own racist behaviors or racism in general.	7
	Other microaggressions	Other subtly negative forms of discrimination that did not clearly fit into the other categories.	18

Note: *Indicates manifestations of intimate racism subcategories that are especially relevant to the relationship context.

South Asian). For system justification, a participant shared that her partner approved of the suffering that the members of her heritage culture were experiencing: "Commenting about the recent tragedies that occurred in Iran, and how the Iranian citizens deserved the political injustice, as they have no pride in their country's history" (W45, 19, Middle Eastern). Though not as frequently reported as other forms (see Table 1 for frequencies), these findings show that even these more overtly negative manifestations can indeed exist in intimate contexts with a loved one.

Microaggressions. Many of the same microaggressions and stereotypes that racialized people encounter in their daily life with others were manifest in participants' experiences with their partners. The different forms of microaggressions, or subtly negative expressions of racism, were divided into several categories (see Table 1) and are described below: *microinsults, microinvalidations, positive stereotypes, racial fetishization, partner abuse, defensiveness, and other microaggressions*. Across the different categories, four subcategories were found to be especially relevant to the context of intimate relationships (as indicated by an * in Table 1), given that these relationships provide the context for physical intimacy and conversations about intimate relationships and family planning, as well as the likelihood that these interactions would take place over time rather than as a one-off incident. These included the aforementioned categories of racial fetishization and partner abuse, as well as the microinsults that specifically targeted their partner's body and stereotyped their relational practices. Additionally, relationship-relevant racism manifested through two other microaggressions where the partner demonstrated persistent stereotyping even after having heard explanations and education, and where the partner used stereotypes as a shortcut for getting to know their partner, rather than coming to know their partner as a complex individual within their context.

Microinsults refer to derogatory and debasing assumptions and behaviors toward one's ethnic and racialized identity or group, such as assuming that one's group is characterized by greater violence and criminality, or that one's group possesses inferior intelligence (Sue et al., 2007). One participant described her experience of a microinsult where her partner *treated her group as inferior*, specifically in terms of their intelligence:

> When I told my partner my background was Trinidadian, he told me that he would have never guessed it because I speak properly and carry myself in what he called a sophisticated way. I asked him what he meant by saying that and he said that normally those people speak broken English and act in a ghetto kind of way. That they didn't have a reputation for having a higher level of intelligence. (W61, 21, Mixed heritage).

Many described incidents where partners targeted participants' cultural practices, including their rituals surrounding food preparation and eating. One participant described an incident where her partner insulted her food traditions:

> I had made dinner for my partner and family and served it in a traditional manner. Traditionally we eat the food with our hands, on the floor, and from one plate. I informed my partner of the tradition beforehand. He told me that the tradition was dated and reminded him of cavemen. (W70, 26, Black).

The use of racist jokes and teasing emerged ambiguously, with some participants citing jokes that were mocking them, particularly *targeting their cultural self-expression or self-presentation*, while others referred to jokes as pleasant. An example of a mocking experience was reported as follows: "My partner has said "ching, chang, chong", to mock my Chinese heritage several

times […]" (W38, 18, Mixed heritage). An illustration of a pleasant experience of racist jokes was evidenced as follows: "We generally make obligatory racist remarks about each other in a light-hearted manner. We joke about it often, but we never take it seriously, as neither of us truly believe what we say." (M29, 18, Latin American).

Stereotypes of relational practices could include romantic or family and parenting practices. For instance, one wrote:

> My partner assumed that all Indian partners [parents] are strict. He assumed that my dad was a very strict parent, however, this was false. I had done poorly on an exam and my boyfriend assumed my dad was going to be extremely upset with my performance. (W69, 19, Mixed heritage)

Another participant shared how his cultural group was assumed to have compromised relationship morals: "My former partner accused all Jamaican males of being cheaters and liars." (M80, 20, Black). As an example of microinsults that *target the body*, one participant shared her experience of her group being racialized as less attractive:

> My partner complimented me by saying that I have "bigger" eyes compared to the majority "smaller" Asian eyes. Although this might be visually noticeable in comparison, it came with an underlying tone that smaller eyes with monolids are less attractive. (W60, 21, Southeast Asian)

Microinvalidations are characterized by denying and undermining one's identities and their value, as well as denying one's experience as an ethnic or racialized minority (Sue et al., 2007). Several participants shared the microinvalidation experience where their partner *ignored their identity or issues with racism*, including denying their cultural identities. One participant wrote, "In an argument, my partner will often refer to my race as 'white,' even though I am very racially mixed and do not identify with being caucasian." (W18, 18, Mixed heritage), and another wrote that their partner '[…] kept telling me "I was just a white girl" and "stop pretending to be West-Indian" (NB67, 36, Mixed heritage).

Positive stereotypes are stereotypes that appear to elevate a minority group by perceiving more "positive" or "desirable" qualities (e.g., the "model minority" stereotype; Padgett et al., 2020), but serve to reduce the group to this stereotype, create false conditions for legitimate belonging to one's group, and reinforce the power differentials between White people and other people of color (i.e., the racial hierarchy). One participant described her experience: "[…] I said 'I think I'm going to fail' to which he said 'No, you'll do good because you're Asian'" (W91, 18, Mixed heritage).

Racial fetishization refers to the sexual stereotyping and dehumanization of ethnic and racialized minorities (Hall, 1992; Watson et al., 2012). One participant shared her experience: "I felt as though they expected me to fulfill the stereotypical idea of what an Asian female should be (i.e. quiet, submissive, "kawaii", tight vaginal muscles[…])." (W46, 19, Mixed-heritage).

Partner abuse refers to the experience of intimate partner violence, including physical (e.g., hitting) and psychological harm (e.g., manipulation) which also contains cultural and racial stereotypes as part of the abusive behavior. One participant wrote about her experience with *emotional abuse* where her partner repeatedly stereotyped her during their conflicts: "My boyfriend was Portuguese and he always looked at Middle Eastern [people] as aggressive and dangerous so he would call me a terrorist every time we had an argument" (W10, 18, Mixed heritage).

Defensiveness refers to behaviors that were used to defend or deny one's statements or behaviors that were already racist, and includes behaviors such as naming the participant as the exception to stereotypes about their racialized minority group, or where the participant was treated as a token by their partner to prove that they were not racist. Other aspects of this category have been explained in the concept of white fragility (DiAngelo, 2018), where members of the dominant group, when faced with their own racism and racism at large, engage in defensive behaviors that aggressively uphold one's position and intentions, deny racism, and silence minority individuals and groups who are experiencing racism. One participant described a *tokening* experience: "She went on to say that racism is not a thing anymore because we are dating." (M57, 24, Black). Another participant wrote about being *treated as the exception* when their partner also stereotyped and derided her cultural group's relational practices, specifically their communication style:

> We were at a mall and walked past a group of people who were Filipino. They were having their conversation and my boyfriend made a comment on how Filipinos are annoying and don't have an indoor voice, if only they knew how to be quiet. He then quickly said "but not you" and awkwardly laughed. (W9, 20, Mixed heritage).

Other microaggressions include other subtly negative forms of discrimination that did not clearly fit into the other categories. The participant whose partner said "ching, chang, chong," to her, wrote about her partner *persisting in his discriminatory behavior*:

"[…] I have expressed my disappointment at times […] He has even said the phrase in front of his parents while I was over at their house" (W38, 18, Mixed heritage).

Frequency analyses were conducted to examine the number of participants that reported each form of intimate racism (see Table 1). Microinsults was the most frequently reported category, with over 60 participants naming an event involving one or more microinsults. Microinvalidations were also highly frequent, reported by over 20 participants, followed by explicit racism and other microaggressions, reported by 15 or more participants. Between 6 and 7 participants reported defensiveness and positive stereotypes, while racial fetishization and abuse were reported the least frequently.

Frequency analyses were conducted to examine participants' demographics (i.e., racialization, gender) and the different categories of intimate racism (see Table 2). Notably, microinsults were generally reported by all ethnicities, and microinvalidations were reported frequently by mixed-heritage individuals. Many women and men reported microinsults more than other forms, while the two gender non-binary individuals reported microinvalidations.

Participants' experiences of intimate racism

Participants reported 53 different experiences of the racism that they encountered with their partner, which were organized into three broad categories: negative, positive and neutral experiences (see Table 3). Within these broader categories, the experiences were organized into sub-categories that represented emotional (i.e., feelings), relational (i.e., concerning the pair bond between partners) and cognitive (i.e., perception and understanding of events) experiences. In terms of emotions, we included the established "basic" emotions, such as anger, disgust, joy, and fear (Tracy & Randles, 2011) and social emotions, or emotions that are dependent on the thoughts,

TABLE 2 Demographic breakdown of intimate racism categories by racialization, gender, and relationship timing

	Intimate racism categories							
	Explicit racism	Microinsults	Microinvalidations	Positive stereotypes	Racial fetishization	Partner abuse	Defensiveness	Other microaggressions
Ethnicity								
Mixed heritage	16%	69%	28%	9%	0	3%	9%	19%
East Asian	8%	100%	8%	8%	8%	0	0	42%
South Asian	25%	75%	25%	0	0	0	0	17%
Southeast Asian	29%	71%	14%	14%	0	0	14%	14%
Middle Eastern	18%	82%	24%	6%	0	6%	6%	6%
Black/African/Caribbean	25%	38%	38%	0	0	0	25%	13%
Latin American	25%	100%	25%	0	0	0	0	25%
Gender identity								
Women	18%	79%	18%	6%	2%	3%	8%	18%
Men	23%	64%	14%	9%	0	0	9%	27%
Non-binary/gender non-conforming	0	0	100%	0	0	0	0	0
Past/current relationship								
Past	33%	58%	50%	8%	8%	8%	0	25%
Current	20%	78%	18%	7%	0	0	7%	24%
Unknown	14%	69%	26%	6%	0	0	11%	11%

Note: N = 92. The percentages shown represent the proportion of participants from each demographic category that mentioned each intimate racism category (e.g., 5% of participants of Mixed heritage mention explicit racism, 13% of women mentioned explicit racism).

TABLE 3 Participants' experiences of intimate racism

Experiences category	Subcategories and codes	Definitions	Number of participants (n = 92)
Negative experiences			76
	Negative emotions	Emotions characterized by distress, aversion, and unpleasantness	65
	Anger		22
	Anxiety		5
	Disgust		2
	Sadness		5
	Shock/stunned		13
	Shame/embarrassment		15
	Helpless/powerless		2
	General/unspecified		30
Attachment injury		Ruptures to the connection between partners in close relationships	40
	Trust violation		13
	Disconnected		6
	Invisible/invalidated		28
	Rejection		2
Feeling wronged		Perception that one has was treated unjustly	21
Low self-esteem		Negative evaluation of one's self-worth	17
Positive experiences			6
	Positive emotions	Emotions characterized by the experience of vitality, alertness and pleasure	4
Feeling close to the partner		Experiencing intimacy with their partner	2
Neutral experiences			54
	Neutral emotions	Emotions characterized by an absence of arousal, or of pleasure or displeasure	54

Note: N=92.

emotions and evaluations of others, such as shame and embarrassment (Hareli & Parkinson, 2008)[7].

Negative experiences. There were 44 different negative experiences, which we organized into four subcategories: negative emotions, attachment injuries, feeling wronged, and low self-esteem. Negative emotions, such as sadness, fear and anger, are characterized by distress, aversion, and unpleasantness (Watson et al., 1988). Within the negative emotion's subcategory, there were seven sub-subcategories: anger, anxiety, disgust, sadness, shock/stunned, shame/embarrassment, helpless/powerless and general. Regarding a fetishization experience, one participant wrote that she felt *disgust* (dirty) and *generally negative* (uncomfortable): "It [...] made me feel quite dirty and uncomfortable thinking about how these boys/men viewed me" (W46, 19, East Asian).

Attachment injuries refers to the experience of rupture to the connection between partners in close relationships, and are characterized by betrayals, abandonments, and rejections surrounding a partner's emotional and connection needs (Johnson et al., 2001). One participant expressed *sadness, generally negative emotions* (hurt), and *attachment injury* (broken trust): "I felt hurt that my own girlfriend at the time would make fun about my own ethnicity. It hurt even more that she knew that I was facing racism at high school" (M26, 19, Mixed heritage). Another participant expressed their attachment injury experience through their feeling *disconnected* (distant) and feeling *invisible/invalidated* (misunderstood), writing "[...] it made me feel distant, misunderstood." (W7, 22, Latin American).

The category of feeling wronged refers to the participants' perception that they were treated unjustly (Miller, 2001). One participant shared their experience of feeling judged: "It made me feel as if I was already labeled before I could actually act. As if the color of my skin predetermines everything for me" (W41, 18 South Asian).

Low self-esteem refers to the negative evaluation of one's self-worth (Leary et al., 1995). One participant shared that "It made me feel insecure about my appearance, for not just my skin tone but other features typical of my ethnicity" (W75, 18, Mixed heritage).

Positive experiences. A minority of participants reported four different positive experiences, which were organized into two subcategories: *positive emotions* and *feeling close to the partner*. *Positive emotions*, such as hope, joy, and calm, are characterized by the experience of vitality, alertness, and pleasure (Watson et al., 1988). *Feeling close to the partner* consisted of the experience of intimacy with their partner. One participant wrote about feeling more open and connected: "[...] as I knew it was just a joke, it has made our comfort zones open up as we were able to joke around more (about ourselves - not stereotyping other people) which allowed for a closer connection knowing we would be able to not take it in a serious matter." (W75, 18, Mixed heritage).

Neutral experience. In terms of neutral experiences, only neutral emotions were reported, namely indifference. Neutral emotion is characterized by an absence of arousal, or of pleasure or displeasure (Watson et al., 1988). Several participants said that they felt indifferent, that they were not bothered, or that they did not feel anything in particular. For example, one participant wrote "I didn't really care [...]" (W23, 18, Mixed heritage) and another wrote "I wasn't upset or anything" (W28, 19, Middle Eastern).

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[7] While emotion experiences can be more complex than simply "negative" and "positive" (see Solomon & Stone, 2002), this grouping of emotions was employed based on established work in the emotions literature (Carver & Scheier, 1990; Oatley et al., 2006; Tracy & Randles, 2011; Watson et al., 1988).

Responses to the partner's racism

There were 23 different responses to the partner's racism that emerged from the participants, which were organized into four broader categories: confronting racism, disengaging from the partner, prioritizing the partner and making sense of the racism (see Table 4).

Confronting racism refers to participants' efforts to challenge, argue, assert themselves and educate their partner; there were two subcategories for confronting racism: *asserting*, which encompassed the efforts to challenge and halt the partner's racism, self-affirm and educate the partner, and *labor*, which encompassed the experience of anticipating the work it would take to shift their partner's positioning, as well as the fatigue that resulted from these efforts. One participant shared her experience of *asserting* herself: "It made us fight, and made me want to make him understand the severity of what was going on." (W45, 19, Middle Eastern). Several participants asserted themselves through their *education* efforts; one participant wrote: "He also continues to be mildly ignorant in differentiating Chinese from Vietnamese cultural aspects that I am involved in. I have to remind him that each culture is greatly different and how each of them are individual" (W38, 18, Mixed heritage). To illustrate labor, one participant expressed that she felt "Awkward about him, like I became his educator about minority issues instead of a partner that was safe with him" (NB59, 36, Mixed heritage).

Making sense refers to the participants' understanding of the partner's racism, which involves participants' analysis of the content of the partner's racism and the positioning of their partner. One participant wrote about her process of making sense of the racism: "I felt like if they said what they said, would they see me as who I really am? or just go by the stereotypes that have been made of the Latin American community?" (W88, 18, Latin American).

Disengaging from the partner refers to participants' distancing themselves from their partner, including ending the relationship. The following response illustrates a form disengagement: "It forced me to have second thoughts about our relationship, because I didn't wanna be with someone that would just make fun of me the whole time" (M26, 19, Mixed heritage).

Prioritizing the partner refers to participants' efforts to ensure the comfort of their partner, and consisted of three subcategories: *avoiding conflict*, where the participant avoided addressing their partner's racist behavior, *excusing the partner*, where the participant found justifications for their partners' behavior and excused their partner, and *humor*, where participants would use humor to minimize the partner's statements. One participant shared her experience of *avoiding conflict*: "[…] I was kind of hurt but I didn't speak up about it. I kind of just brushed it off." (W51, 19, South Asian); another avoided conflict by resigning herself, writing, "It obviously didn't feel good, but what can I do?" (W12, 18, South Asian). Another participant shared his experience of *excusing his partner* by attributing her racism to ignorance: "It was ignorance of the culture as opposed to racism […]" (M11, unknown, South Asian). An illustration of *humor* can be found in one participant who shared: "I took the comment as a joke, but it made me insecure about my eyes" (W66, 17, East Asian).

Separate from their experiences of the intimate racism itself, participants also expressed their own self-affirming feelings about how they responded to their partner's racism. This experience was labeled *Pride in one's culture*, which involved feeling pride and positivity about oneself and one's culture in the face of intimate racism (n = 16). One participant shared: "It made me feel better about myself for standing up for [my] culture" (M24, 19, South Asian). Many participants shared their feelings of pride; one participant wrote "I'm proud of being Chinese" (W3, 29, East-Asian), and another wrote "I'm still proud of my ethnic background, that one comment won't change my mind" (W9, 20, Mixed-heritage).

TABLE 4 Categories and subcategories for the different responses to the partner's racism

Response category	Subcategories	Definitions	Number of participants (n = 92)
Confronting racism		Efforts to challenge, argue, assert themselves and educate the partner.	35
	Labor	Anticipating the work it would take to shift the partner's positioning, and the resulting fatigue.	5
	Asserting	Efforts to challenge and halt the partner's racism, self-affirm and educate the partner.	33
Making sense		Analysis of the content and positioning of their partner and their racism; critical thinking about racism.	16
Disengaging from partner		Distancing oneself from the partner; questioning and ending the relationship.	36
Prioritizing the relationship		Efforts to ensure the comfort of the partner.	41
	Avoiding conflict	Avoiding addressing the partner's racist behavior.	18
	Excusing partner	Finding justifications for their partners' behavior and excusing their partner's racism.	30
	Humor	Using humour to minimize the partner's statement.	11
Confronting racism		Efforts to challenge, argue, assert themselves and educate the partner.	35

Note: N = 92.

Partner's responses to the participant

Nine participants mentioned their partner's own responses in relation to their own racist behavior and to the participant's experience. There were five different responses that were organized into two categories: repair and avoidance. *Repair* (n = 4) consisted of the partner's efforts to understand and redress for their racism (e.g., apologize). One participant shared that his partner demonstrated understanding following his education efforts: "I made the decision to educate her on the position of Black people. She was very receptive of the information" (M57, 24, Black). Another participant wrote about his partner's apology: "I called her out on it and she apologized. It was genuinely an honest mistake" (M24, 19, South Asian). *Avoidance* (*n* = 5) consisted of the partner's efforts to evade responsibility and deny their actions and their meaning (e.g., deny racism). One participant of both Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jewish heritage wrote about an incident with her partner:

> My partner made jokes about how I am Ashkenazi and that Sephardic [Jews] are far more superior, which is not proper to say. I argued back and said that although I feel my personality is more Sephardic in general, I still would not agree with his statement on superiority. [...] Nothing made me resent him but we argued and were able to agree to disagree. To see the differences between each type of Jew (W48, 22, Mixed heritage).

In their situation, the argument was resolved with an "agree to disagree" and an acknowledgement of differences between groups, but the partner did not address his statement about superiority and inferiority.

Identity experiences

Participants named ten different identity experiences which we organized into two categories. The first category was named *minority stress* (*n* = 28), drawing from minority stress theory (Brooks, 1981; Meyer, 2003) and other works (Ilmi, 2011; Steele & Aronson, 1995) which highlight identity stress experiences lived by minorities as a result of their chronic stigmatization. These included experiences of being self-conscious about stereotypes toward one's cultural groups, and attempts to hide one's ethnic identity. Within the minority stress category was the subcategory of *internalized racism* (n = 16), which refers to the internalization and endorsement of racist ideation, attitudes and treatment towards one's group and towards oneself (David et al., 2019). A participant described their minority stress experience of becoming conscious of the stereotyping perspective that others may have toward her and her group: "I am not ashamed of my cultural identities but after this I realized that there are stereotypes being associated with me that I didn't even think people noticed" (W34, 18, Mixed heritage). The participant who described her partner stereotyping Filipinos as loud in public described her own minority stress experience of stereotype threat: "It did make me feel more self aware of my surroundings. [...] I noticed that I started to catch myself whenever I'm speaking in a public setting and to lower my voice just so I didn't fit that stereotype" (W9, 20, Mixed heritage). Another participant reported an internalized racism experience: "At the time, I caught myself wishing I was another race or at least mixed which is horrible because it made me under appreciate my ethnicity and who I am" (W87, 19, East Asian).

The second identity category was *internal identity conflicts* (n = 6), which consisted of disidentifying from one's cultural group and feeling divided between one's identities. This category was

constructed by referring to literature examining divisions between one's cultural and social identities (Benet-Martínez et al., 2006; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2012; Yampolsky & Amiot, 2016, Yampolsky et al., 2020). To illustrate, one participant wrote about feeling as though she would need to disidentify from her heritage culture: "It made me feel like I need to erase my cultural identity to not be associated with the negative stereotypes" (W2, 22, East Asian). Internalization of the denial of the legitimacy of one's identity was also included in the internal identity conflicts subcategory.

Co-occurrence analyses

Co-occurrence analyses revealed several chains of connections surrounding the relationship between intimate racism and how participants experienced the racism in relation to the other themes of participants' responses to the partner, partner's responses and identity experiences (see Tables 5 and 6). These were organized into three nodes of experiences. The first node was the link between intimate racism and negative experiences. The second node was the link between intimate racism and neutral experiences, and the third node revolved around positive experiences.

Node 1: intimate racism and negative experiences. All forms of intimate racism co-occurred with negative experiences (see Table 5). The negative experiences that were elicited by the encounter with intimate racism co-occurred with participants' responses of making sense, confronting and disengaging from their partner, and prioritizing the relationship, as well as with participants' identity issues in terms of both minority stress and internal identity conflicts (see Table 6). The first node was also related to the partner's avoidant responses. Additionally, avoidant responses from the partner co-occurred with both minority stress (3% of total participants named both minority stress with their partner's avoidant responses) and with internal identity conflicts (2% of total participants named both internal identity conflicts with their partner's avoidant responses). The following discourse illustrates the links between the participant's experience of *intimate racism* (microinsults targeting identity and self-expression, positive stereotypes), *negative experiences* (negative emotion, attachment injury, low self-esteem), *disengaging from the partner*, his partner's *avoidance*, and his own *identity issues* (minority stress and internalized racism):

> When we were still together there were some assumptions that I found kind of offensive at the time. Since my ethnicity is generalized as just Asian. She would assume I was just generally smart at everything. She would make fun of me because I did Taekwondo, and make small references to the movie Karate Kid. I felt hurt that my own girlfriend at the time would make fun about my own ethnicity. It hurt even more that she knew that I was facing racism at high school. Sometimes I would feel culturally attacked, because it prevented me to share about my ethnicity. I would be mad, and she wouldn't understand how it felt [...] It forced me to have second thoughts about our relationship, because I didn't wanna be with someone that would just make fun of me the whole time. She would find it humorous, but I personally didn't. It was unfortunate because I thought she was a nice person and she wasn't like that. I felt embarrassed about my culture sometimes, and sometimes wished I was white because I felt like that's what was normal. I didn't feel normal, and I felt self conscious (M26, 19, Mixed heritage).

Several participants' discourses revealed the negative feelings associated with their partner's racism, as well as their confronting through education efforts in response to the partner's intimate racism, and their reflections on racism more broadly. One participant's experience of her partner's

TABLE 5 Co-occurrences between intimate racism manifestations and participants' experiences of intimate racism, participants' responses, partners' responses and identity issues

	Participants' experiences			Participants' responses				Partner's responses		Identity issues	
	Negative	Positive	Neutral	Confronting racism	Disengaging from partner	Prioritizing the partner	Making sense	Avoidance	Repair	Internal identity conflicts	Minority Stress
Intimate racism total	79%	7%	57%	37%	37%	42%	15%	5%	3%	7%	29%
Explicit racism	15%	2%	10%	10%	5%	8%	4%	2%	0%	1%	7%
Microinsults	59%	7%	46%	25%	29%	37%	10%	4%	2%	7%	24%
Microinvalidations	24%	0%	8%	12%	12%	12%	5%	3%	1%	3%	9%
Positive stereotypes	5%	0%	5%	2%	2%	2%	1%	1%	0%	2%	2%
Sexual fetishization/exoticism	1%	0%	1%	0%	1%	0%	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%
Abuse	2%	0%	0%	1%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Defensiveness	7%	1%	3%	4%	4%	3%	2%	0%	1%	1%	2%
Other microaggressions	16%	0%	10%	4%	10%	8%	4%	2%	0%	2%	8%

Note: N = 92; numbers shown are percentages of participants who simultaneously named both the racism category and the experiences, participants' responses, partners' responses or identity issues categories (e.g., 15% of participants who mentioned simultaneously explicit racism and reported a negative experience).

TABLE 6 Co-occurrences between participants' experiences of intimate racism and participants' responses, partners' responses, and participants' identity issues

	Participants' responses				Partner's responses		Identity issues	
	Confronting racism	Making sense	Disengaging from partner	Prioritizing the relationship	Avoidance	Repair	Minority stress	Internal identity conflicts
Negative experiences	30%	15%	39%	34%	5%	3%	28%	7%
Neutral experiences	24%	8%	14%	34%	2%	3%	12%	1%
Positive experiences	3%	2%	1%	5%	0%	0%	1%	0%

Note: N = 92; numbers shown are percentages of participants who simultaneously named both the experience category and the participants' responses, partners' responses or identity issues categories (e.g., of all participants reported a negative experience and a confronting racism response).

intimate racism (nonverbal, microinsults targeting cultural practices) and her *negative experience* (attachment injury) were linked to her *confronting* response (asserting through education) as well as *making sense* and *questioning her identity* and cultural heritage:

> My partner has in the past made stereotypical assumptions and judgments about my ethnic background and has made slightly offensive remarks about my parents' beliefs and morals. [...] Just remarks he has made in the past or facial expressions of judgment when I am discussing my culture or family/cultural values that are different to his. Usually I feel offended by the remarks, but then just try to make him understand the meaning behind the values or what significance certain things have to my culture. It made me feel like maybe dating outside of your ethnic heritage can be a little too difficult and complicated. It can make you question your own culture and your family's values (W27, 23, South Asian).

Another account from a participant shows that his partner's receptivity did not necessarily assuage the *negative experiences* (anger, shock) of the *intimate racism* experience (ignoring racism, defensiveness), and was linked to *making sense* of his partner's statements (ignorance,[8] misunderstanding) and to *confronting* (asserting through education):

> My partner told me to get over the issue of racism because slavery has been over for years. She went on to say that racism is not a thing anymore because we are dating. This was a very ignorant statement to make. This angered me deeply and it affected the way I viewed her. I went silent for a while after she said it because I was in shock. Initially I was mostly shocked than anything else. I was conflicted, but in the end, I made a decision to educate her on the position of Black people. She was very receptive of the information. This made me more aware of how misunderstood Black oppression is by other ethnic groups (M57, 24, Black).

To illustrate the link between the first node and prioritizing the relationship, one East-Asian participant shared their experience of her partner's microinsult of *stereotyping her body* along with her response of *prioritizing her partner* by attributing her partner's comment to humor. Alongside this response are her negative experiences of *low self-esteem* (insecurity) and *attachment injury* (feeling insecure around her partner), with internalization of her ethnicity being racialized as less attractive:

> When I was unable to look at the menu because of my poor vision at a restaurant, my last partner commented on how my eyes were small and that was the reason why I was unable to read the menu. I took the comment as a joke, but it made me insecure about my eyes. [...] I became more insecure around my partner. [...] It made me feel as though Asians don't have pretty eyes. (W66, 17, East Asian)

A South Asian participant's experience illustrates the relationship between his *negative experience* (general negative emotions) of their partner's *microinsult* (targeting his cultural food practice) and his response of *making sense* of the racism (that she thought his culture was savage) with

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[8] Depending on how the participant used the word "ignorance" in their discourse, ignorance was sometimes coded as making sense and sometimes as excusing the partner.

prioritizing the relationship through *excusing the partner* (attributing their statement to ignorance and not racism). This link between his negative experience and prioritizing the partner is also paired with *neutral emotions* (not caring) and *confronting* (education):

> Sometimes in Bengali culture, people eat rice with their hands. I don't do it often but it came up in a conversation and I told her. She said "Gross, don't tell my parents that." It hurt and I let her know. I felt like she thought it was like a savage culture. It was ignorance of the culture as opposed to racism. I didn't really care but took the moment to educate her. (M11, unknown, South Asian)

Another participant shared their negative experience of *attachment injury* (invalidation) and *general negative emotions* (not feeling good) after their partner's *microinvalidation* (identity denial), which was linked to their *prioritization of the partner* (resigned) as well as *neutral emotions* (indifference) and *internalized racism* (internalized identity denial).

> My partner once jokingly said how I'm not in touch with my culture & that he knows more about my culture than I do. I felt invalidated. It was rude of him to have said that as I do my best to stay connected to my culture in the West, having been born & raised here. [I felt] Indifferent, It obviously didn't feel good, but what can I do? It made me feel invalid. (W12, 18, South Asian).

Of the 42% of participants that had both negative experience and a response of prioritizing the partner, 34% also reported neutral experiences. Participants' responses of prioritizing their partner in conjunction with their negative experience of intimate racism suggest that the link between negative experiences of racism and prioritization of the partner responses were also connected to neutral experiences, which are addressed in the following node.

Node 2: Intimate racism and neutral experiences. The second node is the co-occurrence between the experience of intimate racism with neutral experiences, specifically neutral emotions (see Table 5). In further unpacking the experience of neutral emotions, analyses revealed that when participants felt indifferent toward the racism from their partner, they often reported negative experiences as well (negative experiences were named in 41% of the neutral responses). For example, a couple of participants wrote: "I didn't really care, but I dislike how everyone has that view about Asians" (W23, 18, Mixed heritage) and "Doesn't make me feel too bad. I wouldn't say I care for it very much" (W71, 18, Middle Eastern). This demonstrates that the experience of neutral emotions is not necessarily truly neutral, but is connected to negative experiences and may demonstrate an ambivalent experience.

The second node was found to co-occur with the participants' response of prioritizing the partner, especially with excusing the partner. As an illustration, one participant reported feeling *indifferent* following her partner's *microinsults* (inferiority, targeting her identity and self-expression) and *attributed his racism to humor* while also expressing *minority stress* and *negative emotions* (general):

> My partner tends to make these "jokes" about me cleaning around the house and also says that I have a crazy side to me because of my Latin background. It doesn't really upset me because I know he means no harm and is just being playful. It did not affect the relationship. Regarding my feelings based on my ethnicity, it bothers me that these are the way some people may really view women with a Latin background (W14, 19, Mixed heritage).

A Middle Eastern woman's response illustrates the links between *neutral* and *negative emotions* (general) with *microinsults* (targeting one's religion) as well as *prioritizing the partner* (excusing), *making sense* (learning and teaching requirements for intercultural relationships), *confronting* (labor) and *repair*:

> […] He used a Muslim prophet's name in a joking manner, and I did not really appreciate it, but I let him know that it's not very nice to say that, and he quickly understood. I wasn't upset or anything, I just had to tell myself that he simply didn't know, and now he does. I never felt bad about the relationship, but I definitely do think that having a partner from a different cultural and religious background does call for learning and teaching one another about each other's backgrounds (W28, 19, Middle Eastern).

Similar to the first node of negative experiences, the second node for neutral experiences also co-occurred with confronting racism and with disengaging from one's partner. In this way, neutral emotions are related to both efforts to prioritize the comfort of the partner and the maintenance of the relationship, while also being connected to the responses of confronting the racism emitted, and distancing oneself from the partner. Nodes 1 and 2 are therefore connected through the responses of confronting and disengaging from the partner in the face of intimate racism, further demonstrating that the neutral emotions also lean towards responses that involve distance between the participant and their partner.

Node 3: Positive experiences. The third node revolves around positive experiences, specifically positive emotions. Overall, positive emotions did not co-occur with intimate racism experiences (see Table 5), with three exceptions: feeling flattered from a positive stereotype, or from being told that one was the exception to a negative stereotype, or feeling positive emotions when consensually joking with one's partner. To illustrate, the link between positive emotions and joking, the participant, who was cited earlier for making "obligatory racist remarks about each other in a light-hearted manner," described his *positive feelings* (feeling closer to his partner) regarding how he and his partner consensually make racist jokes with each other:

> […] Joking around with my significant other makes me feel good and happy, and makes me believe that we have a strong relationship […] Most of the stereotypes we make jokes of are clearly just that, jokes, yet we both have our own negative and positive opinions on each other's, as well as our own, cultures (M29, 18, Latin American).

One participant described her experience of feeling flattered after her partner told her that her eyes were attractive since they were "bigger" than "smaller" Asian eyes. As can be observed in her discourse, her *positive emotion* (feeling flattered) was also paired with the negative experiences of *attachment injury* (broken trust) and *feeling wronged* about her partner's *microinsult* (targeting body), and were linked to *making sense* and to *disengaging from the partner* as well as *confronting* the partner (labor):

> […] Initially feeling some flattery because it was meant to be a complement. However, I started to feel that what he said was wrong, not funny, and added to existing stereotypes about how other races view Southeast Asians and Asians. It made me question him a bit because I realized he was not as culturally aware as I would have

liked and that it meant I needed to take that effort to correct / educate him. It made me feel like my broader race as an Asian Woman has natural features that are not viewed as generally attractive compared to others. I started to notice that many Asian girls in North America wear heavier make-up to emphasize their eyes and how these subtle things can add up to insecurities (W60, 21, Southeast Asian).

Similar to the experience of neutral emotions, the above account demonstrates how positive emotions could co-occur with negative emotions, again demonstrating that positive emotions may exist with the negative experience of intimate racism.

The positive experiences that emerged for participants' responses to their partner (i.e., *pride in one's culture*) primarily co-occurred with the participants' response of confronting their partner's racism (14% of the participants that reported a confronting response), specifically with their own identity resilience and affirmations of pride in their cultural identity for themselves. The following response illustrates the complex relationship between *intimate racism* (microinsults targeting culture and self-expression/self-presentation) and *negative emotions* (stunned, sadness, broken trust) alongside the *pride in one's culture*:

My partner made comments that people from my culture are weird, specifically males. He claimed the way they acted was ridiculous. He also criticized the way we speak. The conversation came up after I mentioned something about my country. I was confused because I did not feel it was his place to say something like that. I was also a little offended. I was kind of hurt but I didn't speak up about it. I kind of just brushed it off. It made me wonder how he would feel about my family. This experience did not change the way I feel about my ethnicity or cultural identity because I am proud of my culture (W51, 19, South Asian).

Similarly, another participant described an incident where she felt *anger* about her partner's *microinsult* (inferiority, targeting self-expression/self-presentation); this experience was linked to her *confronting* her partner through a conversation, and she *affirmed her pride* in her cultural identity:

[He was] Saying that Chinese are bad drivers, to be careful when I'm behind the wheel. It was a joke, but it was really inappropriate but we had a conversation and he understands that jokes like that are not okay. Really mad. Angry. I did not feel any different [about her ethnic identity] I am proud of being Chinese (W3, 29, East Asian).

DISCUSSION

Racism is harmful and persistent (Satzewich, 2011), and yet racism from close others remains a relatively invisible issue in both scientific and public spheres. The current research introduced the concept of intimate racism to shed light on the experience of racism in close relationships. Intimate racism from one's partner does indeed exist and in a multitude of forms, ranging from explicit to subtle. Many of these forms identified in the current study have already been documented in the existing racism literature. These include explicit racism (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986), microaggressions (e.g., Sue et al., 2007) and defensiveness (DiAngelo, 2018), all forms of racism

that had only been examined in public spheres. Another contribution of the current study was the identification of several forms of racism that are especially relevant to intimate relationships. These included microaggressions targeting racialized bodies, using stereotypes to get to know one's minority partner, stereotyping and insulting a cultural group's relationship practices and morals, as well as being treated as a token partner or an exception to racial stereotypes by one's partner, being racially fetishized and being subject to persistent stereotypes and racist behavior. Some participants in this study also reported forms of partner abuse that involved cultural content or stereotyping. Such responses are coherent with prior work by Pizzirani et al. (2019) who found that dehumanization by one's romantic partner was related to abusive partner behaviors. The results of the current study thus indicate the pervasive influence of systemic racism and how it filters down to the private space of intimate relationships. Identifying the different manifestations of intimate racism is a critical step, and our findings may guide future research that examines the experience and impact of racism from loved ones.

In addition to identifying the different forms of intimate racism, the current work showed that intimate racism is largely a negative experience that has potential implications for well-being and relational dynamics. This is consistent with prior work on the impacts of explicit and subtle racism (Nadal et al., 2014; Paradies et al., 2015), and points to the need to further examine how these negative experiences play out in intimate relationships (e.g., feeling invalidated, rejected, etc.). Neutral, and sometimes positive experiences were related to experiencing negative emotions, demonstrating that even less aversive emotions can be linked to negative experiences.

Intimate racism played an important role in how participants felt about their relationship. The connection between intimate racism and negative experiences were related to difficulties for the relationship itself, where the negative experiences of intimate racism were linked to experiencing conflict with their partner, being cautious and doubtful of their partner and their suitability, and even the termination of the relationship.

A curious finding was that neutral experiences (i.e., indifference) in relation to intimate racism were reported with prioritizing the partner (e.g., excusing the partner's behavior). This pattern may reflect that the partner had indeed put efforts to repair the rupture from the racism incident since it transpired, which may influence how the participant retrospectively recounted their experience. It may also reflect an affective attempt to avoid or downplay one's distress following their partner's racism (Alvarez & Juang, 2010; Crosby, 1984), which may be instrumental in maintaining one's investment in the relationship despite the negative experience of intimate racism. Future research can examine how indifference is related to coping with intimate racism, which minority partners may be adopting to remain in the relationship.

Negative experiences were also linked to neutral emotions and to participants' responses of prioritizing the relationship. The participants' response of ensuring their partner's comfort may be indicative of several factors. They may wish to maintain their connection with their partner in spite of the negative experience (e.g., Joel et al., 2018), or wish to save face for the partner (e.g., Castle Bell & Hastings, 2011). This may reflect a conflict resolution style nested in a power differential between the partners (e.g., Neff & Harter, 2002). Future research should examine the role of these motivational and relational processes in the experience of intimate racism. Moreover, the findings that intimate racism was met with participants' prioritization of their partner in spite of, or in conjunction with, their negative experiences, their minority stress and their internalized racism, brings our attention to how intimate racism potentially functions within intercultural relationships by maintaining dominance over racialized minority partners (Jackman, 1994), highlighting the importance of further investigating how intimate racism is an important element of maintaining racial oppression more broadly.

Positive experiences, though rare, were found to emerge in participants' discourse in relation to racism that initially presented itself as complimentary, but was then understood to be debasing. The link between confronting racism and self-affirmations of cultural pride and resilience demonstrates that intimate racism itself is indeed experienced negatively, but that individuals drew strength from their cultural belonging. This may speak to the broader experience of resilience in the face of racism (e.g., Rivas-Drake et al., 2021), and will need to be investigated in the context of intimate racism, specifically.

Humor was found to be ambiguous. Participants reported their partners telling racist jokes, mocking them, or brushing off their comments as "just a joke," which many participants found hurtful. At the same time, some participants named an appreciation for consensual and mutual exchange of racist jokes within their relationship, which were experienced positively. The use of humor in intercultural couples has been shown to function as a coping mechanism for culture-related stressors (Bustamante et al., 2011), which may extend to racist jokes. Future research will need to disentangle the harmful and helpful uses of humor, and the role of consent to play with racist jokes.

In terms of the relationship to one's cultural identity, the link between intimate racism and the experience of negative emotions was related to stressful identity experiences, including minority stress, internalized racism, and identity conflicts. These findings are also consistent with the literature on minority stress (Brooks, 1981; Meyer, 2003) as well as recent work showing that relationship marginalization against intercultural couples is related to identities being less integrated and more divided (Yampolsky et al., 2020).

The current research did not ask specifically about repair attempts on the part of the partner following their intimate racism behaviors, and only a small number of participants reported repair attempts with little detail. Nevertheless, interesting findings emerged from those participants that did share these aspects in their discourse. Avoidance responses were associated with negative emotions, but repair attempts were related to more neutral feelings rather than positive feelings. Both were related to making sense and disengaging from the partner. The repair responses that were discussed involved initial partner responses, such as apologizing or being receptive to listening to the participant, which did not appear to demonstrate deeper awareness and accountability for their actions, nor did they appear to alleviate the negative experience of their racism. This suggests that apologies or acknowledgments on their own may not be enough to repair the rupture of intimate racism, and that deeper reconciliation work may be necessary. This is coherent with literature on public apologies for racial injustices and atrocities (Govier & Verwoerd, 2002; Tarusarira, 2019) as well as literature on ruptures and repairs within close relationships (Lewis et al., 2015). Future qualitative work will probe into partner's repair attempts and their implications. Future longitudinal studies can also investigate the role of persistence of their partner's intimate racism over time despite previous attempts at resolution and repair.

Limitations and future directions

This research provides an initial look into the phenomenon of intimate racism using short open-ended questions, and as a result, we were unable to go into depth with each participant's story. The current study has only just scratched the surface of intimate racism, and future in-depth interviews could capture how these racism events from one's partner unfold in terms of the context surrounding the racist events, the conversations that ensue between partners and relevant close others, and the extent of repair or rupture. Interviews will also ensure a greater breadth of understanding for the more sensitive themes, such as fetishization and abuse. Since the current work is

qualitative, we are unable to determine the causality of intimate racism; future longitudinal and experimental priming studies would determine the causal impact of intimate racism from one's partner.

The purpose of the current study was to explore and establish the nature of intimate racism, and thus the open-ended questions inquired directly about such experiences. As a result, this may have attracted participants who would speak to the experience of intimate racism more than a study that was presented as an exploration of their general experiences in their intercultural relationship. The current study was not able to examine and establish how prevalent the experience is within intercultural relationships, and so future work would need to create a general inquiry for all racialized minorities in intercultural relationships which would include questions about intimate racism experiences in order to ascertain how prevalent the experience is within intercultural relationships.

In terms of generalizability, the current sample is composed of young adults, which limits the range of experiences reported, given that older adults would likely have greater relationship experience. In addition, the sample has more women represented than men and gender-diverse individuals. Future studies will be conducted with community samples and adults of all ages, and with more representation for men and gender-diverse people. Diverse gender representation will enable future work to examine intersectionality between ethnicity/racialization and gender within the experience of intimate racism. While we assessed participants' ethnocultural background, we did not ask if they were white passing. As a result, if someone was, for example, Middle-Eastern but was fair-skinned relative to another participant, we were unable to observe if they reported different experiences based on their lighter/darker complexion category. Additionally, we did not assess the backgrounds of the participants' partners. The current study also did not account for the relationship length. Future studies will account for this information and examine these factors.

The current study did not examine other social identity intersections that were at play in the participants' experiences. Future work can account for the potential manifestations of multiple intimate oppressions (e.g., class, gender, ethnicity, ability, etc.). Lastly, the current study focused on intimate racism within romantic relationships, but intimate racism can subsequently be examined in other intimate contexts, such as families and friendships.

Conclusion

Intimate racism constitutes maltreatment and rejection from one's partner and close others, rather than security and acceptance, and is rooted in the greater landscape of intergroup injustice. The present work opens a new field of research for the phenomenon of intimate racism. The novel findings from this present work point to the complexity and gravity of the experience of intimate racism, and to the need for future research to deepen our understanding of its nature, its causes, and its impact on individuals and relationships. Understanding this phenomenon can potentially inform public education against intimate racism, as well as clinical interventions for racialized minorities in relationships where they are experiencing this harm from their partners.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.