
Daniel Lattimore

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EXPLORING MODERATION EFFECTS OF HUMOR STYLES ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RACIAL AND ETHNIC MICROAGGRESSIONS AND WORK VOLITION IN BLACK WORKING MEN

by

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Anyone who has a Ph.D. might be knowledgeable in a very niche topic, but they also know it takes a village. To my chair, Dr. Lease, I could not have done it without your diligence, persistence, and patience. Thank you for believing in me. I’d like to thank my dissertation committee for its time, its support, its insight, and positive vibes. I want to thank my parents, my family, my friends, and my ancestors because I literally would not be here without you. I want to thank my cohort members, Drs. Kim Adams, Asia Amos, Emily El-Oqlah, Dorothy’e Gott, Erica Magsam, Kanesha Moore, and Ally Schimmel-Bristow, for sharing humorous moments amidst the waves of stress (*Academy Awards orchestral music crescendos*). I would like to thank the University of Memphis College of Education community, especially the Counseling Psychology Doctoral program faculty and cohorts. Last but not least, I’d like to thank Aaliyah Shivers for not only being my sounding board, but also helping me keep perspective on who and what matters.
Abstract

This study examined the relationship between racial and ethnic microaggressions and work volition and whether humor styles moderated that relationship. Participants were 216 employed Black men who completed measures of work volition (WVS-V), racial and ethnic microaggressions (REMS-45), and humor styles (HSQ-32). Data were analyzed using Hayes’ PROCESS macro for SPSS (Model 1, moderation) and supported the hypothesis that racial and ethnic microaggressions (REMS) frequency were directly related to work volition. Aggressive humor style moderated the racial microaggression – work volition relationship such that using an aggressive humor style at high levels of microaggressions was associated with lower work volition. The other three humor styles did not moderate the REMS – work volition relationship, though affiliative and self-enhancing humor styles directly predicted work volition. Clinical implications, limitations, and future directions are discussed.

Keywords: microaggression, work volition, humor, Black, African American, men, career
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“Humor is laughing at what you haven’t got when you ought to have it…Humor is when the joke is on you but hits the other fellow first - before it boomerangs. Humor is what you wish in your secret heart were not funny, but it is, and you must laugh. Humor is your own unconscious therapy. Like a welcome summer rain, humor may suddenly cleanse and cool the earth, the air, and you.” – Langston Hughes

This study sought to build upon existing literature as it pertains to the work and career perceptions of Black working men. Additionally, this study explored to what degree subtle forms of discrimination based on race or ethnicity psychologically affected the worldview of Black working men, and whether their tendency to use humor impacted this effect. Traditional career development theories emphasize the role of work choice (Blustein, 2019). However, minority populations have historically experienced more constraints in their autonomy to choose careers or make decisions regarding their places of work (Duffy et al., 2016; Duffy et al., 2012b). Their more limited choices are evident in unemployment figures, disproportionate employment in certain occupations, and fewer health and retirement benefits. The unemployment rate of Black Americans has consistently been one of the highest when compared to other races (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). The unemployment numbers are particularly dire for Black men. As of February 2022, the unemployment rate of Black/African American men (6.6%) 16 years or older was twice of that of their White (3.3%) counterparts (BLS, 2022). Prior to the economic crash brought on by the novel Coronavirus, approximately 30% of the current Black workforce held management, professional, or related positions, while 55% were employed in sales and service positions, often characterized by lower pay and less security (BLS, 2019).

The differences in employment rates and accessibility of jobs for Black men suggest the necessity of understanding some of the barriers to unconstrained career choice, as well as factors
that might ameliorate those barriers. Experiencing racial marginalization is one identified barrier. In a Pew Research Center (Anderson, 2019) survey of non-Hispanic Black men, 73% stated that people acted like they were suspicious of them, 61% noted that people had acted as if they were not smart, 57% had been subjected to slurs or jokes, and 50% noted being treated unfairly in hiring, pay, or promotion, all due to their race or ethnicity. There are multiple ways to cope with or reduce the negative effect of marginalization experiences, and the use of humor is one potential moderator of the negative effects of marginalization. Some forms of humor have been shown to facilitate coping with stressors or life adversity (Martin & Ford, 2018; Martin & Lefcourt, 1983; Richards & Kruger, 2017). Based on the Psychology of Working Theory, the current study examined the relationship between experiencing racial and ethnic microaggressions and work volition and whether various humor styles moderate that relationship.

**Psychology of Working**

Most career theories were developed based on the standard of white, middle-to-upper socioeconomic class, educated men (Blustein, 2006; Duffy et al., 2016; Flores et al., 2019). Vocational researchers have been tasked with increasing their focus on understanding how social class and other systemic forms of oppression have led to inequities in work choice for minority populations, defined as a “population subgroup with social, religious, ethnic, racial, or other characteristics that differ from those of a majority of the population” (APA, n.d.). This has led to a paradigm shift in work and career theories that capture the experiences and resiliencies of minority populations in the workplace. Blustein, Kenna, Gill, and DeVoy (2008) put forth the Psychology of Working Framework (PWF) that emphasizes the roles of sociocultural factors in both career selection and fulfillment. Duffy, Blustein, Diemer, and Autin (2016) extended this framework to develop the Psychology of Working Theory (PWT). They sought to highlight the
path to decent work and focus on workers who may not have been represented in earlier career theories, such as those who experience marginalization, prejudice, or severe financial challenges. Economic constraints and marginalization are proposed as the main predictors of decent work, which is defined as work that allows an individual to operate in safe working conditions, receive adequate compensation, have unrestricted free time and rest, have accessible health care, and adheres to values congruent with their personal values or those of their community. The effects of economic constraints and marginalization are mediated by career adaptability and work volition. Work volition is seen as a crucial aspect in attaining decent work.

This study sought to build on the Psychology of Work Theory (Duffy et al., 2016) by exploring humor styles as possible moderators of the marginalization – work volition relationship. Work volition is defined as “perceived capacity to make occupational choices despite constraints” (Duffy et al., 2012b, p. 401). Work volition has been linked to career decision-making and work fulfillment (Blustein, 2008; Duffy et al., 2015; Duffy et al., 2012a). Evidence has supported that increased career barriers lead to lower levels of perceived volition (Blustein et al., 2008; Duffy & Dik, 2009; Duffy et al., 2016); marginalization is hypothesized to be one such barrier. Duffy and colleagues (2016) defined marginalization as a stressor that can “limit an individual’s ability to feel adaptive, volitional, and secure decent work” (p. 138). Studies have shown that Black workers have reported negative effects such as paranoia, depression, lack of confidence, worthlessness, loss of drive, helplessness (Root, 2003), and lowered job satisfaction (Decuir-Gunby & Gunby, 2016) due to experiencing marginalization (Holder et al., 2015; Pitcan et al., 2018). Marginalization has been shown to negatively affect work volition in sexual minority populations (Douglass et al., 2017; Smith & Baranik, 2020).
Duffy, Gensmer, and colleagues (2019) found that marginalization had a significant, negative correlation with work volition in a sample of 286 racial and ethnic minority (REM) adults.

**Marginalization via Racial Microaggressions**

Encountering racial microaggressions is one experience within the broad spectrum of marginalization (Duffy et al. 2018; Lewis & Neville, 2015). A racial microaggression is defined as a “brief, everyday exchange that sends denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273). Racial microaggressions are rooted in people’s experiences of prejudice or discrimination based on their racial group membership (Lewis & Neville, 2015). Three modes of microaggressions currently exist: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations (Sue et al., 2008b). A microassault is an attack, verbal or nonverbal, intended to hurt someone, often through ridicule, avoidant behavior, or discrimination. An example of a microassault is using a racist slur or refusing to provide services to someone based on race. A microinsult is a form of communication that conveys rudeness and insensitivity and can demean a person’s identity, as exemplified by a coworker’s or employer’s comment about a Black customer being well-spoken. A microinvalidation involves communicating invalidation of someone’s thoughts, existence, or worldview (Sue et al., 2008b). An example of a microinvalidation is asking someone where they are “really” from, which communicates that they are a foreigner of their own land. Experiences with everyday microaggressions have been related to increased somatic symptoms and distress (Ong et al., 2013).

Racial microaggressions have a detrimental effect on one’s ability to do work, and Black Americans are often burdened with facing subtle negative messages in working settings (Pitcan et al., 2018; Sue et al. 2007; Sue et al., 2008a). These messages can result in feeling powerless,
invisible, a lowered sense of integrity, and an increased need to comply with the status quo (Sue et al., 2008b). Additionally, Black male employees have reported experiencing “fatigue, dysthymia, and a fear of interactions” in ways that stunt their ability to make necessary career moves and seek success in their positions (Pitcan et al., 2018, p. 308). Also, Black men noted feeling like they had to do twice or thrice the amount of work just to gain a minimal amount of recognition (Pitcan et al., 2018). Regarding work volition specifically, Duffy et al. (2018) found a negative correlation between racially and/or ethnically based workplace microaggressions and volition ($r = -.14, p < .01$) in a sample of 526 minority adults. Although statistically significant, this relatively low correlation could be due to the grouping of all racial and ethnic minority employees; focusing on employees who specifically identify as Black or African American may produce a different correlation, especially amidst the current societal conversations around Black Lives Matter and legislation regarding training in diversity, equity, and inclusion in educational and organizational settings (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016).

Nadal (2011a) spoke to the internal processes that can occur for those targeted by microaggressions. Because discrimination via microaggressions is frequently covert, it can be more difficult to respond to or navigate (Pitcan et al., 2018; Spanierman et al., 2021). Often, those targeted may question whether the event even occurred. If they judge that it did occur, they are left to question if they should respond. If they decide to respond, it becomes a question of how they should respond. Nadal suggested someone targeted could react proactively by seeking catharsis through therapy or trusted social support. Black employees and employers might advocate for themselves by engaging in healthy vigilance, initiating “sanity checks” through conversations with family members and/or Black confidants, and seeking ways of self-empowerment and self-validation (Sue et al., 2008a).
However, male minority workers may not readily be able to communicate what is going on to their family members, friends, and colleagues for several reasons. There is generally stigma regarding asking for help or bringing attention to stressors, especially by people of color (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2020). Ward et al. (2013) found that 63% of African Americans believed having a mental health condition was a sign of weakness, and being perceived as weak may lead to negative consequences in social and/or workplace settings. Another barrier to help-seeking, especially from Human Resources or other organizationally affiliated sources, could be that help-seeking counters the “unwritten” rules of the organization. Examples of unwritten rules of the workplace Black employees feel pressured to follow include not challenging the status quo and not disrupting or being a “whistle blower” (Travis et al., 2019).

Another option suggested by Nadal is to be assertive. This might involve calmly confronting the perpetrator in a way that expresses how the target felt and educating the perpetrator, yet this approach can result in perpetrators becoming defensive or feeling attacked and committing further microaggressions. Pitcan and colleagues (2018) acknowledged that addressing racial microaggressions in predominantly white organizations “may be difficult for Black men because they have to navigate different rules for emotional display based on racial and gender identity” (p. 302). Socially acceptable responses to microaggressions are affected by the unequal power dynamics in the workplace (Wingfield, 2010; Wong et al. 2014). Anger and frustration, although common responses to microaggressions (Holder et al., 2015), could be deemed as socially unacceptable to exhibit in the workplace or worse, potentially perpetuating a stereotype of the “angry Black woman” or “aggressive Black man.”
A third option Nadal (2011a) proposed is that those targeted could react in an indirect manner, such as making a joke or using sarcasm. This suggests that some forms of humor might be used to buffer the negative effects of racial microaggressions. Since there is no clear ideal response to marginalization, the question becomes, what variables might buffer the negative effect of marginalization experiences on work volition and is humor one of those buffering variables? This study examined the use of humor and its role in moderating the relationship between racial and ethnic microaggressions (REMS) and work volition.

**Moderating Mechanisms and Humor**

Duffy et al. (2016) hypothesized that having a proactive personality and social support would moderate the relationship between marginalization and work volition. Several studies have reported that proactive personality (Duffy et al., 2016; Holder et al., 2015) buffered the relationship between marginalization and work volition. In those studies, proactive personality was defined as a proclivity to actively influence one’s surrounding environment (Li et al., 2010). A potential tool for influencing one’s environment is use of humor. Pitcan and colleagues (2018) noted that humor was included on a list of internal coping mechanisms exhibited by Black men in response to microaggressions. There is also extensive literature recognizing the utility of social support in mitigating stress for Black populations (Coker, 2003; Holder et al., 2015; Pitcan et al., 2018), and specifically mitigating harmful effects of marginalization on work volition (Duffy et al., 2016). One role of humor is to connect with others, possibly enhancing one’s social support. Although there is debate regarding a universal, concrete definition of humor as well as its functionality, the current study defined humor as:

> A broad, multifaceted term that represents anything that people say or do that others perceive as funny and tends to make them laugh, as well as the mental processes that go
into both creating and perceiving such an amusing stimulus, and…the emotional response of mirth involved in the enjoyment of it. (Martin & Ford, 2018, p. 3)

Martin and colleagues (2003) identified four styles of humor: (a) affiliative humor, the use of humor to enhance one’s relationships with others; (b) self-enhancing humor, the use of humor to augment the self; (c) aggressive humor, the use of humor to enhance the self at the expense of others; and (d) self-defeating humor, the use of humor to enhance relationships at the expense of self. Martin and Ford (2018) noted humor functions as a personality trait, affecting the way people “perceive, respond to and initiate behavior in daily life” (p. 13).

Affiliative and self-enhancing humor styles are considered adaptive styles of humor because they are expected to facilitate positive psychosocial well-being (Stieger et al., 2011), whereas aggressive and self-defeating humor styles are hypothesized to be generally harmful to well-being or maladaptive in nature (Kasow, 2012; Martin et al., 2003). Self-enhancing and self-defeating styles are considered intrinsic in nature, while affiliative and aggressive humor styles are directed toward interpersonal interactions. Self-enhancing humor has been recognized as having a role in coping with adversity and life stressors (Martin & Ford, 2018; Martin & Lefcourt, 1983; Richards & Kruger, 2017).

In contrast, higher use of self-defeating humor has been correlated with an increase in reported physical health symptoms (Richards & Kruger, 2017). Self-defeating humor has also been characterized as “humorous remarks targeting oneself as the object of humor” and may be implemented to show modesty, ease the listener, or “ingratiate oneself” with the listener (Martin & Ford, 2018, p. 21). Although Stieger and colleagues (2011) contended people who use self-defeating humor were more likely to have damaged self-esteem, people who use self-defeating humor have also been shown to exhibit higher state self-esteem, experience improved
interpersonal relationships, and portray more facial displays of positive emotions (Heintz & Ruch, 2018). Thus, the literature regarding the costs and benefits of self-defeating humor is mixed.

There is no simple answer as to whether humor is helpful when addressing negative marginalization experiences. Humor has been shown to be capable of increasing interpersonal relationships and facilitating the maintenance of healthy interpersonal boundaries (Martin & Ford, 2018; Meyer, 2000). Thus, it might increase an overall sense of social support. Kuiper (2012) noted workers in highly stressful occupations utilized cynical humor as tension relief and to cope with work-related stress. Humor can also be used to push back against marginalization experiences. Pitcan and colleagues (2018) found that Black male workers used jokes that were a retaliatory response to a superior making offensive jokes. Coker (2003) spoke to humor being used by African American female adult learners in higher education to remove “the sting of the internal pain of an insult or derogatory remark” as well as getting women’s points across without “appearing too aggressive, confrontational, or violent” (p. 670).

Hence, humor can serve as a “social lubricant” (Martin & Ford, 2018, p. 28) in that it evades confrontation, opposition, or other more serious modes of communication between the oppressor and oppressed. Researchers have reported that humor can be used to reduce interpersonal tension and simplify relationships (Liu, 2012; Martin & Ford, 2018); however, no studies have explicitly investigated humor style as moderating the effects of racial marginalization experiences on work volition. Furthermore, there is no research that examines whether the four different humor styles all function similarly to moderate the relationship between REMS and work volition or if utilizing some humor styles more than others are more successful in buffering the negative effect of REMS. With these questions in mind, the current
study focuses on humor styles as moderators of the relationship between REMS and work volition for a sample of Black male employees.

Individuals with higher socioeconomic status have more access to resources and thus fewer financial and structural constraints, which in turn would increase one’s ability to make choices in career (Duffy et al., 2016). Thus, one’s social status is hypothesized to directly affect one’s perceived work volition and will be entered as a predictor variable in the analyses. Additionally, as individuals gain more work experiences over time, it is possible that age would also be related to work volition. Age will also be entered as a statistical control variable in the analyses. If age and/or social status do not significantly predict work volition, they will be removed from the analysis to reduce additional variable error. Figure 1 illustrates the hypothesized study relationships.

**Hypotheses**

1. Racial and ethnic microaggressions will be negatively associated with work volition.
2. Controlling for age and socioeconomic status, humor styles will moderate the relationship between racial and ethnic microaggressions and work volition such that:
   a. Higher endorsement of adaptive humor styles (affiliative, self-enhancing) will attenuate the inverse relationship between racial and ethnic microaggressions and work volition.
   b. Since previous authors have found both positive and negative outcomes related to self-defeating and aggressive humor styles, this study will explore the interaction effects of maladaptive (self-defeating, aggressive) humor styles on the relationship between racial and ethnic microaggressions and work volition but make no specific directional hypotheses.
Figure 1 shows the hypothesized relationships. The analyses testing the moderation of the REMS-work volition relationship will be repeated for each of the four humor styles.

**Figure 1**

*Hypothesized Moderation Model*

Note. Conceptual diagram of a simple moderation model in which the effect of racial and ethnic microaggressions on work volition is conditional on humor styles. Age and social status are treated as covariates.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants were 216 adult African American or Black male employees ($M_{age} = 33.2$ years, $SD = 10.5$) who had either lived or worked in the United States most of their lives. Employees were defined as working a minimum of 10 hours per week or, if recently unemployed due to COVID-19, had worked a minimum of 10 hours per week prior to becoming unemployed.
Ten hours per week was considered the minimal amount of hours for gainful employment (Sharma, 2021). Almost all ($n = 211$) were employed at the time of the study, and 99 participants endorsed working 40 hours or more per week, 76 indicated working between 35 and 40 hours per week, and 41 worked between 10 and 35 hours. Two hundred eight responders chose the single category of African American or Black, three identified as Native American or Alaskan Native, three identified as biracial or multiracial, one participant identified as Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and one identified as “AfroLatino.” Participants who did not indicate “African American or Black” were asked in a follow-up question “Do you identify as Black or African American?” Participants who indicated, “Yes” were allowed to continue with the study. The participants who identified as Black or African American and another race are reflected in the table as Biracial/Multiracial. Participants who indicated “No” were directed to the end of the study. Table 1 presents additional sociodemographic descriptions of participants.
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</table>

Note. a This reflects the number and percentage of participants who answered “yes” to this question. b This reflects the number of participants who were employed at the time of the study.
Measures

Demographic Questionnaire

Participants were asked to provide information on their gender, age, race, ethnicity, number of working hours per week, level of education, and occupation. Since only individuals identifying as employed Black/African American men were eligible to participate, those who indicated as female or non-binary, were employed less than 10 hours/week, or did not identify as Black/African American were directed out of the study. People who indicated they were multiracial or biracial and identified as being Black were eligible for the study.

Social Status

The MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (MSSS; Adler et al., 2000) is a measure of one’s subjective social status. The MSSS prompts participants to indicate their position in their society on a 10-rung ladder (1 = bottom rung and 10 = highest rung) when taking into account their own income, level of education, and occupation. Adler et al. (2000) recommended two conceptualizations of the ladder to capture different aspects of social status: having the participant compare themselves to others in the United States (MSSS-USA) and having the participant compare themselves to others in their communities (MSSS-Community). The MSSS-USA ladder score was utilized since it provides the same comparison group across participants. The MSSS was shown to have a high, positive correlation ($r = .68$) with other subjective social status measures in a sample of 218 sexual minorities (Douglass et al., 2017) and yielded predictive validity of work volition ($r = .28$) in a sample of Turkish employees (Kozan et al., 2019).
**Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS-45)**

The Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS) is a 45-item measure developed by Nadal (2011b) that assesses the microaggressions that people of color experience in their everyday lives. There are six subscales: (a) Assumptions of Inferiority, (b) Second-Class Citizen and Assumptions of Criminality, (c) Microinvalidations, (d) Exoticization/Assumptions of Similarity, (e) Environmental Microaggressions, and (f) Workplace and School Microaggressions. Item response choices are on a scale that ranges from 1 (did not experience this event) to 6 (I experienced this event five or more times in the last six months) although it is typically scored as a simple count of experiencing microaggressions. Participants received a score of “0” for not experiencing the event in the past six months or “1” for having experienced the event at least once in the past six months. The measure can be scored as separate subscales or as an average of all scale items with higher scores indicating a higher frequency of microaggressions. The total averaged score was used in the current study (\(M = .56, SD = .29\)).

Nadal (2011b) reported Cronbach’s alpha reliabilities of .91 for the overall total score and coefficients for the subscales ranging from .78 to .87. A confirmatory factor analysis (\(N = 218\)) supported a 6-factor model proposed by Nadal. For this study, the Cronbach’s alpha was .97 for the total score.

**Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ-32)**

Martin and colleagues (2003) developed the HSQ-32 to assess four ways in which humor is utilized. This scale consists of 32 items measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Totally Disagree) to 7 (Totally Agree). Eight questions correspond to each of the four styles of humor, and items are summed with possible scores ranging from 8 to 56 for each humor style. Higher scores represent a stronger endorsement of using the humor style. Based on a study of
1195 Canadian participants (470 men), ranging in age from 14 to 87 years (mean age = 25, SD = 15.68), the subscales had Cronbach’s alphas ranging from .77 to .81. Affiliative and self-enhancing humor styles were somewhat positively correlated ($r = .33$ for males, $p < .001$). Affiliative and aggressive humor scales were also positively correlated ($r = .28$ for males, $p < .001$), which Martin and colleagues explain as affiliative humor naturally including some teasing behavior. Aggressive and self-defeating humor scales were positively correlated ($r = .22$ for males, $p < .001$). Test-retest reliabilities over a one-week period for the four humor styles were reported as .80 - .85 for a sample of 179 participants (55 men) from an Introductory Psychology subject pool (Martin et al., 2003). For this study, the subscales had Cronbach’s alphas ranging from .72 to .82.

*Work Volition Scale (WVS)*

The Work Volition Scale (Duffy et al., 2012b) assesses participants’ perceived capacity to make occupational choices despite constraints. The WVS contains 13 items with three subscales: volition (4 items), structural constraints (4 items, reverse coded), and financial constraints (5 items, reverse coded). Only the four-item Volition subscale of the Work Volition Scale was used to assess participants’ perceived capacity to make occupational choices. Example items include, “I’ve been able to choose the jobs I have wanted,” and “I feel able to change jobs if I want to.” Items are answered on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree) and summed for a total score. A higher score indicates perceiving more work volition. Duffy et al. (2015) reported an internal consistency reliability of .82 for the subscale in a sample of 526 racial and ethnic minority employees (34.6% African American). Duffy, Bott, Torrey, and Webster (2013) reported internal consistency reliability
coefficients ranging from .81 to .86 for the subscales. The Cronbach’s alpha across the 4-item Work Volition subscale for this study was .84.

**Procedures**

Following approval by the IRB, participants were recruited through convenience sampling. Social media and snowball sampling were used to distribute a flyer (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, Reddit, etc.) that directed participants to an online survey that included all measures. The survey was available through an online platform (i.e., Qualtrics) and the data were exported to SPSS 27. Eligible participants who completed the survey were entered into a raffle for 1 of 5 $25 Amazon gift cards.

**Results**

Out of 425 participants who accessed the survey, 77 either had duplicated free responses, or had exact start and stop times. For example, at least 13 responses commented, “There is no” to the free response item asking about survey feedback. This appears to be a nonsensical response entered by a bot. There were similar duplicated or suspicious responses and those 77 participants were removed from the data set. A missing value analysis was done for responses missing less than 10% of the measures of interest, and responses missing more than 10% of the total items of interest in the study were excluded. One hundred thirty responses were not considered valid data (missing more than 10% of data) and/or failed the third and fourth attention checks directing them to leave the item blank (participants were allowed to miss two of the attention check items); thus, they were removed from the study leaving a working sample of 218 participants before checking for outliers.

Normality of data distribution was examined by analyzing skewness and kurtosis of study variable values. Conservative estimates within social sciences consider data distributions to be
significantly skewed if skewness exceeds an absolute value of 3.0 and significantly kurtotic should the value exceed an absolute value of 10.0 (Kline, 2011). None of the variables exceeded those criteria, suggesting normality assumptions were met. Univariate outliers were assessed by examining standardized scores for the measures. Two participants whose scores exceeded an absolute value of $\pm 3$ SD on the humor self-defeating subscale were removed. Additionally, the data were checked for multivariate outliers through Cook’s distances. No cases exceeded the threshold of 1.0 (Cook, 1977); thus, no additional cases were excluded from the study. This resulted in the final sample of 216 participants.

**Preliminary Analyses**

Table 2 displays means, standard deviations, and correlations among study variables. The four separate humor style subscales were summed, yielding four humor style subscale scores that were used in subsequent analyses. As expected, REMS-45 total scores were negatively correlated with work volition ($r = -.45, p < .01$). Also as expected, age positively correlated with work volition. Conversely, the number of microaggressions experienced and tendency to use maladaptive humor styles were inversely related to participant age. Subjective social status positively correlated with work volition ($r = .43$) and was inversely correlated with microaggressions ($r = -.55$). Subjective social status also positively correlated with affiliative ($r = .37$) and self-enhancing ($r = .30$) humor styles, and inversely associated with aggressive ($r = -.34$) and self-defeating ($r = -.39$) humor styles.

To determine whether the dependent variable differed by demographic variables, a one-way ANOVA test examined differences on work volition by education level was examined. Education level was grouped into four categories: less than college, some college, bachelor’s degree, and graduate level. Those with more education had greater work volition, $F(3,212) =$
25.96, \( p < .001, \eta^2 = .27 \). Since subjective socioeconomic status and education were highly correlated \( (r = .51) \), subjective socioeconomic status was chosen as the control variable for the regression equations since it is a continuous, rather than categorical, variable.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of Study Variables \( (N = 216) \)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Age</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. SSS-USA</td>
<td>.52**</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. WV</td>
<td>.26**</td>
<td>.43**</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. REMS</td>
<td>-.50**</td>
<td>-.55**</td>
<td>-.45**</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Affiliative</td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>.37**</td>
<td>.39**</td>
<td>-.58**</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Self-Enhance</td>
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<td>.30**</td>
<td>.49**</td>
<td>-.36**</td>
<td>.51**</td>
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<td>7. Aggressive</td>
<td>-.43**</td>
<td>-.34**</td>
<td>-.32**</td>
<td>.50**</td>
<td>-.33**</td>
<td>-.14*</td>
<td>--</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Self-Defeat</td>
<td>-.37**</td>
<td>-.39**</td>
<td>-.27**</td>
<td>.42**</td>
<td>-.21**</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.50**</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( M )</td>
<td>33.18</td>
<td>4.49</td>
<td>17.14</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>39.14</td>
<td>34.71</td>
<td>26.85</td>
<td>26.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( SD )</td>
<td>10.52</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>5.50</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>8.13</td>
<td>7.89</td>
<td>7.33</td>
<td>7.93</td>
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</table>

*Note.* SSS-USA = Subjective social status; REMS = Racial and ethnic microaggressions; WV = Work volition; Affiliative = Affiliative humor style; Self-Enhance = Self-enhancing humor style; Aggressive = Aggressive humor style; Self-Defeat = Self-defeating humor style.

* \( p < .05 \), ** \( p < .01 \).
Primary Analyses

The objective of the study was to understand if racial and ethnic microaggressions predicted work volition and if humor style moderated the REMS – work volition relationship. Hierarchical multiple regression was conducted using the PROCESS macro (Model 1, moderation) developed by Hayes (2017). Age, subjective socioeconomic status, four humor styles, and REMS were entered into the PROCESS macro. To avoid potential problematic high multicollinearity with the interaction term, the variables were centered. The PROCESS macro was conducted once per proposed humor style, giving a total of four regression analyses.

Preliminary analyses indicated that REMS frequency was negatively associated with work volition ($r = -.45, p < .01$), thus supporting Hypothesis 1. Additionally, REMS consistently predicted work volition across four regression models ($b = -5.50$ to $-3.98$, all $p < .01$). Age was removed from the regression analyses because it was found not significant after testing. Social status was found to predict work volition across all four models, so it was retained as a control variable. Tables 3 displays the results of moderation tests for both adaptive styles of humor: affiliative and self-enhancing. Hypothesis 2a was not supported, as neither affiliative ($p = .09$) nor self-enhancing ($p = .85$) humor styles moderated the REMS – work volition relationship; however, both humor styles were identified as significant predictors of work volition after controlling for social status (see Table 3). As can be seen, the microaggressions, affiliative humor, and social status significantly predicted work volition, $F (4, 211) = 20.81, p < .001, R^2 = .28$. Microaggressions, self-enhancing humor, and social status also significantly predicted work volition, $F (4, 211) = 28.89, p < .001, R^2 = .35$.

Table 4 displays the results of moderations tests for both maladaptive styles of humor: aggressive and self-defeating. The aggressive humor style did moderate the relationship between
REMS and work volition in a sample of Black employed men ($b = -0.36, t(211) = -2.15, p = .03$). For every one unit of increase of the interaction term of REMS and aggressive humor, there was a .36 unit decrease in work volition once controlling for social status. Figure 2 illustrates the moderation effect of aggressive humor on the REMS – work volition relationship. At low levels of experiencing microaggressions, aggressive humor style had no effect on levels of work volition, but as microaggressions increased, the use of aggressive humor was related to lower work volition. As can be seen, the microaggressions, aggressive humor, and social status significantly predicted work volition, $F(4, 211) = 20.15, p < .001, R^2 = .28$. In the self-defeating humor styles model, only microaggressions and social status significantly predicted work volition, $F(4, 211) = 18.02, p < .001, R^2 = .26$. Self-defeating humor was the only humor style that did not predict work volition ($p = .68$) nor did it interact with the REMS – work volition relationship ($p = .61$).
Table 3

Analysis of Adaptive Humor Styles as Moderators of the Relationships Between Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions and Work Volition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>B</th>
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<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>LLCI</th>
<th>ULCI</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Affiliative Humor</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>14.98</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>16.68</td>
<td>&lt;.01</td>
<td>13.21</td>
<td>16.75</td>
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<td>REMS</td>
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<td>-7.10</td>
<td>-1.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiliative</td>
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<td>.05</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>&lt;.01</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction term</td>
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<td>.16</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.58</td>
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<tr>
<td>SSS-USA</td>
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<td>.17</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.91</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Self-Enhancing Humor</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>14.86</td>
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<td>11.83</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>-1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Enhancing</td>
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<td>.04</td>
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<td>&lt;.01</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.33</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interaction term</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2.90</td>
<td>&lt;.01</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.86</td>
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</table>

*Note. N = 216. REMS = Racial and ethnic microaggressions; Affiliative = Affiliative humor style; Self-Enhancing = Self-enhancing humor style; SSS-USA = Social Status Ladder-US.*
Table 4

Analysis of Maladaptive Humor Styles as Moderators of the Relationships Between Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions and Work Volition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>B</th>
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<tr>
<td>Aggressive Humor</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>.88</td>
<td>16.98</td>
<td>&lt;.01</td>
<td>13.22</td>
<td>16.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REMS</td>
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<td>-3.56</td>
<td>&lt;.01</td>
<td>-7.88</td>
<td>-2.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggressive</td>
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<td>0.05</td>
<td>-2.19</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction term</td>
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<td>-2.15</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSS-USA</td>
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<td>0.17</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>&lt;.01</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Self-Defeating Humor</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
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<td>.88</td>
<td>16.22</td>
<td>&lt;.01</td>
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<td>16.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>&lt;.01</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Defeating</td>
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<td>0.05</td>
<td>-0.42</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>-0.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction term</td>
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<td>0.52</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>-0.23</td>
<td>0.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSS-USA</td>
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<td>3.47</td>
<td>&lt;.01</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 216. REMS = Racial and ethnic microaggressions; Aggressive = Aggressive humor style; Self-Defeating = Self-Defeating humor style; SSS-USA = Social Status Ladder-US.
**Figure 2**

*Moderation Effects of Aggressive Humor on the REMS – Work Volition Relationship*

*Note.* Low = -1SD; Mid = Mean; High = +1SD; Agg = aggressive humor. REMS = Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions.

**Discussion**

Extending the original model proposed by Duffy and colleagues, humor styles might be seen both through the lens of facilitating social support, a known moderator in the PWT model, and as a coping approach when dealing with adversity. As hypothesized, racial and ethnic microaggression experiences were negatively associated with work volition in a sample of Black male employees. This finding is in line with the Psychology of Working Theory as well as many other studies reporting associations between experiencing microaggressions and negative work outcomes (Douglass et al., 2019; Holder et al., 2015; Houshmand et al., 2017; Pitcan et al.,
2018). However, this study is the first to gather quantitative data confirming this association specific to Black employed men. Of note, the relationship between microaggressions and work volition was much stronger in the current study comprised of a sample of Black men than the work microaggressions – work volition relationship found in the Duffy et al. (2018) study, which included participants from several different racial and ethnic minority groups.

Additionally, this relationship was significant even when controlling for social status, suggesting experiencing REMS has negative consequences over and above the negative effects of lower socioeconomic status. This is important because lower socioeconomic status and microaggressions often co-occur, and the effects can be challenging to separate. Interestingly, Duffy and colleagues (2022) found in a sample of 495 working adults that perceived strength of the economy not only correlated with work volition, but also moderated the effect of lifetime experiences of marginalization on work volition; at more favorable perceptions of economic conditions, the marginalization – work volition relationship becomes non-significant. Although the current study only asked about a participant’s current social status, it is intriguing to consider how an optimistic perspective of how one’s social status could override the effects of marginalization.

In this study, affiliative humor style acted as a predictor of work volition. In other words, the more likely someone is to use humor as a tool to enhance interpersonal relationships, the more someone might perceive themselves to have a sense of choice in their jobs and career. This suggests that using an affiliative humor style is beneficial, which aligns with other positive aspects in the literature such as implicit self-esteem (Stieger et al., 2011), personality (Martin et al., 2003), happiness (Liu, 2012), and other facets of health (Cann et al., 2010). Self-enhancing humor also predicted work volition in this study, which also supports the proposed adaptive
nature of this style of humor (Martin & Ford, 2018; Richards & Kruger, 2017). It would be expected that a type of humor characterized by its ability to augment the self would positively associate with one’s assuredness in their ability to make career choices. Aggressive humor predicted work volition in an opposite direction, such that one’s increased proclivity for humor that puts others down to bring himself up is associated with less sense of perceived choice in his career.

Although several of the humor styles predicted work volition, aggressive humor style was the only humor style to moderate the relationship between REMS and work volition. At higher levels of aggressive humor style, the REMS – work volition relationship was exacerbated. This finding suggests that using an aggressive humor style is not helpful and can be potentially damaging. It is possible that people who utilize more aggressive humor are depressed, pessimistic, or have personality aspects correlated with lowered work volition. Additionally, REMS was moderately associated with aggressive humor style, so it is possible that participants’ experiences with microaggressions encourage a more hostile type of humor.

Other literature has supported several of the humor styles as moderators that did not function as moderators in the current study. For example, self-defeating humor moderated the relationship between perceived stress and physical health (Richards & Kruger, 2017) in a sample of Black South Africans, but self-defeating humor was the only humor style that did not predict work volition in the current sample. Perhaps the humor construct posed by earlier researchers may not have completely captured the experience of Black American populations. The other more positive humor styles (affiliative and self-enhancing) were significantly associated with work volition even if they did not moderate the effects of microaggressions. Thus, humor may still play an important role in promoting work volition, although future research should examine
other personality correlates of humor since it is possible that optimistic or adaptive approaches to life are associated with certain humor approaches. Humor in any form, while not always considered the most effective coping mechanism for Black Americans, has historically been prominent and palatable across emotional, physical, intellectual, environmental, social, and generational trauma (Gordon, 1998). There is also acknowledgment that Black people are not perceived to have the same freedom of emotional expression as their White counterparts (Wingfield, 2010) so humor may be a way of indirectly expressing other emotions. While literature supports the function of humor as a coping mechanism that some African American men use (Pitcan et al., 2018), humor alone may not buffer the effects of microaggressions.

Spanierman and colleagues (2021) conducted a meta-analysis on participants’ experiences with racial microaggressions. Responses to racial microaggressions included collective coping, resistance coping, and self-protective coping (Spanierman et al., 2021). A style of collective coping was humor and laughter, which served to buffer racial microaggressions across different racial and ethnic groups. Spanierman and colleagues also framed humor as a resistance coping tool in a “subtle and powerful” way. This literature suggests the benefit for continuing to explore how humor could be a protective resource for African Americans.

Clinical Implications

Traditionally, communities of color do not utilize therapy as much as their white counterparts partially due to socioeconomic disparities, stigma, and inequality of care (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2020); however, counseling that centers around work concerns may be viewed with less stigma than counseling that has a psychological focus (APA, 2017). Black male clients may seek out counseling to explore their work and career options for several reasons, and counselors must utilize their best clinical judgment to assist the clients in attaining
their goals. When they do seek counseling, Black men are likely going to work with a White counselor or psychologist. A majority of psychologists do not identify as people of color; 84% of US psychologists identify as White (APA, 2020), and only four percent identify as Black or African American. Additionally, about 12% of career development counselors identify as Black or African American, compared to about 70% identifying as White (APA, 2020).

It is beneficial for career counselors to recognize the power dynamics in counseling, and counselors should orient themselves and their clients to the potential differences in the room (e.g., race, religion, ability status, age, etc.) as those differences can influence the therapeutic alliance (Day-Vines et al., 2007). Since the vast majority of counselors will not have personally experienced REMS, they would benefit from awareness of the frequency of microaggressions that people of color experience while also realizing how difficult it can be to identify and/or challenge subtle forms of discrimination. Continued awareness of approaches based in cultural humility (Owen et al., 2016; Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998) will assist counselors in providing high quality services that recognize the lived experiences of many Black men in the workforce.

Some Black male clients might share an encounter of what happened but not label it as a microaggression. Microaggressions might not be recognized to the degree to which outward or blatant discrimination is. The career counselor might suspect the encounter as discriminatory in nature, yet they must check-in with themselves to not externally label the event as microaggressive or discriminatory before the client does. After the client shares their experience, the counselor can reflect the client’s statements back to them or directly ask how the client emotionally or behaviorally responded to the situation. Counseling treatment or coaching work
that brings attention to the emotional consequences of a situation can be beneficial, especially related to how it might affect career related expectations or perceived barriers.

This study sought to explore the moderation effects of humor on the REMS – work volition relationship, and higher usage of aggressive humor was found to exacerbate the relationship. This supports the notion of aggressive humor as a maladaptive humor as proposed by Martin and colleagues (2003) and Steiger et al. (2011); however, it could be beneficial for counselors to explore how their clients utilize humor (Vereen et al., 2006) and when it can be a useful coping approach and when it might be used defensively. Sometimes clients will attempt to brush off or deflect their feelings with humor. Men are socialized to avoid displays of emotionality or reliance on others (APA, 2019), and humor, especially humor for Black men in America, might be a more available way of coping, considering the higher rates of emotional distress (NAMI, 2020), hopelessness (NAMI, 2020), and physical stress and death (APA, 2019) they experience.

**Limitations**

As is common in cross-sectional survey research based on self-report data, this study has several limitations. The cross-sectional nature of the data does not allow for testing causal relationships so one cannot confirm that experiencing racial and ethnic microaggression leads to decreased work volition, although such a causal relationship is posited by the Psychology of Work. Second, convenience sampling was used, and the reliance on self-report of microaggressions requires that participants identify the experiences as microaggressions. It was interesting that age was inversely correlated with the endorsement of microaggressions, which raises the question of whether older Black Americans truly experience fewer racial and ethnic
microaggressions or whether they are just less likely than younger Black men to make note of them when they happen.

The Psychology of Work Theory includes both marginalization experiences and economic constraints as important predictors of work volition and subsequent decent work. This was true in the current study, but the inevitable fact is that being a part of a marginalized group that experiences microaggressions often overlaps with lower socioeconomic status, making it hard to separate the two constructs and potentially limiting the ability to detect moderating effects.

Future Directions

This study sought to measure one dimension of microaggressions— that of race and ethnicity in Black men. However, future research could consider the intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) of race and gender and include Black women. Utilizing a microaggression scale such as the Gendered Racism Microaggression Scale (GRMS; Lewis & Neville, 2015) could be a way to capture this intersection. Similarly, inclusion of members of other racial groups would increase the generalizability of the findings. As Black men have mentioned the use of humor when experiencing microaggressions (Pitcan et al., 2018), qualitative analyses might explore into the functions of humor intra- and interpersonally in the workplace and across interactions and situations (i.e., with same race and different race colleagues and supervisors).

Additionally, Duffy et al. (2016) proposed different moderators of the relationship between marginalization and work volition such as social support, critical consciousness, proactive personality, and economic conditions. Research could focus on the degree to which different moderators, particularly critical consciousness, might be important in moderating the relationship between marginalization and work volition for minority workers.
Conclusion

The present study sought to broaden the lens regarding the experiences of minority populations within the work force. This study explored whether racial and ethnic microaggressions were associated with work volition in a sample Black employed men and if humor moderated that relationship. REMS were strongly related to lowered work volition, and aggressive humor influenced the negative effect of REMS on work volition. Additionally, affiliative, self-enhancing, and aggressive humor styles predicted work volition, but none of the proposed humor styles buffered the negative effects of racial and ethnic microaggressions. The functionality of humor styles might range from facilitation of social support to a coping response in the face of adversity. Clinicians interested in the experiences of Black men in the workplace may use these findings to inform their conceptualization of Black male clients who report microaggressions and wish to explore barriers and facilitators of their work and career decisions.
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August 23, 2021

PI Name: Daniel Lattimore
Co-Investigators:
Advisor and/or Co-PI: Suzanne Lease
Submission Type: Modification
Title: Humor (at the Expense of) Me: Black Men at Work
IRB ID: #PRO-FY2021-62
Level of Review: Exempt

Approval: August 19, 2021
Expiration: --

The University of Memphis Institutional Review Board,FWA00006815, has reviewed your submission in accordance with all applicable statuses and regulations as well as ethical principles.

The modification is approved.

Approval of this project is given with the following obligations:
This IRB approval for modification has an expiration date, an approved renewal must be in effect to continue the project prior to that date. If approval is not obtained, the human subjects consent form(s) and recruiting material(s) are no longer valid and any research activities involving human subjects must stop.

1. When the project is finished a completion form must be submitted.
2. No change may be made in the approved protocol without prior board approval.
3. Human subjects training is required every 2 years and is to be kept current at citiprogram.org.

*Modifications do not extend the expiration of the original approval

Thank you,
James P. Whelan, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board Chair  
The University of Memphis.

March 2, 2021

PI Name: Daniel Lattimore  
Co-Investigators:  
Advisor and/or Co-PI: Suzanne Lease  
Submission Type: Initial  
Title: Humor (at the Expense of) Me: Black Men at Work  
IRB ID: #PRO-FY2021-62  
Exempt Approval: March 1, 2021

The University of Memphis Institutional Review Board, FWA00006815, has reviewed your submission in accordance with all applicable statuses and regulations as well as ethical principles. 

Approval of this project is given with the following obligations:

1. When the project is finished a completion submission is required
2. Any changes to the approved protocol requires board approval prior to implementation
3. When necessary submit an incident/adverse events for board review
4. Human subjects training is required every 2 years and is to be kept current at citiprogram.org.

Thank you,  
James P. Whelan, Ph.D. 
Institutional Review Board Chair  
The University of Memphis.