MONICA EMODE

Terms of Endearment

The effect of racial epithets on internalized racial oppression

Early research on racism traditionally focused on measuring beliefs and attitudes towards racial and ethnic groups. There is a need to examine internalized racial oppression and the mechanisms that seek to maintain and reproduce prejudice among Black populations. The objective of the current study was to gain insight into how usage of racial epithets among Black populations might influence the internalization of white racism. This study examined changes in scores on a post-internalized racial oppression measure after exposure to the racial epithet "nigger" among Black and white female participants. In this study, female York University (Toronto, Canada) students (n=30) were randomly assigned to one of three experimental vignette conditions. Pre-post scores of internalized racial oppression were assessed for each participant. The relationship between psychological resilience and internalized racial oppression was also explored. On average, Black participants obtained higher scores on a post-internalized racism measure (p < .001) but retained lower psychological resilience scores compared to their white counterparts. Results from this study suggest that exposure to the racial epithet "nigger" may unknowingly strengthen internalized racial oppression among Black female participants. Moreover, these findings demonstrate that Black participants with high levels of resilience are better able to mitigate the psychological and emotional discord associated with internalized racial oppression, compared to those with low levels of resilience.

Keywords: Racial epithet, internalized racial oppression, Black psychology, resilience, discrimination

Racism is a pervasive and entrenched problem in our society. Yet, racial discourse has focused on the interpretation of traumatic public events, rather than the acknowledgment of the insidious and deleterious effects of white racism on oppressed persons (Doane, 2003; Doane, 2006; Pyke, 2007; Pyke, 2010). Understanding how systems of inequality reproduce and promote internalization of

oppression is integral to dismantling racist structures and ideologies, advancing anti-racism, and understanding Black identity.

Internalized racial oppression refers to a process by which oppressed groups accept the inaccurate myths and negative stereotypes created by the dominant white culture's actions and beliefs (Barlow, 2003; Bailey et al., 2011; Schwalbe et al., 2000; Osajima, 1993). Previous research from the United States has shown that internalized racial oppression is associated with increased depressive symptoms and psychological distress among African Americans, US-born Caribbean Blacks, and foreign-born Caribbean Blacks (Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000; Mouzon & McLean, 2017). Additional studies have found that internalized racial oppression is associated with increased levels of psychological stress, blood pressure, cortisol secretion, and abdominal obesity in African Caribbean women, and glucose intolerance among Black women living in Africa (Butler et al., 2002; Tull et al., 1999; Tull et al., 2005; Williams & Mohammed, 2013; Chambers et al., 2004).

These studies demonstrate that perceived racism can cause significant stress for Black individuals and contribute to adverse health and psychological outcomes in Black populations (Clark et al., 1999; for "minority stress theory," see Meyer, 2003a, 2003b, and Schwartz & Meyer, 2010). Available evidence suggests that psychological resilience is a buffer to minority stress (Masten et al., 1990; Szalacha et al., 2003). For the purpose of this study, psychological resilience is defined as the ability to mitigate the internalization of structural and interpersonal discrimination and to adapt effectively when faced with prejudice (Zimmerman et al., 1999; Meyer, 2003a; Wagnild, 2009). Individuals with high levels of resilience may be more likely to circumvent the effects of internalized racial oppression in a way that minimizes stress and negative health outcomes (Zimmerman et al., 1999).

The first study of internalized racial oppression in the psychological literature was conducted by two African American psychologists whose research demonstrated a strong association between identity and internalized racial oppression. Clark and Clark (1939) published a series of doll studies and determined that racial self-hatred was common among African American school children, who preferred white dolls over Black dolls. A study conducted by Steele and Aronson (1995) demonstrated that when African Americans were in a condition that was to elicit stereotype threat—a situation where individuals are at risk for confirming the negative stereotypes of their in-group—they tended to perform worse on standardized measures than Caucasian Americans.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate how hegemonic myths and racial ideologies can be internalized indirectly without "conscious consent," which in turn influences how Black individuals view themselves and others (Osajima, 1993; hooks, 2003; Pyke, 2010). The implications of these early research studies are twofold. First, these studies demonstrate that Black individuals unknowingly participate in racist practices and must continuously work to dissociate themselves from white stereotypes

about Black people. Second, these findings highlight the importance of examining experiences of everyday racism—racist practices or behaviours that are normalized and infused in our daily interactions with others—among Black populations (Essed, 1991). Understanding race-based behaviours, such as the use of racial epithets—derogatory terms or expressions used to characterize a person in relation to their race—is necessary to explore ways in which Black individuals may unconsciously reproduce and maintain white racism through everyday "race talk" (Croom, 2008, 2013a; Hom, 2008; Doane, 2006; Myers & Williamson, 2001).

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis or linguistic relativity theory posits that our worldview and thought processes are shaped by the language we use (Black, 1959; Whorf & Carroll, 1942). This theory is useful for examining ways in which Black individuals view themselves and others after exposure to the racial epithet "nigger." The pejorative term "nigger" has been historically used to label Black populations as inferior to other races (Easton, 1837; Kennedy, 2003). Today, common variations of the term include, but are not limited to, "the n-word," "nigga," "niggar," "niggah," and "nigguh" (Kennedy, 2003; Lighter, 1994). Regardless of the nuances in orthography, the original meaning of the term was meant to disparage and derogate Black populations. In recent years, the racial epithet "nigger" has been used exclusively by in-group members to symbolize reclamation of the term (Anderson & Lepore, 2013); however, there is disagreement about whether racial epithets can be reappropriated for use among Black populations. Current linguistic theories propose that racial epithets by nature are offensive (Hedger, 2013; Camp, 2017; Anderson & Lepore, 2013; Croom, 2014). Given its abhorrent historical past, some are skeptical that the protean word can be reclaimed or whether there is utility in reclaiming it (Easton, 1837; Kennedy, 2003; Cervone et al., 2021). Others argue that "nigger" or variations of the epithet can be used as a term of endearment among friends to signify kinship and group affiliation (Walton et al., 2013; O'Dea & Saucier, 2020; Jeshion, 2020; Galinsky et al., 2013). If the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis proves correct, exposure or usage of the epithet "nigger" plays a largely determinative role in how Black people internalize their individual experiences with white racism.

THE CURRENT STUDY

The current research was intended to gain insight into how usage of racial epithets among Black populations may influence the internalization of white racism. The objective of the current study was to examine changes in scores on a post-internalized racial oppression measure after exposure to the racial epithet "nigger." A secondary objective was to investigate the relationship between psychological resilience and internalized racial oppression. There were three hypotheses for this study. First, it was hypothesized that Black participants' scores on a post-internalized racial oppression measure would be higher than those of white participants when compared to the baseline scores. Second, it was hypothesized that Black participants

would score higher on the psychological resilience measure compared to white participants. Third, it was hypothesized that there would be no difference in the post-internalized racial oppression scores between white participants and Black participants with high psychological resilience.

METHODS
Participants
Data were collected from female students at York University (Toronto, Canada) between February 1 and May 31, 2015. Participants were Black and white university students between the ages of 18 and 23. The average age of participants was 20.5 years. All Black participants were members of an African, Black, or Caribbean cultural club at York University.

Materials
The experience of racism questionnaire is a four-item questionnaire adapted from Mills (1990) to assess participants' previous experiences of racism. It consists of four questionnaire items that focus on beliefs, observations, and personal experiences. Each question is answered on a four-point Likert scale with options including "never," "sometimes," "frequently," and "all the time."

The 14-item resilience scale (RS-14) was designed to evaluate psychological resilience in a general population (Wagnild & Young, 1993; Wagnild, 2009). The reduced scale contains various items measuring self-reliance, meaningfulness, equanimity, perseverance, and existential aloneness. Items are rated on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

The Nadanolitization scale was used to measure internalized racial oppression (Bailey, 2008; Bailey et al., 2011). The 49-item scale was developed in the United States to measure Black individuals' internalization of white stereotypes about Black people. The scale is split into two components: the racialistic contents, which consist of 24 items that examine the white prejudice and social stereotypes that may be internalized by African Americans (Jones, 1996), and the social component, which consists of 25 items that ask questions about how African Americans are viewed in society. The range of the racialistic component (M = 1.80) was between 0 and 200, and the social component (M = 3.39) was 0–194. All items are rated on a scale of 0–8, from "not-at-all agree" to "entirely agree." For the current study, the scale was split in half by the different content sections to make up the pre-post internalized racism measures.

Three vignettes were developed for the purpose of this study. The vignette dialogue described a social interaction between two individuals over text message of unidentified race and names. The three experimental vignette conditions included 1) racism content and profanity; 2) no racism content and profanity; or 3) no racism content and no profanity. The racial epithet "nigger" was manipulated using

profanity with differing levels of offensiveness. The vignettes included the non-racial and non-gendered slurs "fucker" and "shit." In addition, participants' reaction to the vignette was measured using a five-item vignette rating scale that was developed specifically for the purpose of this study. The purpose of the rating scale was to help respondents reflect on the dialogue that they read, while ensuring that participants read the vignette.

Study Design

The current study was conducted using a 3 (vignette condition) x 2 (race) between-subjects factorial design. Factorial designs are advantageous for detecting interaction effects among variables, are adept at preventing carry-over effects, and allow for simultaneous examination of multiple independent variables (Baker et al., 2017; Collins et al., 2009). Participants were asked to read the vignette and then rate the interaction using the vignette rating scale. The racism content included in the vignettes was the first independent variable included in the study. The second independent variable was participant race, defined as Black or white. The continuous dependent variable was the overall score on the post-internalized racial oppression measure. Pre-internalized racial oppression scores were obtained before exposure to the vignette conditions to collect baseline data. Finally, a continuous variable was utilized to measure psychological resilience (moderator variable).

Procedures

Eligible female participants were sent an electronic invitation via Facebook to complete a survey about social attitudes and social perceptions of profanity usage. Black participants were recruited from African, Black, and Caribbean cultural clubs at York University. White participants were invited electronically but were recruited from the general York University student population. When participants clicked on the link, they were instructed to provide basic demographic information including age, sex/gender, race, where the participant attended school, what ethnic/cultural groups they held a membership in, and a self-rating of how often they use profanity. The specified order of the test battery included a baseline measurement of internalized racial oppression (the social component), the experience of racism questionnaire, and the resilience scale (RS-14). Upon completion, respondents were randomly assigned to one of three vignette conditions. Participants were randomly assigned to a vignette dialogue where either both a racial epithet and profanity were used, where only profanity was used, or where neither was used. Participants were asked to read the vignette and then rate the conversation using the vignette rating scale. A post-internalized racial oppression measure (the racialistic component) concluded the study. After completion, respondents were directed to another screen, which listed a debriefing message and contact information. This study was approved by York University's Research Ethics Board.

RESULTS

This study consisted of 30 female participants (14 Black students and 16 white students) randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions: the racism content and profanity condition (n=10; 4 Black, 6 white), the no racism content and profanity condition (n=10; 4 Black, 6 white), and the no racism content and no profanity condition (n=10; 6 Black, 4 white).

Analyses

A 3 (vignette condition) x 2 (race) factorial repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to measure differences between pre-post internalized racism scores (dependent variable). On average, Black participants received higher scores than white participants on the post-internalized racism measure compared to the control groups (see Appendix C for Figure 1). This difference was statistically significant, $F_{(1, 24)} = 26.98$, $p = <.001$, partial $n^2 = .529$. Neither vignette condition ($F_{(2, 24)} = 2.091$, $p = .145$, partial $n^2 = .148$) nor race ($F_{(1, 24)} = 2.189$, $p = .152$, partial $n^2 = .084$) had a statistically significant impact on post-internalized racism scores. The interaction between vignette condition and race was not statistically significant ($F_{(2, 24)} = .229$, $p = .797$, partial $n^2 = .019$). The descriptive statistics for these analyses are presented in Appendix A, Tables 1 and 2.

A 3 (vignette condition) x 2 (race) univariate factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to examine differences in psychological resilience (dependent variable). On average, Black participants scored lower on the psychological resilience measure compared to white participants (see Appendix D for Figure 2). Moreover, vignette condition ($F_{(2, 24)} = 4.27$, $p = .026$, partial $n^2 = .262$) had a statistically significant impact on psychological resilience scores. Race did not have a statistically significant impact on psychological resilience scores ($F_{(1, 24)} = .469$, $p = .50$, partial $n^2 = .019$). The interaction between vignette condition and race was not statistically significant ($F_{(2, 24)} = .379$, $p = .69$, partial $n^2 = .031$). The descriptive statistics for these analyses are presented in Appendix A, Table 3.

A 3 (vignette condition) x 2 (race) x 2 (psychological resilience) univariate factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to examine the association between levels of psychological resilience with internalized racial oppression. Black participants with high psychological resilience received lower scores on a post-internalized racism measure when compared to participants with low psychological resilience (see Appendix E, Figures 3 and 4). Vignette condition ($F_{(2, 19)} = 8.18$, $p = .003$, partial $n^2 = .463$), race ($F_{(1, 19)} = 4.49$, $p = .047$, partial $n^2 = .191$), and psychological resilience ($F_{(1, 19)} = 10.83$, $p = .004$, partial $n^2 = .363$) had an impact on post-internalized racism scores; however, there was no significant difference between levels of psychological resilience, race, and vignette condition ($F = (1, 19) = 2.120$, $p = .162$, partial $n^2 = .100$). There was an interaction between psychological resilience and vignette condition ($F_{(2, 19)} = 12.84$, $p <.001$, partial $n^2 = .575$). This

difference was statistically significant and accounted for a large effect size. The interactions between psychological resilience and race ($F_{(1, 19)} = 3.29$, $p = .085$, partial $n^2 = .148$) or race and vignette condition ($F_{(2, 19)} = .947$, $p = .405$, partial $n^2 = .091$) were not statistically significant. Descriptive statistics for these analyses are presented in Appendix B, Tables 4 and 5.

DISCUSSION

To my knowledge, this is the first study to demonstrate that exposure to the racial epithet "nigger" was associated with an increase in internalized racial oppression among Black female students in Canada. One possible explanation for this finding is that use of the racial epithet "nigger" was perceived as derogative and may have triggered a negative affect among Black participants. This finding is consistent with previous literature demonstrating that exposure to homophobic epithets activated stereotypes and reproduced prejudice, even among individuals who were not the target of discriminatory language (Fasoli et al., 2016; Bianchi et al., 2019). Additionally, while the vignette conditions in this study did not allow for the examination of the relationship between the two individuals, it is possible that the context in which racial epithets were used in this study influenced perceived offensiveness (Walton et al., 2013; O'Dea et al., 2015). A recent study has found that slurs used among strangers are perceived as more offensive than slurs used among friends, which were likely to be perceived as promoting group cohesion and affiliation (O'Dea & Saucier, 2020).

These findings have important implications for understanding reappropriation of racial epithets—the process of altering the meaning of derogative terms for use among in-groups (Bianchi, 2014; Croom, 2013b; Galinsky et al., 2013). Past studies have found that individuals derive a positive self-identity from self-labelling with pejorative terms, a finding that implies that reappropriation is an act of resistance used to reduce the stigma associated with derogatory labels (Galinsky et al., 2003; Galinsky et al., 2013; Pyke, 2007). However, previous research examining "defensive othering"—the creation of a racial hierarchy within one's in-group—suggests that developing a positive self-identity requires oppressed persons to accept that negative stereotypes associated with pejorative terms may be true of others in their in-group, but not of themselves (Pyke & Dang, 2003; Schwalbe et al., 2000). These results suggest that in intragroup environments, racialized individuals can use epithets to create negative sub-ethnic identities that disparage "others" in their in-group, while distancing themselves from the dominant stereotypes (Pyke, 2010; Pyke & Dang, 2003). Findings from the current study demonstrate that exposure to racial epithets both reminds racialized individuals of their own oppression and forces acknowledgement of the fixed identities created by the dominant white culture.

A unique contribution of this study was the examination of resilience and its moderating role on internalized racial oppression, following exposure to a racial

epithet. In the current study, Black participants scored lower on psychological resilience compared to their white counterparts when exposed to the racial epithet "nigger," a finding not substantiated by the second hypothesis. However, this finding is in line with our understanding of minority stress, a theory that describes racism as a unique stressor that can reduce individual resilience (Meyer, 2003a, 2003b, 2015; Franklin et al., 2006; Schwartz & Meyer, 2010; Spence et al., 2016). It is important to note that there were no significant differences in levels of resilience among race, a key finding that demonstrates that racism, not race, is the cause of significant stress among Black individuals.

Additionally, this study found that higher psychological resilience was associated with lower internalized racial oppression among Black participants. These findings suggest that psychological resilience is important in shaping individual responses to race-based behaviours (Meyer, 2015). From a clinical perspective, there is a need for additional therapeutic interventions targeted at reducing internalized racial oppression (Watts-Jones, 2002; Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Semmler, 2000). Findings from the current study suggest that psychological resilience may act as a therapeutic buffer to internalized racial oppression. Future research should examine how clinical interventions can be targeted to enhance individual and community-level resilience in racialized populations (Meyer, 2003b, 2015; Herrick et al., 2014).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The results of this study should be interpreted with the consideration of some limitations. This was a small preliminary study conducted at a Canadian university. The sample is not representative of the York University student population, and thus the results should not be used to make strong assertions about the population at large. Second, this study included only females between the ages of 18 and 23. Future research should examine if findings are similar among their male counterparts. Third, the racial epithet "nigger" contains many different nuances in orthography, whereas this study only focused on one variant of the pejorative term. More research is needed to understand how nuances in orthography may influence the results of the study.

To date, much of the race scholarship, originating from the United States, has centred on understanding racism within an American context. To my knowledge, this research is the first to empirically study the relationship between common usage of the racial epithet "nigger" and internalized racial oppression among Black female students in Canada. Future research should seek to better understand internalized racism among Black populations living in Canada. Moreover, the use of racial epithets has been adopted by other ethnic groups, yet only a few studies document the insidious effects of internalized racial oppression among these populations. Future research should examine how internalized racial oppression may affect other racialized populations. In addition to racial epithets, much of our cultural lexicon uses gender-based slurs that target women. There is a large variety of women-centric

pejorative terms compared to pejorative terms used to describe men. For this reason, it is imperative to understand intersectionality and examine the complexities of the multiple oppressions (i.e., internalized gender oppression and internalized racial oppression) that women experience. Finally, there are no current psychometric measures used to assess resilience among marginalized populations. Future research can support the development and validation of resilience measures that can account for responses to racism-related stressors.

CONCLUSION

Language plays a pertinent role in determining how we perceive ourselves and others. This study found that exposure to the racial epithet "nigger" was associated with an increase in internalized racial oppression in Black female participants. Additionally, this study found that Black females with high levels of resilience were better able to mitigate the psychological and emotional discord associated with internalized racial oppression, compared to individuals with low levels of resilience. Internalized racial oppression is a symptom of the social and political structures that perpetuate prejudice. Additional research is needed to better understand internalized racial oppression among Black and other racialized populations.

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APPENDIX A

Table 1. Average Baseline Measurement of Internalized Racism Grouped by Race and Vignette Condition

	Black		White	
Internalized Racism	Means	SD	Means	SD
Racism and Profanity	31.50	26.10	34.00	23.89
No Racism and Profanity	57.00	25.39	52.33	15.93
No Racism and No Profanity	44.33	20.59	40.50	25.96

Note: SD: standard deviation

Table 2. Average Post-Internalized Racism Scores Grouped by Race and Vignette Condition

	Black		White	
Internalized Racism	Means	SD	Means	SD
Racism and Profanity	21.75	6.55	14.50	17.25
No Racism and Profanity	22.75	15.28	7.83	8.77
No Racism and No Profanity	32.67	39.95	4.50	4.12

Note: SD: standard deviation

Table 3. Average Psychological Resilience Scores Grouped by Race and Vignette Condition

	Black		White	
Psychological Resilience	Means	SD	Means	SD
Racism and Profanity	74.00	16.99	80.67	12.68
No Racism and Profanity	74.75	10.18	72.67	8.80
No Racism and No Profanity	86.17	11.39	90.25	4.34

Note: SD: standard deviation

APPENDIX B

Table 4. Mean Post-Internalized Racism Scores Grouped Among Participants with Low Psychological Resilience by Race and Vignette Condition

	Black		White	
Psychological Resilience	Means	SD	Means	SD
Racism and Profanity	30.00	4.36	6.67	5.13
No Racism and Profanity	0.00	2.31	5.80	8.07
No Racism and No Profanity	107.00	.001	0.00	0.00

Note: SD: standard deviation

Table 5. Mean Post-Internalized Racism Scores Grouped Among Participants with High Psychological Resilience by Race and Vignette Condition
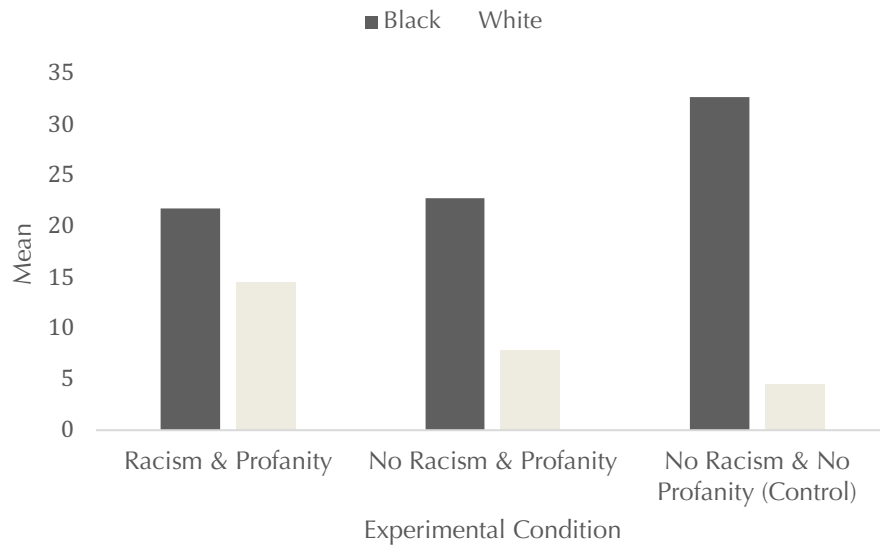
	Black		White	
Psychological Resilience	Means	SD	Means	SD
Racism and Profanity	19.00	.001	22.33	23.12
No Racism and Profanity	30.33	0.00	18.00	0.00
No Racism and No Profanity	17.80	18.39	4.50	4.12

Note: SD: standard deviation

Figure 1. Mean Internalized Racial Oppression Scores by Race and Vignette Condition (n=30)

APPENDIX D

Figure 2. Mean Psychological Resilience Scores by Race and Vignette Condition (n=30)
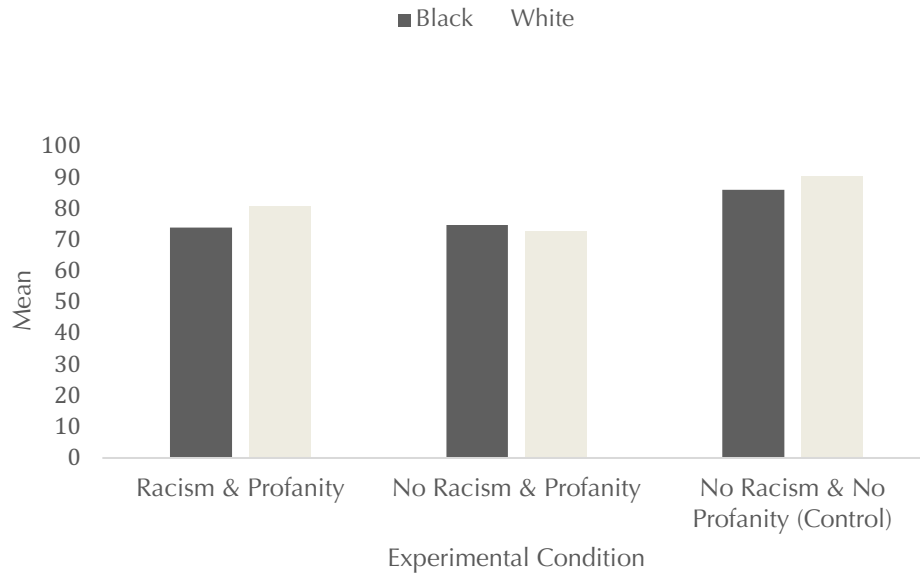
APPENDIX E

Figure 3. Interaction Effects Between Level of Psychological Resilience and Vignette Condition on Post-Internalized Racial Oppression Scores Among Black Female Participants (n=14)
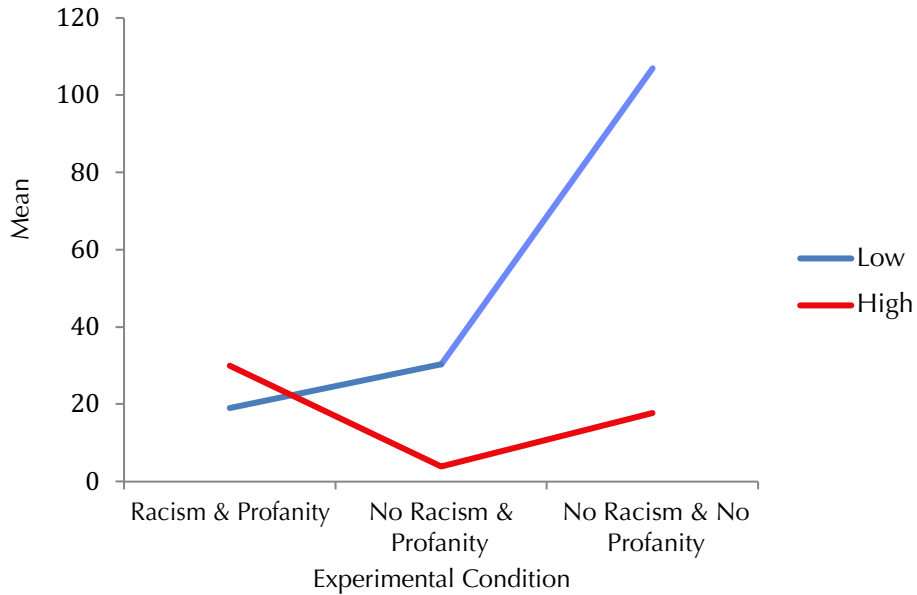
Figure 4. Level of Psychological Resilience by Vignette Condition on Post-Internalized Racial Oppression Scores Among White Female Participants (n=16)