

Ignoring racism makes distress worse, study finds

April 6 2010, by Elaine Bible



A 1930s photograph of a hotel entrance with a sign reading “Positively no Filipinos allowed.” This blatant racism stands in contrast to the subtle 'everyday racism' that Professor Alvin Alvarez has found still exists today.

(PhysOrg.com) -- Subtle forms of racism are part of the fabric of life, according to Professor of Counseling Alvin Alvarez, but the way people choose to cope with racist incidents can influence how much distress they feel.

Alvarez' latest study, published in the *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, found that denying or ignoring racial discrimination leads to greater

psychological distress, including [anxiety](#) and [depression](#), and lowers self-esteem.

"We found that some coping methods are healthier than others for dealing with everyday [racism](#)," Alvarez said. "When people deny or trivialize racist encounters, they can actually make themselves feel worse, amplifying the distress caused by the incident."

The study focused on what is referred to as 'everyday racism' -- subtle, commonplace forms of discrimination, such as being ignored, ridiculed or treated differently.

"These are incidents that may seem innocent and small, but cumulatively they can have a powerful impact on an individual's [mental health](#)," Alvarez said. "Trying to ignore these insidious incidents could become taxing and debilitating over time, chipping away at a person's spirit."

Alvarez surveyed 199 Filipino-American adults, both men and women, in the Bay Area and found that 99 percent of participants had experienced at least one incident of everyday racism in the last year.

The findings challenge the [stereotype](#) of Filipino-Americans as 'model minorities' -- ethnic groups that are typically successful in society and believed to no longer experience discrimination. "What's striking is we found that racism is still happening to Filipinos," Alvarez said.

"Therapists need to look beyond the frequent portrayal of Asian Americans as model minorities and help clients assess what their best coping strategy could be, depending on their resources, what's feasible and who they could turn to for support."

While further research is needed to determine what makes a healthy coping method, the study did find that for men, dealing with racism in an active way, such as reporting incidents to authorities or challenging the

perpetrator, was associated with decreased distress and increased self-esteem. For women, ignoring racism was linked to increased distress, but no significant correlation was found between other coping methods and [psychological distress](#).

The study was published in the April 2010 issue of the *Journal of Counseling Psychology* and was co-authored by Linda Juang, associate professor of psychology at SF State.

Provided by San Francisco State University

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