

The Relationship Between Appraisal of Racist Experiences and Anxiety Symptoms in a Black Sample: Moderating Effects of Church-Based Social Support

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Introduction

Anxiety disorders are among the most frequently diagnosed mental disorders in the United States (Kessler, Berglund et al., 2005; Kessler, Chiu, Demler, Merikangas, & Walters, 2005). Historically, research on anxiety disorders in Black populations has been limited. However, in a recent national epidemiological study, Breslau and colleagues (2004) found anxiety disorders to be more persistent and pervasive in individuals who identified as Black when compared to other racial groups. Given that the literature suggests that anxiety disorders exist in Black populations and that the experience of racism is associated with negative mental health outcomes (Harrell, 2000), it is important for researchers to focus on potential stressors that might be associated with the development of anxiety in this population and factors that may buffer the impact of these stressors.

Research suggests that Blacks in the United States are exposed to racist experiences regularly (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999), and these experiences significantly, negatively affect the psychological well-being of this population (Harrell, 2000). In addition, the literature suggests that racism is often experienced as a lack of control over one's environment, which has been found to be associated with the development and maintenance of anxiety symptomology (Barlow, 2002).

Given that the literature suggests that racism-related stress might be associated with anxiety in Black individuals, it is a critical next step for researchers to identify potential protective factors and begin to focus on ways to lessen the negative impact of racism on the mental health of Black individuals. Historically, Black churches have served this purpose. Researchers have theorized that the role of religion in Black communities is multifaceted. In particular, research suggests that religion in this community provides spiritual guidance, social support, and a commitment to the upward mobility of the Black community (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990).

The current study contributes to the literature by examining the relationship between racist experiences and anxiety in the Black community, hypothesizing that social support in the Black church moderates the relationship between race-related stressors and symptoms of anxiety in the Black population.

Methods

Questionnaires were completed by 41 participants, who self-identified as Black and attended a predominantly Black church in the Boston area. The participants were between the ages of 18 and 86 (mean = 52.34, SD = 18.11) and 51.2% were women, 36.6% were men, and 9.8% identified as "other". Participants endorsed a wide range of ethnic identities; the most common were

African-American (70.7%) and Caribbean (12.2%).

The questionnaire packet included measures of tension/stress (Depression Anxiety Stress Scale, DASS-21, stress subscale), anxious arousal (DASS-21 anxiety subscale), racism (Schedule of racist events, SRE, past year and lifetime frequency and appraisal subscales), and a measure of religious social support (Religious Support Measure, RSM).

The DASS-21 (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) is a 21-item measure of anxiety and depression symptoms that asks respondents to indicate how much each statement applies to them using a 4-point Likert-type scale. In particular, the anxiety and stress subscales of this measure assess anxious arousal and worry, stress, and tension, respectively. The DASS-21 has strong reliability and validity (Antony, Bieling, Cox, Enns, & Swinson, 1998). Internal consistency for the stress and anxious arousal subscales in this sample were good (Cronbach's alpha = .92 and .70, respectively).

The SRE (Landrine & Klonoff, 1996) is an 18-item self-report measure designed to assess the frequency and appraisal of racist events; the appraisal subscale was used in this study. Participants are asked to answer each question on a 7-point Likert-type scale, rating how stressful they found each event to be. Internal consistency for this subscale in this sample was .95.

The religious support measure (Krause, 2002) is a 13-item measure that assesses emotional support received from church members, negative interactions with other church members, anticipated support, and tangible social support received from church members. The scale ranges from 1 (very often) to 4 (never). In this sample the measure demonstrated good internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .86.

Results

It was predicted that appraisal of racist events would be significantly positively correlated with anxiety symptoms in this sample. To test this hypothesis, correlations between appraisal of racist events (SRE-A), and anxious symptoms (DASS-A & DASS-S) were computed. Contrary to the hypotheses, neither of these correlations were significant (.24 and .18, respectively).

Two hierarchical regressions were conducted using DASS-S or DASS-A as the outcome variable. Appraisal of racist events and church-based social support (centered) were entered in the first step. Next, the interaction term (the product of appraisal of racist events and church-based social support (centered)) was entered in the second step of the regression.

Church-based social support did not emerge as a significant moderator of the relationships between appraisal of racist events in predicting anxious arousal symptoms in this sample. However, in the analysis of church-based social support and the relationship between appraisal of racist events and stress, when the interaction term was added to the model including the centered main effects, the final step significantly improved the model, $\Delta R^2 = .13$, $F(1,33)=5.35$, $p < .05$. This indicates that church-based social support significantly moderated the relationship between appraisal of racist events and stress symptoms in this sample. See Table 2.

To interpret this interaction, we followed the procedures of Aiken and West (1991). Results indicated that church-based social support moderates the relationship between appraisal of racist events and stress such that at low levels of social support this relationship is significantly positive ($\beta = .68$, $t = 2.33$, $p = .03$), but at high levels of church

based social support this relationship is not significant ($\beta = .07, t = .45, p = .66$). See Figure 1.

Discussion

This study examined the moderating effects of church-based social support within the relationship between the experience of racism and anxiety symptoms in a sample of individuals who self-identify as Black. As expected, church-based social support was found to moderate the relationship between appraisals of racist events and stress symptoms in this sample such that the relationship was significantly positive at low levels of church based social support and not significant at high levels of church-based social support.

Given that the importance of church-based social support to the psychological well-being of Black individuals is highlighted in several studies, it is not surprising that at

low levels of church-based social support appraisal of racist events and stress symptoms were strongly positively related. Several studies have highlighted both social support and church-based social support as important coping strategies used by Blacks that buffer against the experience of racism (Shorter-Gooden, 2004; Utsey et al., 2006) and the results of this study appear to be in line with these findings.

The results from the current study suggest that church-based social support may be an important coping resource to consider when exploring the experience of racism and anxiety in Black populations. More broadly, they suggest a need for continued research on the impact of racism on the mental health of Black individuals, specifically on the nature of anxiety in this population. Future research should explore successful strategies that can lessen the impact of racist experiences.

Table 2.

The Moderating Effect of Church-Based Social Support on the Relationship Between the Appraisal of Racist Events and Stress

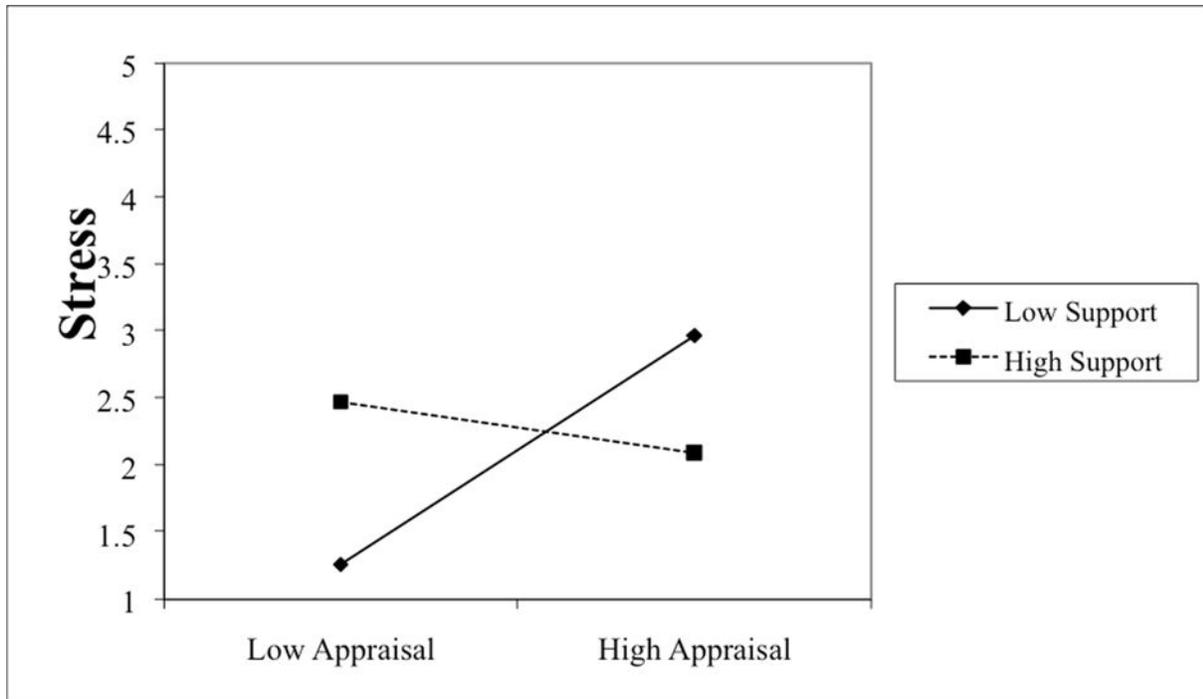
	B	SE B	Beta
Step 1			
RSM	.04	.04	.17
SRE-A	.01	.01	.11
Step 2			
RSM	.02	.04	.08
SRE-A	.02	.01	.28
RSM x SRE-A	-.004	.002	-.4*

Note. $\Delta R^2 = .13$ for Step 2. RSM = Religious Support Measure; SRE-A = Schedule of Racist Events stress appraisal subscale

* $p < .05$

Figure 1.

Church-Based Social Support Moderating the Relationship Between Appraisal of Racist Events and Stress



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