POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS AND POSTTRAUMATIC GROWTH IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to research psychological outcomes among Black adults after exposure to race related traumatic events online (TEO). Exposure to such events can lead to posttraumatic stress (PTS) and posttraumatic growth (PTG). Results showed a significant correlation between posttraumatic stress and posttraumatic growth indicating a link between the variables.

Keywords: Posttraumatic growth, posttraumatic stress, social media, black identity, trauma.

1. Introduction

Witnessing racial discrimination can be just as traumatic as directly experiencing it. This exposure often leads to many negative posttraumatic stress symptoms, but there's a new area of research focusing on the positive changes following traumatic events known as posttraumatic growth. An individual's personal connection with their racial identity may exacerbate or act as a buffer against experiences of racial discrimination. The purpose of this study is to research mental health outcomes among Black adults living in the US. Specifically, this study explores the relationships and associations between repeated exposure to race related traumatic events online and Black identity contribution to the amount of distress and growth experienced by individuals in the Black community. Past and current literature on this topic tends to focus on the negative consequences and outcomes following adverse events, ignoring the potential growth, resilience, and recovery that can occur within the Black community. Understanding the factors that may contribute to negative and positive consequences following adversity can lead to a better understanding of ways to best support individuals within the Black community and other racial/ethnic groups.

1.1. Variation in trauma responses: posttraumatic stress and posttraumatic growth

Posttraumatic Stress

Though racism is linked to many negative health outcomes, the connection between racial discrimination and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms is even more prominent and unique (Williams et al., 2021). PTSD is a psychological disorder triggered by witnessing or experiencing a traumatic event (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022). Some symptoms include flashbacks, avoidance of reminders of the event, nightmares, hypervigilance, and negative thoughts about oneself (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022). A longitudinal study found that Black and Latinx American adults' frequency with experiences of discrimination significantly predicted PTSD, but not other anxiety and mood disorders (Sibrava et al., 2019). The presence of multiple stigmatized identities may also have a compounding effect on traumatization with a study finding that gendered racial microaggressions towards Black women with HIV predicted PTSD symptoms and posttraumatic cognitions greater than discrimination based on race or HIV-status alone (Dale & Safren, 2019).

Posttraumatic Growth

Posttraumatic growth (PTG) is the positive psychological changes experienced as a result with highly challenging life circumstances which can result in greater appreciation for life and personal strengths, recognizing new possibilities for one's life, improved interpersonal relationships, and spiritual development (Chan et al., 2016). Within the PTG model, there are three categories of positive change: (1) changed perception of self, (2) change interpersonal relationships, and (3) changed philosophy on life (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1996). Previous research has shown that experiencing adversity may promote positive change and growth in refugees (Chan et al., 2016), but not considering one's exposure to

race-related traumatic events online. However, for PTG to develop and manifest, some degree of posttraumatic stress is necessary that challenges one's core beliefs to later prompt cognitive processing (As cited in Lowe et al., 2013). When individuals core beliefs, assumptions about the world, sense of safety, and identity are shaken up and challenged, they attempt to understand what is happening to them overall (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004).

1.2. Race related traumatic events online

Social media platforms have become widely used by people and ingrained within multiple cultures worldwide. With approximately 4.76 billion active social media users (Petrosyan, 2023) the exposure of these platforms is undeniable. Media coverage of traumatic events can be a common trigger to remember suppressed traumatic memories and cause immediate physiological arousal in adults who have experienced various kinds of traumatic events (Elliot 1997 & Kinzie et al., 1998). Little research has been done to understand the many negative effects of being exposed to racism and discrimination online on the mental health of people of color.

This gap is crucial, given the recent murders of George Floyd and others, and the concurrent tension between the Black community and the police continuing to rise. Police brutality against Black people has been widely circulated within the mainstream media. Videos of racism, discrimination, and the mistreatment of Black bodies – with a recent example being the murder of George Floyd– are played across multiple social media platforms reminding Black people that their lives aren't valued the same as their white counterparts. On YouTube alone, videos talking about and showing the murder of George Floyd have millions of views. On Twitter, analysts found evidence of strong condemnation of George Floyd's murder through the frequent use of popular hashtags #nojusticenopeace and #georgefloyd, and the daily use of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag surpassed 1 million (Nguyen et al., 2021). Through social media these race-related traumatic events can be circulated even more across multiple social media platforms – a problem that some scholars have with the spread of police brutality against Black men. Though these problems have come to forefront in mainstream society, little research has explored the effects of repeated exposure to race related traumatic events online (TEO) among minority populations (Tynes et al., 2019). Such research is necessary due to the many negative psychological symptoms that can occur because of media exposure to traumatic events (Tynes et al., 2019). The broad objective of this study is to shed light on the impacts of being exposed to race-related traumatic events online on the mental health of Black adults.

1.3. Black identity

Black people are not a monolith, and the individual experiences of Black people can greatly vary. How meaningful and significant one's racial/ethnic identity is also varies between individuals. Racial identity can greatly vary between individuals which directly influences the role of race in behaviors and across situations (Scottham et al., 2009). Scottham et al., (2009) created the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI) that separates racial identity into four dimensions: Salience, Centrality, Regard, and Ideology. (1) Salience is the extent to which race is relevant to oneself in different contexts. (2) Centrality refers to how much one emphasizes racial group membership as a part of their identity. (3) Regard refers to how positively or negatively one feels about their race and is separated into two dimensions, public and private. Public regard refers to how one feels about how other people view the Black community, while private regard refers to how one feels about the Black community and their membership within that. (4) Ideology refers to one's beliefs about the way Black people should behave and act (Scottham et al., 2009). Where an individual lies on these dimensions may determine how they react to discrimination. For this study, I will focus on the dimensions of centrality public regard, and private regard.

2. Objectives

The purpose of this study is to research psychological outcomes among Black adults living in the U.S. after exposure to race related traumatic events online. **Hypothesis** 1 is PTG and PTS will be significantly correlated with each other. **Hypothesis 2** is centrality, public regard, and private regard will influence the relationship between witnessing race related traumatic events online and PTS. **Hypothesis 3** is centrality, public regard, and private regard will influence the relationship between witnessing race related traumatic events online and PTG.

3. Design

Data for this study was drawn from an online survey of Black people living in the US assessing the thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and physical health following exposure to race-related traumatic events

online. A consent form and questionnaire were presented to participants requiring a maximum time of 25 minutes to complete. Individuals who were ineligible to participant were directed to the end of the study. A correlation was run to measure the relationships between all the variables and to see if PTS and PTG are associated with each other. To measure if centrality, public regard, and private regard influenced the relationship between race related TEO and PTS/PTG, a mediation analysis was run.

4. Methods

4.1. Participants

The sample for the present study consisted of 96 participants (N = 96) with 77 of them being female and 19 of them being male. 56 of the participants identified as straight, 39 identifying as a sexual minority, and 1 chose not to disclose. Participants mean age was 32 (SD = 10).

4.2. Measures

PTS reactions were assessed using the Impacts of Events Scale-6 (Thoresen et al., 2010). Participants were asked to respond to six items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from not at all to extremely about experiences following exposure to race related traumatic events online. A sample question is "I had trouble concentrating." Reliability analyses revealed a high internal consistency, as shown by a Cronbach's alpha of .86 (Horowitz et al., 1979).

PTG was assessed using a short form of the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTG-SF) containing 10 items (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Participants were asked to respond on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from not at all to a very great degree about perceived positive change following exposure to race related traumatic events online. Scores can range from 10 to 60, with higher scores indicating more perceived positive change. A sample question is "I am able to do better things with my life." Reliability analyses revealed a high internal consistency, as shown by a Cronbach's alpha of .94 (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

Three self-report items were used to assess the frequency of participants' experiences of witnessing race-related traumatic events online over the last month. The items correspond with (1) people from my racial group being beaten, (2) people from my racial group being arrested or detained, and (3) a person from my racial group being shot. The frequency of each event was rated from 0 = never and to 5 = every day. Scores were averaged to create a composite score, with higher scores corresponding to more frequent experiences of witnessing race related traumatic events online (Tynes et al., 2019). Reliability analyses revealed a high internal consistency, as shown by a Cronbach's alpha of .85 (Tynes et al., 2019).

To assess one's racial identity the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity-Teen (MIBI-t) scale was used. The subscales of centrality, public regard, and private regard were used with each subscale having three questions. Participants were asked the how much they agree or disagree with items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Participants' scores are averaged into a composite score for each subscale. The centrality scale (α = .55) assesses how important race is to an individual's identity with higher scores indicating race is a more central identity (Scottham et al., 2008). The public regard scale (α = .66) assesses how individuals feel other groups feel positively or negatively towards Black people (Scottham et al., 2008). The private regard subscale (α = .77) assesses how positive an individual feels towards other Black people and being Black (Scottham et al., 2008). Higher scores on the regard scales indicate more positive feelings towards Black people (Scottham et al., 2008).

5. Results

Correlation Analysis

The coefficients for the variables within the study were PTS, PTG, centrality, public regard, private regard, race related TEO, and age. Hypothesis 1 was supported by the analysis. The results revealed that PTS has a significant, positive relationship with PTG (r = .24, p < .05). As PTS increases, PTG also increases. The results also show that PTS has a significant, negative relationship with age (r = -.46, p < .001). As someone's age increases, their PTS score decreases.

Race related TEO has a significant, positive relationship with PTS (r = .40, p < .001) and PTG (r = .33, p < .001), and a negative relationship with public regard (r = -.32, p < .001). For the dimensions of black identity, PTS has a significant, negative relationship with public regard (r = -.42, p < .001). Centrality and private regard are positively correlated (r = .70, p < .001). PTG has a significant, positive relationship with both centrality (r = .31, p < .001). and private regard (r = .29, p < .01).

Mediation Analysis for Race Related TEO, Public Regard, and Posttraumatic Stress

Hypothesis 2 was partly supported by the analysis. Participants age and sex were controlled for during the mediation analysis. The results suggested that the indirect effect of the race related TEO on PTS through public regard was statistically significant (B0 = .0756, Bse = .0340, CI = .0212, .1513).

Post Hoc Analysis

The results revealed that the centrality (B0 = .3109, Bse = .3825, CI = -0.4298, 1.1113) and private regard (B0 = - .4894, Bse = .3297, CI = -0.1508, 1.1750) did not mediate the relationship between witnessing race related TEO and experiencing posttraumatic growth. A post hoc analysis was run to measure the influence of race related TEO, centrality, and private regard on PTG. To test this a multiple regression model was ran and revealed that PTG had a positive relationship with race related TEO, centrality, and private regard. Such that, as PTG increases, race related TEO, centrality, and private regard also increased. ($R2$ = .23, F(1, 5.33) = 1986.798, p < .001).

6. Discussion

Few studies have looked at how witnessing racial discrimination online impacts the mental health of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) communities. This study looked at the link between PTS and PTG among Black adults living in the US. The main purpose of this study was to examine how a person's racial identity mediates the relationship between witnessing race related TEO and psychological outcomes of distress and growth. The results indicate that there is a significant positive correlation between PTS and PTG which is consistent with previous research (Lowe et al., 2013). The results also indicate that public regard influences the relationship between witnessing race related TEO and PTS. The post-hoc analysis showed that centrality and private regard as well as race related TEO predict experiencing PTG which is consistent with previous research (Seaton & Iida, 2019).

Link between Posttraumatic Stress and Posttraumatic Growth

No known PTG studies including Black participants have assessed exposure to frequent traumas in their communities making this research even more necessary. Observing this relationship will advance the research on understanding the phenomenon of PTG and its link to PTS. Past research has looked at the link between posttraumatic stress and posttraumatic growth in survivors of Hurricane Katrina (Lowe et al., 2013). Lowe et al., (2013) found that after one-and-three years post Hurricane Katrina, posttraumatic stress and posttraumatic growth were significantly, positively associated. Survivors with probable PTSD that had high levels of posttraumatic stress, also had high levels of posttraumatic growth (Lowe et al., 2013). This indicates the process of experiencing both PTG and PTS may be very similar. Knowing these effects and impacts can inform future interventions, preventions, and clinical work that will the most effective related to racial trauma.

Mediating Effects of Black Identity

This study specifically examined if centrality, public regard, and private regard mediated the relationship between witnessing race related TEO and experiencing PTS and PTG among Black adults. Though there are mixed findings regarding the mediating effects of black identity dimensions, some of the results of this study are aligned with previous research on this topic (Seaton & Iida, 2019). Hypothesis 2 was partly supported with public regard being negatively associated with PTS as well as influencing the relationship between PTS and witnessing race related TEO. This is inconsistent with previous research showing that low public regard buffer against the effects of discrimination (Sellers et al., 2003; Sellers et al., 2006). The reason why public regard and PTS have an inverse relationship could be because someone with a low public regard will be more likely to believe that others already have a negative perception of them probably leading to higher levels of perceived stress and perceived discrimination. Racially ambiguous events will likely be coded as involving racial discrimination.

Hypothesis 3 was not supported, but the post-hoc analysis revealed that race related TEO, centrality, and private regard predict experiencing PTG. This is consistent with previous research finding that black identity can predict better psychological functioning, as well as high levels of centrality predicting resilience (Sellers et al., 2003). This could be because if someone scores high on centrality and private regard, they would be more likely to see positive aspects of themselves and their identity allowing them to grow from such experiences and see positive aspects of their groups (Sellers et al., 2003).

7. Conclusion

The results from this study are important for reframing the conversation around trauma and racial discrimination. This study reveals the negative impacts of witnessing online racial discrimination while also illuminating the positive changes that may be possible after exposure. This study shows that though these experiences may be debilitating, they can also be a catalyst for change and better psychological functioning. This can allow for BIPOC to come together to discuss such experiences and

how to grow and cope after exposure. Future research on this topic should include a wider sample to examine if the process of experiencing both PTS and PTG is similar in different racial/ethnic groups.

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