Examination of Discrimination and Social Anxiety Prevalence in Minorities and Whites

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ABSTRACT

Social anxiety usually develops at early age and is characterized by fear of social situations in which a person must interact with strangers or situations in which others may judge it. This fear creates excessive distress and interferes with academic, occupational, and social functioning. Discrimination means treating someone unfairly because they have or possess distinct characteristics. Minorities are generally treated differently because of their appearance, accent or characteristics. Many types of discrimination that minorities face are the main sources of anxiety.

The purpose of this study is to determine whether people of color are more likely to feel social anxiety as compare to whites and whether discrimination raises more social fears. White people and minorities from City College of New York were randomly selected to fill out the questionnaire. Results of these questionnaires helped us figure out whether the person is a victim of racial discrimination or social anxiety. Data collected from the college supported by our hypothesis and we would like to further our research on the subject by expanding our sample size and upgrading the procedure of data collection.

Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD), also known as social phobia, is very widespread in the United States, and has a lifetime prevalence of 12.1% (Bryant et al., 2005). Prevalence means the percentage of people who have the disorder in a certain time frame (National Institutes of Health) (“NIMH » What is Prevalence?,” n.d.). The symptoms of SAD include an intense fear of social interactions that end up interfering with people’s lives (Levine et al., 2014).

Although the prevalence rate of SAD in African Americans (4.6%) and Caribbean blacks (4.7%) is lower than non-Hispanic whites (7.1% ) within the time frame of 12 months, they experience the effects more strongly (Levine et al., 2014). Therefore, it is imperative to take a look at the reasoning why these populations experience SAD, and if discrimination plays a part of it.

Social anxiety typically develops at young age and is characterized by fear of social or performance situations in which a person has to interact with unknown persons, or situations in which they can be judged by others. Minorities make up more than a 1/3 of the US. Studies on the relationships and causes of depression, anxiety and other mental illness have produced mixed results in minority groups that requires attention. These studies has shown diverse effects of discriminatory experiences and stereotyping on people with a minority background.

Micro-aggression is an expressions of racism. These expressions come out in apparently damaging comments from people who may have good intentions. A White man or woman reflects a micro-aggression when approached by blacks or Latinos by holding their belonging/ purse. Similarly, an American born and raised in Asia in the United States is complimented for speaking "good English" is another example of micro-aggregation, this reflects the attitude that they are not true Americans.

Discrimination means treating a person unfairly because he or she owns or has certain qualities/ characteristics which are different from the majority. Minorities are usually treated differently only because of their appearances, accent or characteristics. Many kind of discrimination, minorities are faced with, results in the development of anxiety in them. There are certain hypothesized theories that try to explain why anxiety disorders are linked to discrimination, and these might explain why discrimination is specifically linked to SAD. A study conducted in 2010 sampled 36 African American males by conducting focus groups for everyone but two of the participants who had a one-on-one interview. The researchers were interested in how they felt psychologically on college campuses that are predominantly White. The participants reported having feelings of frustration, anxiety, and fear when they experienced racial microaggressions, which are actions that communicate hostility. Racial battle fatigue is a term that describes these feelings in response to racial microaggressions. Also, the African American males saw each interaction they had in a race and gender perspective, and all of them were not pleased to be heavily watched by the campus police (Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007). This demonstrates that SAD and discrimination based on one’s race may only affect African Americans (Levine et al., 2014).

Research has demonstrated a connection between discrimination and mental health issues, but more specifically anxiety disorders like Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) have been linked to discrimination (Soto, Dawson-Andoh, & BeLue, 2011). Discrimination are behaviors and actions that exclude groups of people based on things like gender, age, or sex (Levine et al., 2014). The effects of perceived discrimination were highlighted in one study that found that African Americans who experienced perceived discrimination had very high levels of stress, and low levels of success in society (Broman, Mavaddat, & Hsu, 2000). Perceived discrimination is when a person is judged based on their looks, and put into a category like race, age, or gender. An example of this is if an employer declines training to an African American based on their race (Levine et al., 2014). This demonstrates that discrimination has the ability to affect ethnic minorities. Moreover, in a 2006 report, the American Psychological Association highlighted that people who experience discrimination are negatively affected, but people who did not experience discrimination had healthy mental states (Jackson et al., 1996). Other forms of discrimination like major discrimination, a form of discrimination that concerns major events that occur like a person being fired due to their race, and everyday discrimination, a form of discrimination that is treating someone with less respect like calling them a racially offensive term, have been linked to having detrimental effects on African Americans.

Many research studies have not examined the link between discrimination and certain anxiety disorders. Yet, studies have determined that racial discrimination is predominantly targeted against African Americans (Fisher, Wallace, & Fenton, 2000) (Swim, Hyers, Cohen, Fitzgerald, & Bylsma, 2003). This could explain why they experience SAD since people who have SAD have constant fear of judgement. One study examined GAD and perceived discrimination with African Americans, Afro-Caribbeans, and non-Hispanic Whites (Soto et al., 2011). They discovered that the three groups were likely to have GAD due to experiencing discrimination that was not race related. However, race based discrimination was significantly associated with GAD in African Americans only. Also, another study that is the only study to have examined the relationship between non-race based discrimination and social anxiety, found that non-Hispanic whites, Hispanic, and African Americans who experienced unfair treatment were significantly likely to experience SAD (Levine et al., 2014). Also, they concluded that African Americans and Caribbean blacks were likely to associate unfair treatment to racial prejudice. Therefore, racial discrimination and SAD could only be linked together for African Americans and Caribbean blacks. This link makes sense since SAD is characterized by feeling that others are judging you (Hope et al. 1990). Also, everyday discrimination, and not major discrimination was significantly linked to SAD (Levine et al., 2014).

The purpose of our study is to figure out if social anxiety is more prevalent in people of color than Whites, and if discrimination plays a role if you have more social anxiety. Past research determined that SAD in African Americans (4.6%) and Caribbean blacks (4.7%) is lower than non-Hispanic whites (7.1% ), but African Americans and Caribbean blacks experience the effects more strongly (Levine et al., 2014). So, our research tried to examine if we would find different results, and observe a higher prevalence in minorities. We hypothesized that people of color will experience more social anxiety, and that discrimination is a factor in why they have more social anxiety.

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