



Short Communication

Discrimination hurts, but mindfulness may help: Trait mindfulness moderates the relationship between perceived discrimination and depressive symptoms



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ABSTRACT

Discriminatory experiences are not only momentarily distressing, but can also increase risk for lasting physical and psychological problems. Specifically, significantly higher rates of depression and depressive symptoms are reported among people who are frequently the target of prejudice (Kessler, Mickelson, & Williams, 1999; Schulz et al., 2006). Given the gravity of this problem, this research focuses on an individual difference, trait mindfulness, as a protective factor in the association between discrimination and depressive symptoms. In a community sample of 605 individuals, trait mindfulness dampens the relationship between perceived discrimination and depressive symptoms. Additionally, mindfulness provides benefits above and beyond those of positive emotions. Trait mindfulness may thus operate as a protective individual difference for targets of discrimination.

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1. Introduction

The experience of discrimination deprives a person of opportunities and can damage mental and physical health (see Pascoe & Richman, 2009, for review). In this paper, we test the hypothesis that trait mindfulness may diminish the relationship between discrimination and depressive symptoms. Mindfulness is defined as a perspective of nonjudgmental attention and awareness of the present moment (Bishop et al., 2004). A growing body of research suggests that mindfulness promotes successful coping in stressful situations, and thus, may serve as a buffer against the stress of experiencing discrimination.

1.1. Understanding the relationship between perceived discrimination and depression

The experience of discrimination is often hurtful, humiliating, and even traumatizing. Researchers have found a robust relationship between perceived discrimination and depression (Pascoe & Richman, 2009). Kessler and colleagues (1999) found that perceived discrimination was significantly associated with nonspecific distress and major depression. Noh, Beiser, Kaspar, Hou, and Rummens (1999) found that in a sample of Southeast Asian

immigrants, those who reported experiencing racial discrimination had higher levels of depression than those who did not experience discrimination. Finally, a longitudinal study found that increasing rates of discriminatory experiences over a 5 year period was associated with increases in depressive symptoms over the same time period (Schulz et al., 2006).

The relationship between discrimination and depression has commonly been understood in terms of a stress and coping framework. Events appraised as threatening, such as experiences of discrimination, result in a stress response, which mobilizes mental and physical resources to fight or avoid the stressor. Although momentary activation of the stress response may be beneficial to combat or escape from threatening situations, prolonged stress activation depletes psychological and physiological resources and causes psychological and physical damage. Therefore, individuals who frequently experience discrimination are at risk for prolonged stress and its harmful long term effects (Richman, Pek, Pascoe, & Bauer, 2010).

The consequences of prolonged stress, however, depend on an individual's coping strategy – his or her cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage the internal and external demands of a stressful event (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). Generally, coping has two main roles: (1) dealing with the problem causing distress and (2) regulating emotions triggered by the distressing event (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). Previous research has shown mindfulness to be a successful coping strategy for a number of other mental health problems, and it is a consistent predictor of greater well-being

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more broadly (for review see [Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007](#)). Thus, we aimed to test whether higher levels of mindfulness could buffer the effects of experiencing discrimination.

1.2. The moderating role of mindfulness on the discrimination-depressive symptoms relationship

Mindfulness could dampen the relationship between perceived discrimination and depressive symptoms through at least three mechanisms. First, mindfulness is associated with improved understanding of personal emotions, which is thought to improve one's ability to regulate emotions and hasten recovery from negative emotions ([Coffey, Hartman, & Fredrickson, 2010](#)). Second, mindfulness is thought to improve individuals' ability to mentally separate experiences from sense of self-worth ([Brown et al., 2007](#)), a trait which predicts fewer automatic negative thoughts and greater ability to let go of negative thoughts ([Frewen, Evans, Maraj, Dozois, & Partridge, 2008](#)). Finally, mindfulness has been linked to lower general emotional reactivity ([Arch & Craske, 2006](#)), allowing for more objective observations and more appropriate and deliberate responses to situations ([Barnes, Brown, Krusemark, Campbell, & Rogge, 2007](#)).

Thus, people higher in mindfulness who experience discrimination may have greater ability to regulate negative emotions, decouple discrimination from sense of self-worth, make objective observations and successfully navigate interpersonal interactions than can those who are less mindful. All of these abilities suggest that greater mindfulness should mitigate the consequences of discriminatory experiences.

1.3. The buffering effects of mindfulness versus positive emotions

Previous research has found that positive emotions offset the negative effects of discrimination ([Ong & Edwards, 2008](#)). Furthermore, mindfulness and positive emotions tend to be associated; people who have greater positive emotional reactivity are more likely to be mindful ([Catalino & Fredrickson, 2011](#)). To test whether the protective effects of mindfulness are distinct from those of positive emotions, we examined whether the effects of mindfulness remained after controlling for individual differences in the experience of positive emotions.

2. Current research

Given the ubiquity of discrimination and its negative consequences, the current project sought to investigate whether trait mindfulness moderates the relationship between perceived discrimination and depressive symptoms. First, we hypothesized that mindfulness would moderate the relationship between perceived discrimination and depressive symptoms. Second, we hypothesized that this relationship would be independent of the effects of positive emotions.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

Community members were recruited to participate in a web-based survey in exchange for \$20 compensation.¹ The sample was recruited as the screening phase for another experiment on optimal mental health ([Catalino & Fredrickson, 2011](#)). The screening phase

aimed to collect as many individuals as possible in order to obtain a wide range of people experiencing varying levels of mental health. Participants were recruited through several methods including flyers and electronic advertisements posted on Craig's List, from January to May in 2007. Any US resident was eligible to take part in the survey. A sample of 624 adults participated. Nineteen subjects did not complete all of the measures pertinent to the current research question, so the sample used for our analyses was $N = 605$. A power analysis indicated that our sample size provided high power ($1 - \beta > .9$) to detect even a small effect size ($r = .20$). [Table 1](#) displays the sample's sociodemographic and descriptive information on the variables of interest for the current research.

3.2. Materials

3.2.1. Perceived discrimination

Participants completed a modified version of the Perceived Racism Scale ([McNeilly et al., 1996; Richman et al., 2010](#)). The measure was adapted to assess general discriminatory experiences as opposed to racially specific discriminatory experiences. This adaptation of the Perceived Racism Scale has been used in previous research ([Richman et al., 2010](#)). Participants were asked how many times they experienced situations such as "People 'talk down' to me". Responses were made on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 6 (*several times a day*). The mean of these 33 items served as the participant's measure of perceived discrimination ($\alpha = .96$). At the end of the scale, participants were asked to indicate the main source of their experiences of unfair treatment (*Race or ethnicity; Gender; Sexual Orientation; Age; Religion; Income Level; Physical Appearance; Body Weight*).

Table 1
Sociodemographic information and statistics on variables of interest.

Characteristic		
Age	Mean	40.93
	SD	9.60
	Range	19–65
Gender	Male	$N = 241$
	Female	$N = 361$
	Missing	$N = 3$
Race	White	$N = 469$
	Black	$N = 85$
	South Asian	$N = 25$
	East Asian	$N = 8$
	Hispanic	$N = 7$
	American Indian	$N = 2$
	Other	$N = 2$
	Missing	$N = 3$
Positive emotion	Mean	3.26
	SD	0.87
	Range	1.08–5.00
Perceived discrimination	Mean	1.64
	SD	0.64
	Range	1.00–5.39
Mindfulness	Mean	3.40
	SD	0.49
	Range	1.82–4.83
Depressive symptoms	Mean	1.36
	SD	0.46
	Range	1.00–3.71

¹ The study was approved by the University of North Carolina's IRB. Participants provided informed consent prior to participant. In addition, the data were completely de-identified.

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