



A preliminary exploration of the moderating role of valued living in the relationships between racist experiences and anxious and depressive symptoms

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ABSTRACT

The present study explores the relationship between frequency of racist experiences and anxious arousal, stress (general anxiety), and depressive symptoms in an African American sample. Fifty-seven African American undergraduate and graduate students responded to questionnaires assessing experiences of racism, valued living, and anxious arousal, stress (general anxiety), and depressive symptoms. Results indicated that valued living was significantly negatively correlated with anxious arousal, stress (general anxiety), and depressive symptoms. Additionally, valued living moderated the relationship between past year frequency of racist events and these symptoms. Specifically, the relationships between past year frequency of racist events and anxiety and depressive symptoms were significantly positive at low levels of valued living and not significant at high levels of valued living. Results from the current study provide preliminary evidence that engaging in actions consistent with what matters to the individual may buffer the negative emotional impact of racist experiences.

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1. Introduction

Lifetime prevalence rates of mood and anxiety disorders in Black American populations are 24.4% and 10.8% respectively (Breslau et al., 2006) and these rates are comparable to those in the general population (Kessler et al., 2005; Neal-Barnett & Turner, 1991). However, several studies have found that racial and ethnic minorities receive lower-quality mental health care (Harris, Edlund, & Larson, 2005; Institute of Medicine, 2002). In addition, Black Americans are significantly underrepresented in treatment in mental health settings (Neal-Barnett & Turner, 1991; Wang et al., 2005), in part, due to a cultural mistrust of mental health care providers based in a history of exploitation and lack of quality care provided to this community including the lack of culturally informed treatments available (Carpenter-Song et al., 2010; Hunter & Schmidt, 2010). Research examining culturally specific factors that exacerbate anxiety and depression among Black American individuals (e.g., racist experiences) and factors that buffer the negative impact of racism on anxious and depressive symptoms (e.g., mindfulness and acceptance-based strategies) can

help address this gap in prevalence and treatment. Specifically, this gap can be addressed through creating an enhanced understanding of culturally specific stressors and their impact on mental health difficulties as well as the ways in which clinicians can apply strategies to target the negative effects of culturally specific stressors, such as experiences of racism. The current study adds to the existing literature by exploring the potential buffering role of values consistent living, a mindfulness and acceptance-based strategy, in the relationship between the experience of racism and anxious and depressive symptoms in an African American sample.¹

Experiences of racism are associated with negative health and mental health outcomes (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999;

¹ Race (e.g., Black) and ethnicity (e.g., African-American) have historically been conflated in psychological research. This conflation ignores the nature of race as a social construction, as well as the importance of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds and lived experiences among individuals who racially identify as Black. For the purpose of the current paper, when citing other studies, we will use the term "Black American" to describe study samples from the literature when race and ethnicity are conflated, because it is the broader term that does not assume ethnicity. In addition, we will use the language used by authors of papers when race and ethnicity are not conflated. Finally, we will use the term African American to describe the current study sample, to indicate that our participants identified ethnically as African American, in addition to identifying racially as Black.

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Fang & Myers, 2001; Krieger & Sidney, 1996; Slavin, Rainer, McCreary, & Gowda, 1991). Specifically, studies have found that perceived racial discrimination is linked to higher levels of depression, anxiety, and somatization symptoms in Black American samples (Broman, Mavaddat, & Hsu, 2000; Landrine & Klonoff, 1996; Greer, 2011). Moreover, experiences of racism have been linked to reports of chronic worry (Rucker, West, & Roemer, 2009), anxiety (Donovan et al., 2012) and depressive symptoms (West, Donovan, & Roemer, 2010) in samples of Black American individuals. Finally, Soto, Dawson-Andoh, and Belue (2011) found the experience of racism to predict Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) in an African American sample. These findings indicate a need to identify factors that may buffer the negative impact racism has on both anxiety and depressive symptoms and promote optimal functioning in the face of experiences of racial discrimination.

One potential effective strategy for combating racism's effects on anxiety and depressive symptoms is the role of attending to and making choices based on one's values (i.e., the things that are meaningful and matter to an individual; Wilson & Murrell, 2004). The process of affirming and reconnecting with values may be particularly important for Black Americans because a context of racism can both promote disconnect and dissonance from one's personal value systems (Sue, 1978).

Within the therapeutic context, discussion of values has been typically applied in acceptance-based behavioral treatments as a way of helping individuals approach the things that matter to them even in the face of distressing emotions, as developed in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT; Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2012) and adapted in Acceptance-based Behavioral Therapy for GAD (ABBT; Roemer & Orsillo, 2014). Interventions that have included a values component have been associated with significant reductions in anxiety and depressive symptoms in predominantly White samples (Hayes-Skelton, Roemer, & Orsillo, 2013; Roemer, Orsillo, & Salters-Pedneault, 2008; Twohig et al., 2010).

Obstacles to living a life consistent with one's values can be either aversive internal experiences of distress or external stressors. The environmental context is one example of an external obstacle (Hayes et al., 2012; Roemer & Orsillo, 2009). Typically, conceptualizations of obstacles in the environmental context are limited to examples related to employment, relationships, family, etc. However, for Black Americans, these obstacles include experiences of racism. The process of reconnecting with one's values may allow for Black American individuals to then engage in valued actions as a way to respond effectively to these distressing experiences. In contrast, if values are ignored, which often happens in the face of distress, distress may never dissipate. When individuals are able to identify and understand their values, they can be more aware of what matters to them during stressful moments, make choices consistent with their values, and act upon these choices (Hayes et al., 2012; Roemer & Orsillo, 2009).

For individuals experiencing values discrepancies in their lives, clarifying what is personally meaningful can help individuals become more aware of these discrepancies during stressful experiences (Sobczak & West, 2013). For example, individuals often feel as if they do not have choices in their lives and that life is only about experiences that they *have* to do (e.g., "I have to let my boss say racist things to me, otherwise I will lose my job.") or *should* do (e.g., "I should not feel upset when I am treated unfairly because of my race"). Focusing on values can help individuals attend to and clarify what matters to them by bringing awareness to the moments when they do in fact have choices in their lives. Even though distress may be inevitable or uncontrollable, it may be possible to choose actions in response to that distress (Hayes et al., 2012). Perhaps an individual who reconnects to his value of respect may decide to approach his boss about the racist comments because simply accepting these comments would

be living a life inconsistent with who he is and what he stands for. For Black Americans, in particular, reconnecting to values can be empowering such that making choices can begin to feel natural, even in the face of racism.

Research findings have already demonstrated the role that an opportunity to reconnect with values can play in increasing positive affect and reducing defensiveness (Crocker, Niiya, & Mischkoshski, 2008) through increasing engagement in prosocial behaviors (Thomaes, Bushman, de Castro & Oriobo, 2012). Most notably, Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, and Master (2006) provided strong evidence for the potential usefulness of connecting to one's values among Black individuals. Black middle school students in an experimental values writing condition earned higher grades during their fall term than the Black students in the control condition. Moreover, the values clarification condition reduced the racial achievement gap between the Black and White students by 40%. There were no condition effects for the White students. In a longitudinal, follow-up study, values interventions prevented decline in belongingness feelings among Black 7th grade students; whereas students who did not participate in the values intervention experienced a decline in feelings of belongingness (Cook, Purdie-Vaughans, Garcia, & Cohen, 2012). These data suggest that being able to affirm and reconnect to values may be especially important for Black individuals in the context of tasks commonly associated with race-related threats, such as academic performance—a finding consistent with previous research on stereotype threat and academic performance (Steele, 1997). Through the cultivation of enhanced self-efficacy and empowerment, engaging in personally meaningful actions may buffer the negative impact of racism on both anxious and depressive symptoms for Black individuals. We also conducted a small pilot study that found that a brief values clarification exercise led to decreased self-reported distress in response to an imaginal racist experience, compared to a control condition of writing about other's values, among Black Americans (West, Graham, & Roemer, 2013).

To further the understanding of the ways in which Black individuals can function optimally in the context of racism, the present study examined self-reported valued living as a potential buffer in the relationship between experiences of racism and anxiety and depressive symptoms in a sample of African American graduate and undergraduate students.

First, we hypothesized that frequency of racist events would be significantly positively correlated with symptoms of anxiety (both stress [general anxiety] and anxious arousal) and depression in this sample. Second, we predicted that valued living would be significantly negatively correlated with these symptoms. Lastly, we predicted that valued living would moderate the relationship between frequency of racist experiences and these symptoms, such that at low levels of valued living, the relationship between racist experiences and psychological symptoms would be statistically significant, while at high levels of valued living, these relationships would be more modest and potentially no longer significant.

2. Method

2.1. Sample and procedures

Participants included undergraduate and graduate students at a large urban commuter university and were recruited through emails sent to students with a university email address, through flyers distributed on campus, and through recruitment in classrooms. All individuals were provided informed consent and were entered into a raffle for a \$50 amazon gift card for participating in the study.

Fifty-seven ethnically identified African American participants (who also identified racially as Black) completed the necessary

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