

Affection Deprivation and Weathering: An Exploratory Study of Black and African Americans' Well-Being during COVID-19*

Alfred Holman, Jordyn Ewing-Roush, and Christal Goines

ABSTRACT

*This study investigates factors related to the well-being of African Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically, reports of discrimination, perceived stress, and affection deprivation through the lenses of Affection Exchange Theory and the Weathering Framework. Sixty-six individuals participated in a cross-sectional survey study through an online Qualtrics questionnaire. We predicted that Black and African American participants would report experiencing more discrimination during the pandemic than other people of color (POC) due to several overlapping pathways of racism (e.g., stereotype effect, internalized racism, and systemic racism) affecting Black individuals more than others. We also predicted affection deprivation for Black and African American participants would be directly related to their perceived stress. Results from an independent samples *t*-test indicated no significant difference of discrimination between Black and non-Black participants. However, in post hoc analysis, there was a significant difference of discrimination between Black and White participants, illustrating the greater strain on Black individuals during the pandemic when compared to their White counterparts. Finally, correlational analysis revealed a significant positive association between affection deprivation and perceived stress for Black participants. We believe this relationship reflects an important health problem Black Americans are facing during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which isolation through COVID-19 protective measures (e.g., quarantine) are exacerbating the burden of stress they already bear.*

***Winner of the Deans' Distinguished Essay Award**

Black and African American individuals are at risk for experiencing greater discrimination than other populations due to the history of their position in the United States' social structure. Discrimination and microaggressions have enormous potential to cause harmful mental (e.g., depression, anxiety) and physical (e.g., high blood pressure) health problems (Geronimus et al., 2006). The challenges of a global pandemic, such as COVID-19, create additional stressors that can exacerbate the negative health outcomes associated with discrimination and related hardships. The current project explores this phenomenon through the lens of the Weathering Framework, which suggests that Black and African American individuals are at a greater risk for "high-effort coping." This style of coping leads to even greater stress and long-lasting health problems for these individuals because they have exponentially greater exposure to racial stressors (e.g., prejudice and discrimination) than other members of the U.S. population during the COVID pandemic (Music, 2020; Wakeel & Njoku, 2021).

Additionally, Affection Exchange Theory suggests that during times of stress, affectionate touch can help reduce negative health outcomes (Floyd, 2014; Floyd et al., 2018). However, when social distancing and other precautions are being used to prevent the spread of disease, especially at the height of the pandemic, the health benefits of affectionate touch cannot be accessed (i.e., affection deprivation; Floyd, 2014). Thus, affection deprivation during the pandemic would contribute to the "weathering" of Black and African American individuals, making the study of affection exchange during the pandemic an important endeavor. The current project explores these concepts in a cross-sectional survey study designed to help address concerns of well-being for members of the Black and African American communities during the pandemic.

Literature Review

Black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) have faced discrimination in America for centuries. Colonization and oppression have created deep rooted issues that affect the legal and social systems of today. Although all members of BIPOC groups have the potential to face discrimination in America, Black and African American people may be disproportionately affected due to the history of slavery in this country and the pathways of cultural racism (i.e., stereotype threat, internalized racism, interpersonal racism, and systemic racism) embedded in society, which have affected their daily lives (Wakeel & Njoku, 2021).

Of interest to the current study, many instances of discrimination against Black and African American people occur in the medical industry. For example, a disproportionate number of Black and African American people lack access to

healthcare services (Chaney, 2020), and the quality of healthcare services available is often diminished (Wakeel & Njoku, 2021). Chaney (2020) asserts that Black people are less likely to be treated by a provider of their same race. According to Filut and Carnes (2020), “Blacks comprise approximately 13% of the U.S. population but only 5% of practicing physicians” (p. 1). The disproportionate number of Black healthcare providers means Black and African American patients are less likely to receive care from people who look like them and, therefore, understand their needs. Additionally, preference for same-race providers stems from frequent discrimination in different-race provider experiences (Malat & Hamilton, 2006). Furthermore, Wang et al. (2021) assert that healthcare workers are often “inherently and racially biased, which leads to misdiagnosis and therefore mistreatment of diseases BIPOC population could face” (p. 2). These conditions make it much more difficult to manage properly any range of health concerns, whether it is physical, emotional, or mental.

Coupled with systemic racism and related health determinants, Wakeel and Njoku (2021) identify the following as stressful life events co-occurring for Black and African Americans during the COVID pandemic: “unemployment or underemployment, increased isolation, reduced educational opportunities, postponement of preventive care needs, reduced access to public transportation as well as free or subsidized meals, and increased stigma related to racial or cultural identity” (p. 4). These negative experiences contribute to the immense stress towards the Black and African American community previously mentioned and appear to be affecting this population more than others. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Black participants will report experiencing more discrimination during the pandemic than other POC within the United States.

The stressors that Black and African American people within the United States must endure, in addition to the added stress of the COVID-19 pandemic, carry a rather large and negative weight. As a result, Black and African American individuals are more susceptible to developing an array of negative health conditions. According to Chaney (2020), Black people are at a higher risk of developing COVID-19 than other people within the United States. Millett et al. (2020) found that counties with a high population of Black people, which were predominantly located in the Southern United States, accounted for 52% of COVID-19 cases and 58% of COVID-related deaths. Thus, it is imperative that we examine what might alleviate some of these compounding stressors during an especially high stress and high-risk period. Supportive communication has been shown to mitigate stress outcomes and should be tremendously helpful for this population.

Affection Exchange Theory (e.g., Floyd, 2006) suggests that affectionate communication facilitates connection between individuals and fosters growth and well-being. Furthermore, affectionate communication can minimize negative health outcomes that occur due to stress (Floyd et al., 2007). In a more recent study, Graves (2021) found a positive association between affectionate communication and positive emotion and a negative association between receiving affection and stress. Thus, as affectionate communication increases, positive emotions increase and stress decreases. According to Affection Exchange Theory and through the lens of the Weathering framework, affectionate touch should help to alleviate some of the allostatic load (“the cumulative wear and tear on the body’s systems owing to repeated adaptation to stressors”; Geronimus et al., 2006, p. 826) stemming from the stress of the pandemic and the systemic inequalities that Black and African American people face. Unfortunately, affection deprivation due to the pandemic prevents this buffering effect from happening.

Hesse et al. (2021) describe affection deprivation as when individuals report receiving less affection than desired. Affection deprivation is associated with depression, sadness, and loneliness, as well as worse general health, poorer relationship satisfaction, and a greater number of diagnosed secondary immune disorders (Floyd, 2014; Hesse et al., 2021). As the global spread of the COVID pandemic necessitated an increase in social distancing, people all over the world experienced loneliness and isolation. Thus, affectionate touch was received less frequently, especially for individuals who live alone. Therefore, it stands to reason that widespread affection deprivation is a direct consequence of the pandemic, contributing to an increase in stress for all (Hesse et al., 2021). However, the situation may be more dire for Black and African American individuals, whose stress during the pandemic is heightened due to systemic inequalities and other pathways of racism, which are now compounded by affection deprivation. Therefore, we propose our second hypothesis:

H2: Affection deprivation will be directly related to Black participants’ reports of stress during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology

Participants

Eighty-seven participants were initially recruited for this study. Data from 21 participants was deleted due to incomplete survey responses, leaving 66 participants. Participants within this study included 66 adults ($M = 27.72$, $SD = 12.35$, range = 19-70). Among the participants, there were 43 (65%) who self-identified as female, 22 (33%) who self-identified as male, and one (2%) who self-identified as non-binary. Of the 66 participants, 28 (42%) answered “yes” to being a college student while 38 (58%) answered

“no” to being a college student. Out of the 28 participants currently in college, two (7%) were undergraduate sophomores, 10 (36%) were undergraduate juniors, 11 (39%) were undergraduate seniors, two (7%) were undergraduate fifth year seniors, and three (11%) were graduates or receiving their master’s degree. Participants reported their race as White or Caucasian ($n = 20, 30\%$), Hispanic or Latino ($n = 1, 2\%$), Black or African American ($n = 40, 61\%$), Asian or Pacific Islander ($n = 1, 2\%$), and Two or more races ($n = 4, 6\%$). After re-coding, there were a total of six non-Black POC included in analysis.

Procedures

All procedures for this project were approved through a standing IRB protocol for COMM 3750 – Quantitative Research Methods in Communication. Participants were recruited through various means of social media (e.g., Instagram, Snapchat) and by word of mouth (e.g., co-workers, classmates, friends, family, and within campus organizations). Those who wished to participate clicked a link to access a Qualtrics survey questionnaire and completed their participation fully online. For each measure, participants were instructed to focus on their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants took an average of six minutes to complete the questionnaire.

Measures

Perceived Discrimination. Fifteen items were adapted from Williams et al.’s (1997) Perceived Discrimination Scale to measure perceived discrimination ($M = .82, SD = .60, \alpha = .88$). The first six items instructed participants to report how many times they experienced discrimination based on their race or ethnic identity during COVID-19 by entering a whole number. Items such as “You were not hired for a job” and “You were prevented from renting or buying a home in the neighborhood you wanted” were included. Some participants seemed to misunderstand instructions and responded to items with “no” in place of a numeric response. We interpreted these responses as equivalent to not having any experience with this event, so we re-coded the negative response with a “0.” Some responded with a “yes,” so we changed these positive experiences to “1” to reflect the event happening at least once. The final nine items instructed participants to choose from four responses in a Likert-type scale of four options (1 = Never and 4 = Often) where higher scores indicated more frequent experiences of discrimination. Items such as “You are treated with less respect than others” and “You are called names or insulted” were included.

Affection Deprivation. Eight items were adapted from Floyd’s (2014) Affection Deprivation Scale to measure affection deprivation ($M = 3.32, SD = .87, \alpha = 0.90$). Participants responded to statements with a 5-point Likert-type scale where higher

numbers represented higher affection deprivation (1 = Strongly disagree and 5 = Strongly agree). Items such as “I often wish I got more affection from others” (reverse coded) and “In general, I feel deprived of affection” were included.

Perceived Stress. Ten items were adapted from Cohen et al.’s (1983) Perceived Stress Scale to measure perceived stress ($M = 3.30$, $SD = .60$, $\alpha = 0.87$). Participants responded to statements with a 5-point Likert-type scale where higher numbers represented higher frequency of stress (0 = Never and 5 = Very Often). Items such as “How often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?” and “How often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do?” were included.

Results

An independent samples t -test was performed to compare discrimination levels between Black and non-Black POC. Hypothesis 1 stated, Black participants will report experiencing more discrimination during the pandemic than other POC within the United States. Results indicated that there was not a significant difference between the two racial groups, $t(41) = .30$, $p = .77$. Black people’s reports of discrimination ($M = 1.09$, $SD = .52$) were slightly higher than non-Black POC’s reports of discrimination ($M = 1.02$, $SD = .46$), but this difference seems to be due to chance alone. Thus, hypothesis 1 was not supported. However, post hoc analysis revealed a significant difference, $t(55) = -6.30$, $p = .000$, between Black participants ($M = 1.09$, $SD = .52$) and White participants ($M = .26$, $SD = .37$) on the outcome measure of discrimination.

A Pearson product moment correlation analysis was performed to test the relationship between Black participants’ stress levels and affection deprivation levels. Hypothesis 2 stated, affection deprivation will be directly related to Black participants’ reports of stress. Results indicate a moderate, positive relationship between stress and affection deprivation, $r(36) = .65$, $p = .000$. The results suggest that an increase in Black participants’ affection deprivation is related to an increase in stress. Because of this significant relationship, hypothesis 2 was supported.

Discussion

We expected that Black and African American participants would experience greater discrimination than non-Black people of color (POC) during the pandemic due to the long history of prejudice and discrimination in the country. The analysis for hypothesis 1 did not support this. One explanation for why our results indicated more parity among the two groups could be that a climate of fear has developed during the COVID pandemic, leading to an increase in discrimination in general. Certainly, a virus that has been pejoratively referred to as the “Chinese flu” has incited an increase in anti-

Asian violence (e.g., Reny & Barreto, 2020). Our post hoc analysis revealed that Black and African American participants reported far greater experiences of discrimination when compared to White participants, showing some support for the weathering hypothesis (Geronimus et al., 2006) and that Black and African American individuals bear more emotional and psychological burdens than White individuals during the pandemic (Wakeel & Njoku, 2021).

Supporting our second hypothesis, affection deprivation was significantly and positively related to Black and African American participants' levels of perceived stress. Consistent with the Weathering Framework (Wakeel & Njoku, 2021), Black and African American individuals are more likely to be negatively impacted by the stress related to the pandemic. The significant negative relationship between affection deprivation and perceived stress in our study sample supports previous findings (e.g., Floyd, 2014; Hesse et al., 2021) and the assertion that well-being is closely linked to receiving supportive communication and affectionate touch, the fundamental claim in Affection Exchange Theory. Indeed, these results suggest that Black people would benefit greatly from an increase in affectionate communication during the COVID pandemic.

Limitations and Future Research

Sampling was a limitation in the current study. The sub-sample of non-Black POC ($N = 6$) consisted of one participant identifying as Hispanic or Latino, one participant identifying as Asian or Pacific Islander, and four participants who identified as having two or more races. This sub-sample is too small to achieve any meaningful power and did not allow us to substantially test our first hypothesis. Future research should attempt to obtain measures from a larger and more diverse sample. Additionally, a more complex investigation of the Weathering Framework (Wakeel & Njoku, 2021) would be helpful for understanding the relationship between stress and affection deprivation during the pandemic.

Conclusion

The purpose of our research was to investigate factors related to the well-being of Black people during the pandemic. Based on these factors (i.e., affection deprivation, perceived stress, and racial discrimination), our goal was to contribute to the conversation about improving the lives of Black people in America, especially in ways that help to prevent further weathering as the result of a worldwide pandemic. To support our goal, we conducted a cross-sectional survey study with 66 participants. Results indicated Black and African American individuals experienced racial discrimination at similar rates when compared to non-Black POC and at higher rates when compared to White individuals. Furthermore, results indicated that an increase in affection deprivation is related to an

increase in perceived stress for Black and African American individuals. These findings suggest that increases in supportive communication can act as a buffer for Black and African American individuals to help reduce the negative effects of weathering and pandemic-related stress.

REFERENCES

- Chaney, C. (2020). Family stress and coping among African Americans in the age of COVID-19. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 51(3-4), 254-273. <https://doi.org/10.3138/jcfs.51.3-4.003>
- Floyd, K. (2006). Human affection exchange: XII. Affectionate communication is associated with diurnal variation in salivary free cortisol. *Western Journal of Communication*, 70(1), 47-63. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570310500506649>
- Floyd, K. (2014). Relational and health correlates of affection deprivation. *Western Journal of Communication*, 78(4), 383-403. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2014.927071>
- Floyd, K., Mikkelson, A. C., Tafoya, M. A., Farinelli, L., La Valley, A. G., Judd, J., Haynes, M. T., Davis, K. L., & Wilson, J. (2007). Human affection exchange: XIII. Affectionate communication accelerates neuroendocrine stress recovery. *Health Communication*, 22(2), 123-132. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10410230701454015>
- Floyd, K., Pauley, P. M., Hesse, C., Eden, J., Veksler, A. E., & Woo, N. T., (2018). Supportive communication is associated with markers of immunocompetence. *Southern Communication Journal*, 83(4), 229-244. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1041794X.2018.1488270>
- Geronimus, A. T., Hicken, M., Keene, D., Bound, J. (2006). "Weathering" and age patterns of allostatic load scores among Blacks and Whites in the United States. *American Journal of Public Health*, 96(5), 826-833. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2004.060749>
- Graves, C. G. (2021). Insights on affection exchange dynamics in interpersonal interaction. *Personal Relationships*, 28(2), 355-378. <https://doi.org/10.1111/per.12370>
- Hesse, C., Mikkelson, A., & Tian, X. (2021). Affection deprivation during the COVID-19 pandemic: A panel study. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 38(10), 2965-2984. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075211046587>
- Malat, J. & Hamilton, M. A. (2006). Preference for same-race health care providers and perceptions of interpersonal discrimination in health care. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 47(2), 173-187. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002214650604700206>
- Music, G. (2020). Covid, racism and Black Lives Matter: A deadly constellation. *Developmental Child Welfare*, 2(3), 197-207. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2516103220959814>
- Reny, T. T., & Barreto, M. A. (2020). Xenophobia in the time of pandemic: Othering, anti-Asian attitudes, and COVID-19. *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, 1-24.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2020.1769693>

- Wakeel, F., & Njoku, A. (2021). Application of the Weathering Framework: Intersection of racism, stigma, and COVID-19 as a stressful life event among African Americans. *Healthcare*, 9, 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare9020145>
- Wang, J., Jiang, S., Ho Cao, K., Chiu, A., & Lian, K. (2021). Racial bias in the medical field and its influence on BIPOC teenagers and young adults' decisions to get vaccinated for COVID-19. *International Socioeconomics Laboratory*, 1(4), 163-195. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4740667>
- Williams, D. R., Yu, Y., Jackson, J. S., & Anderson, N. B. (1997). Racial differences in physical and mental health: Socio-economic status, stress and discrimination. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 2(3), 335-351. <https://doi.org/10.1177/135910539700200305>