

Exploring the links between childhood trauma, discrimination and feeling purpose in life among Black, Latinx and White individuals.

2022 Lifespan Research Day Abstract

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Abstract

Background & Aim:

Robust though mostly independent literatures show that childhood trauma and perceived discrimination are associated with detrimental physical and mental health. It has also been suggested that due (at least in part) to systemic differences in access to resources (e.g., education employment, housing, etc.) similar adverse events may have a differential impact on different racial/ethnic groups. However, there is little research examining this premise. Similarly, less is known about the impact of adverse experiences on resilience factors such as feeling purpose in life. Purpose in life is a self-organizing life aim that stimulates goals, manages behaviors, and provides a sense of value which is linked to well-being. We hypothesize that childhood trauma and discrimination may differently impact feelings of purpose in life among Black, Latinx, and White individuals, though direction of effects was exploratory.

Methods:

We recruited an online sample of Black (n = 393, 49% Women), Latinx (n = 417, 50% Women), and White participants (n = 391, 49% Women) young adults (mean age=23). Participants completed the Purpose in Life Scale (Hill et al., 2016), Everyday Discrimination Scale Short Version (Sternthal et al., 2011) and the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (Bernstein et al., 1994).

Results:

Using regression analyses we examined the simultaneous influence of exposure to childhood trauma and discrimination on feelings of purpose in life. Among Black individuals there was no association between childhood trauma and feelings of purpose in life ($p > .05$); however, discrimination was associated with lower purpose in life ($\beta = -0.10, p < .05$). In contrast, among White individuals childhood trauma was associated with feeling less purpose in life ($\beta = -0.22, p < .001$) though there was no effect of discrimination on feeling of purpose in life ($p > .05$). Latinx individuals did not exhibit an association between childhood trauma ($p > .05$) or discrimination ($p > .05$) and feelings of purpose in life.

Conclusion:

Our findings suggest that there are racial/ethnic differences in the association between childhood trauma and discrimination on feelings of purpose in life.

Clinical Implications:

These results highlight the importance of taking a holistic approach to psychotherapy that acknowledges an individual's racial/ethnic background may shape how various forms of adverse or 'toxic' environments shape well-being.