Cultural resilience does not reverse the impact of racial discrimination on perceived stress

What is this research about?
Racial discrimination is known to be linked to stress and to various health conditions in people from First Nations communities. Resiliency—or the ability to bounce back from adversity—has been shown to play an important role in a person’s ability to cope with stress.

Ontario researchers conducted a study to find out if Aboriginal cultural resilience—or resilience that is based on traditional language, ceremonial activities, and the environment—would decrease stress associated with racial discrimination in people from First Nations communities.

What did the researchers do?
The researchers analyzed questionnaire responses from 340 adult members of the Kettle and Stony Point First Nation community, in Ontario, who were a subset of a sample collected as part of the Researching Health in Ontario Communities study.

The researchers designed the questions and measures in partnership with the Kettle and Stony Point First Nation. They measured:

- perceived stress by asking about the extent to which situations in the respondent’s life are appraised as stressful;
- perceived racial discrimination by looking at a person’s perception of how often they experience racism;
- Aboriginal cultural resilience by identifying a person’s perception of the cultural strengths of their community;
- resilience resources at the individual (education and sociability) and family level (marital status and socioeconomic status);
- demographics (age and gender).

The researchers used a mathematical model to assess the association between each variable and stress levels.

What did the researchers find?
Higher levels of perceived racial discrimination were linked to higher stress levels, while cultural resilience had the opposite effect.

What you need to know
Researchers investigated the role of First Nations cultural resilience as a coping mechanism to offset stress associated with racial discrimination. They used a questionnaire and specific measures to determine the relationship between resiliency, perceived racial discrimination, socioeconomic factors, and perceived stress. Results show that perceived racial discrimination had the greatest effect on stress levels, followed by social support and cultural resilience.
When they examined all variables together, the researchers found the following:

- For every 5-point increase in perceived racial discrimination on a 40-point scale, stress levels increased by about 2%.
- For every 1-point increase in cultural resilience on a 4-point scale, stress levels decreased by 1.5%.
- Age and gender had significant effects on stress. For every 10-year age increase, stress level decreased by 2.7%. Women reported stress levels that were 4.3% higher than men.
- For each 1-point increase in social support on a 15-point scale, there was a 1% decrease in stress levels.
- Education level, marital status, and socioeconomic status did not have significant effects on stress levels.

Stress levels were most influenced by perceived racial discrimination, followed by social support and cultural resilience.

Limitations and next steps

One important limitation of this study is that the cultural resilience scale has not been tested as a psychological measurement tool. Also, the measure of cultural resilience did not assess whether the participants actually took part in cultural activities; it assessed perceived cultural strengths of the community as a proxy for personal pride in culture and for the gradual acquisition of a culture’s characteristics and norms.

The study also focused on one First Nations community, so the findings can’t be generalized to all other communities. Finally, the cross-sectional study design limits the ability to establish cause-and-effect relationships.

About the researchers

Nicholas D. Spence,1 Samantha Wells,2,3,4,5 Kathryn Graham,2,3,6,7 Julie George2,8

1. Harvard Medical School, Harvard University, Boston, MA, USA
2. Social and Epidemiological Research Department, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, London, ON, Canada
3. Dalla Lana School of Public Health, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada
4. Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, Western University, London, ON, Canada
5. School of Psychology, Deakin University, Australia
6. Department of Psychology, Western University, London, ON, Canada
7. National Drug Research Institute, Curtin University, Perth, Western Australia
8. Mental Health and Addiction Services, Kettle & Stony Point Health Services, Kettle & Stony Point First Nation, ON, Canada

Keywords

First nations, Aboriginal, social determinants of health, culture, resilience, racial discrimination, racism, race, stress

How can you use this research?

Programs that emphasize cultural resilience for individuals in First Nations communities may reduce some of the stress that is linked to racial discrimination. Programs that enhance diversity and inclusion and reduce racism would have the greatest impact.