



Discrimination and Mental Illness: A Forgotten Generation

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Abstract

With discriminatory experiences resulting with depression and anxiety in older age, gerontology must apply holistic trauma-informed services that address mental illness using a Developmental Psychopathology Perspective. The primary purpose of the present study was to identify whether experiences of discrimination contributed to anxiety or depression among individuals age 65 years and older. It was hypothesized that as participants' experiences of discrimination increase, depression or anxiety among adults age 65 years and older would increase. The present study used secondary data from the Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) 3 research project and consisted of a sample of 1,424 individuals. A Kruskal-Wallis H test and a Spearman ρ correlation analysis were used to determine whether discrimination related to depression or anxiety among individuals age 65 years and older.

Introduction

Discrimination can occur towards anyone, and elderly individuals are a vulnerable population that may have experienced discrimination. While discrimination can be in the form of violence, hate crimes are an extreme implication of discrimination. In 2018, hate crimes were committed against roughly 8,646 victims in the United States of America and involved 6,188 perpetrators. 59.5% of hate crimes were race-related, 18% involved religious bias, and 16.9% were geared toward sexual orientation bias (U.S. Department of Justice-Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2019). Discrimination can lead to mental illness and in the United States, over 40 million adults live with an anxiety disorder (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2017). Approximately 70 million adults who resided in the United States have experienced at least one depressive episode in the last year, while roughly 15% of adults age 60 years and over live with mental illness (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2017; World Health Organization, 2017). Social workers are called to serve vulnerable populations and advocate for social justice. Those age 65 years and older are a vulnerable population. Effects of discrimination among older adults may present as mental illness as a direct result of arrested development due to experiences of discrimination.

Research Question

This study aims to examine whether the effects of discrimination contribute to the presentation of either depression or anxiety among adults age 65 years and older. The present study will attempt to answer the question: What are the effects of discrimination on mental illness, specifically depression or anxiety, among adults age 65 and older? It is hypothesized that as experiences of perceived discrimination increase, mental illness in the form of depression or anxiety will increase among individuals age 65 and older.

Methods

The present research study design is a quantitative cross-sectional study of secondary data drawn from the MIDUS 3 research project. The sample size for the current study is ($n=1,424$). The current study used a non-probability, purposive sampling method to select a sample consisting of individuals age 65 years and older.

Discrimination Measures

- ❖ A 6-item 5-point Likert style scale measured chronic job discrimination.
- ❖ 11 questions were asked about the occurrences of discrimination over the participants' lifetime related to specific events such as discrimination due to their race.
- ❖ A 2-item 4-point Likert style scale measured discrimination interfering with participants' lives. Responses were dummy coded into a 2-item index.

Mental Health Measures

- ❖ 1 question measured the frequency of participants' depression over twelve months.
- ❖ 1 question with 10 continuous response options measured generalized anxiety disorder among participants.

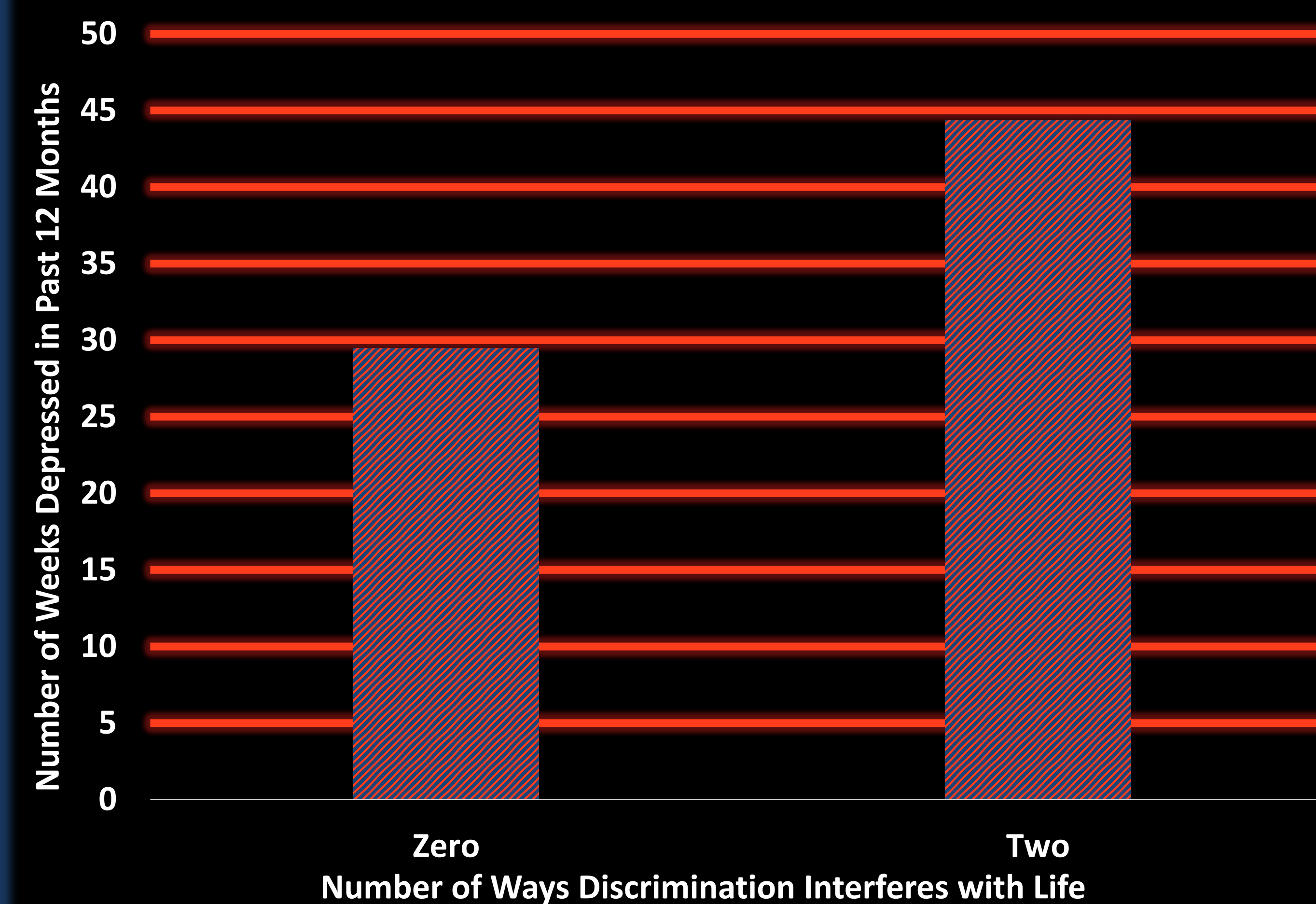
Statistical Analysis

- ❖ A series of Kruskal-Wallis H Tests were utilized to examine the relationship between the total number of discriminatory experiences interfering with participants' lives and the number of weeks participants were depressed.
- ❖ A Spearman ρ correlation analysis was used to evaluate whether correlations existed between experiences of chronic job discrimination, the number of discriminatory events experienced over a lifetime, depression, and anxiety.

Results

Kruskal-Wallis H Test

A significant result was found ($H(2) = 8.51, p = .01$), indicating that the total number of discriminatory episodes interfering with participants' lives differed from each other. Follow-up pairwise comparisons indicated that participants with instances of discrimination interfering with their life in two ways were significantly more depressed in a consecutive twelve-month period ($Mean Rank = 44.38$) than those with discrimination interfering with their life in one way ($Mean Rank = 35.94$). There was no significant difference between having zero or one discriminatory experience interfering with participants' lives and the number of weeks participants were depressed.



Spearman ρ Correlation Analysis

A Spearman ρ correlation analysis was conducted to measure the relationship between the total number of lifetime discrimination events and participants' anxiety. The results indicated a positive relationship and statistically significant association between participants' total number of lifetime discrimination events and anxiety ($r_s(1,239) = .09, p < .01$). The strength of the correlation was weak.

A Spearman ρ correlation analysis was conducted to measure the relationship between chronic job discrimination and participants' anxiety. The results indicated a positive relationship and statistically significant association between participants' experiences of chronic job discrimination and anxiety ($r_s(336) = .16, p < .01$). The strength of the correlation was weak.

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
1. Lifetime discrimination	.67	1.27	-	-	-
2. Chronic job discrimination	8.01	3.60	.20*	-	-
3. Anxiety	.07	.64	.09*	.16*	-
4. Depression	13.66	14.38	-.14	.17	.23*

Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations for Lifetime Discrimination, Chronic Job Discrimination, Depression, and Anxiety

Discussion

The present study found that a significant relationship between the total number of participants' experiences of discrimination interfering with their life and the total number of weeks participants were depressed in a twelve-month period. Participants who had two experiences of discrimination interfering with their life had a higher number of weeks depressed in a twelve-month period. Results indicated that participants who experienced zero or one form of discrimination interfering with their lives did not significantly relate to participants' number of weeks depressed. The present study found a positive weak correlation between participants' total lifetime discrimination experiences and anxiety. The present study found a positive weak correlation between chronic job discrimination and anxiety. Participants' total number of lifetime discriminatory experiences and experiences of chronic job discrimination did not have a significant relationship to the participants' total number of weeks depressed.

Alignment

This study aligned with findings by Kunze Et al. (2011) that job discrimination could lead to higher levels of perceived discrimination. Results from the present study were parallel with findings from a study conducted by Berger and Saranyai (2015), where a link between experiences of discrimination and mental illness were identified.

Implications for Future Research, Policy and Practice

The present study could be used as a single factor among multiple facets to implement a multi-level analysis that distinguishes how transactional relationships between an individual and their environment begin to shape the brain in developing psychopathology in later life. This study affirms the importance of using a Developmental Psychopathology Perspective in social work practice with the elderly.

Strengths and Limitations

- ❖ The present study had an adequate sample size but lacked diversity in the sample which could potentially limit the generalizability of the results.
- ❖ Mental illness was narrowly defined into two categories.
- ❖ Results from the study confirmed a correlation between discrimination and mental illness and could inform future research to identify risk and protective factors for elderly individuals that are related to discrimination.

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