



A structural equation model analysis of perceived control and psychological distress on worry among African American and European American young adults

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ABSTRACT

Perceived control has been identified as an important factor in the development and maintenance of mood disorders, and worry has been shown to have a unique relationship with psychological distress associated with mood disorders. The relationships between these variables have received little attention in the literature, and even less in terms of the role racial status may serve. The current study investigated the structural relationship between psychological distress and perceived control in predicting self-reported worry as well as potential differences in paths to worry in African American and European American young adults using a structural equation model. One hundred twenty-one European American and 100 African American undergraduate students completed the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI), the State Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI), the Anxiety Control Questionnaire (ACQ), and the Penn State Worry Questionnaire (PSWQ). Results suggest that psychological distress and perceived control predict worry in both the African American and European American samples, however there were significant differences in terms of which construct contributed most. For African Americans, psychological distress contributed significantly more to worry than perceived control, whereas low perceived control contributed more to worry for European Americans. Implications and suggestions for future research are discussed.

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The nascent literature supports the dimensional nature of anxiety and mood disorders (e.g., Brown, Chorpita, & Barlow, 1998) with symptoms of psychological distress being implicated in the experience of mood disorders (see Brown et al., 1998; Clark, Watson, & Mineka, 1994). Similarly, low perceptions of control of both internal and external events have been consistently implicated in mood disorders (Chorpita & Barlow, 1998). Perceived control is also related to worry in that the worrier is usually focused on a future potential threat that is uncontrollable by nature (Borkovec, Ray, & Stober, 1998). Other work has suggested that perceived control also has a stronger negative relation-

ship with worry than somatic anxiety (Zebb and Beck, 1998). Further, worry has been correlated with both anxiety and mood disorders and general psychological distress has been associated with worry (Beck et al., 2001). Despite their role in worry, causal links between psychological distress and perceived control over internal and external events are not yet clear. It is also not clear that the relationships among these variables is consistent in ethnically diverse samples as existing literature has relied on primarily European American samples with little information about mood disorders and perceptions of control in African Americans.

The current study investigated the structural relationship between distress and perceived control in predicting self-reported worry as well as potential path differences within African American and European American young adults using a structural equation model.

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1. Mood disorders in African Americans: a known unknown

To date, the literature on mood disorders relies on predominantly European American samples and the status of mood disorders in African American samples remains relatively unknown (Last & Perrin, 1993; Neal & Turner, 1991). The ambiguity surrounding the nature of these disorders in African Americans continues to be well documented in both the anxiety and depression literature (see Breslau, Kendler, Su, Gaxiola-Aguilar, & Kessler, 2005; Heurtin-Roberts, Snowden, & Miller, 1997; Horwath, Johnson, & Hornig, 1994; Lewis-Hall, 1994; Neal & Brown, 1994; Neal & Turner, 1991; Smith, Friedman, & Nevid, 1999; US Department of Health & Human Services, 2001; Williams et al., 2007). Although this area remains understudied, available information suggests that African Americans may be at increased risk for certain disorders (e.g., Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, Specific Phobia) and may be less likely to develop others (e.g., Major Depressive Disorder). These findings highlight the need for progression in the literature, especially in consideration of the under-identification, misdiagnosis, and persistence of mood disorders in African Americans (Friedman, Paradis, & Hatch, 1994; Heurtin-Roberts et al., 1997; Horwath et al., 1994; Williams et al., 2007). It is critical to examine the nature of mood disorders in African American samples to determine psychosocial factors related to the onset and manifestations of mood disorders in this population.

2. Perceptions of control and mood disorders

Current conceptual theories of the development and maintenance of mood disorders place particular emphasis on perceived control. Several researchers have proposed that the perception that unpleasant events are unpredictable and uncontrollable is a central feature of anxiety and mood disorders, perhaps accounting for high rates of comorbidity among them (Alloy, Kelly, Mineka, & Clemens, 1990; Barlow, 2002; Mineka, Watson, & Clark, 1998; Zvolensky, Lejuez, & Eifert, 2000). Empirical literature also supports this notion, suggesting that repeated exposure to seemingly random negative events can lead to emotional disturbances in animals and humans (Geer, Davidson, & Gatchel, 1970; Haggard, 1943; Mowrer & Viek, 1948; Neale & Katahn, 1968; Overmier & Seligman, 1967; Pervin, 1963; Staub, Tursky, & Schwartz, 1971; Weiss, 1971a,b). In humans, such experiences may lead to the development of an external locus of control, characterized by a belief that events are random and unrelated to one's own behavior, rather than an internal locus of control in which an individual believes consequences to be a direct result of his or her own behavior (Rotter, 1966). External locus of control beliefs have been correlated with both anxiety and depression in children (Nunn, 1988; McCauley, Mitchell, Burke, & Moss, 1988). Work by Rapee, Craske, Brown, and Barlow (1996) focused on a more specific measure of control beliefs related to threat and one's response to threat and found that this measure was correlated even more strongly with anxiety in adult samples. Thus, it appears that control

beliefs may extend to external events as well as internal perceptions such as cognitions, emotional states and sensations of physiological arousal (Barlow, 2002; Rapee et al., 1996).

Although these results have significant implications for mood disorders, the role of perceived control in African American populations suffering from these disorders has not been explored. Furthermore, a closer examination of the ways in which control affects psychopathology is warranted considering the negative sociocultural climate of American society, both past and present. For example, it has been suggested that because of historical and ongoing oppression, discrimination, and prejudice, African Americans may be more likely to internalize feelings of helplessness and an inability to effect change in the environment, thus leading to an increased risk of developing an emotional disorder (Gibbs, 1990; Hammack, 2003) and it has been suggested that children growing up in low socioeconomic status environments may learn to attribute events and behaviors to external rather than internal causes (Wheaton, 1980). Although the latter argument is ostensibly related to low socioeconomic status, it is presumed that the racial discrimination that has historically been endemic to African Americans may heighten the risk for experiencing psychological distress. These considerations underscore the importance of examining the role of control beliefs in African American samples.

3. Worry: a cognitive coping attempt for future events

Worry is characterized as a continuous stream of verbal cognition related to future negative and catastrophic events (Barlow, 2002). Although some level of worry is normal, it frequently warrants clinical attention when it becomes uncontrollable and intrusive. In some ways worry may appear to be an effective coping mechanism, as possible ways of dealing with events are entertained by the worrier and the related unpredictability and uncertainty are diminished; however it is important to note that worry is in fact a failed coping attempt because no strategy is identified or employed by the worrier (Barlow, 2002). Further, because it gives the illusion of problem solving to the worrier while simultaneously allowing avoidance of deeper processing of negative emotions, this ineffective coping method is negatively reinforced and thus repeated (Borkovec, Shadick, & Hopkins, 1991; Borkovec et al., 1998; Craske, 1999).

Worry has also been shown to be related to psychological distress. One study found that worriers in a non-clinical sample reported higher levels of anxiety and depression than those who were not worried (Pruzinsky & Borkovec, 1983). Andrews and Borkovec (1988) also found that inducing worry in a non-clinical sample resulted in similar levels of anxiety and depression. Further, it may be that worry alternates between anxious thoughts about threatening events in the future and depressed thoughts about negative events in the past (Borkovec et al., 1998).

Despite suggestions that ethnicity may play an important role in worry, little empirical research has examined ways in which African Americans and European

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