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Cultural Race-Related Stress and Cannabis Use among Incarcerated African American Men

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Abstract

Objective: Research suggests African American men use cannabis to cope with racial discrimination. This conjecture may also be true for incarcerated African American men, who report high rates of cannabis use prior to and after incarceration. However, no studies-to-date have examined the association between race-related stress and chronic cannabis use among incarcerated African American men. As this population encounters pervasive negative cultural stereotypes and devaluation from larger society, cultural race-related stress may predict cannabis use among this population. Therefore, the purpose of this brief report was to examine the relationship between cultural race-related stress and years of regular cannabis use among a sample of incarcerated African American men. **Method:** Study staff completed interviews with $N = 177$ African American men nearing release from four prisons in Kentucky. The interviews focused on mental health, drug use, and HIV risk behaviors. Participants provided their demographics (e.g., age, years of education, and length of incarceration), self-reported their years of regular cannabis use (3 times or more per week), and completed the Brief Index of Race-Related Stress (IRRS-B; Utsey, 1999). **Results:** Multivariate regression analyses demonstrated cultural race-related stress was significant and positively associated with the number of years of regular cannabis use ($p = .003$) among this population. **Conclusions:** This finding has implications for culturally-tailored substance abuse treatment, specifically for cannabis use, with African American men upon their community re-entry from prison.

Keywords: cannabis, race-related stress, African American men, criminal justice involvement

Public Health Significance Statement: This study demonstrates a relationship between cultural race-related stress and regular cannabis use among incarcerated African American men. Our findings highlight the importance of examining drug use as a coping mechanism for cultural race-related stress, which is often exhibited through negative cultural stereotypes. Addressing the negative impact of stereotypes and stigma in substance abuse treatment can improve the quality of treatment provided to African American men after their release from prison.

Introduction

National statistics indicate African Americans regularly use cannabis more than other racial and ethnic groups (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration; SAMHSA, 2019). Research provides a convincing relationship between race-related stressors and cannabis use among those in the general population (Gerrard et al., 2012; Stevens-Watkins et al., 2012). These estimates, however, do not include incarcerated populations. Sparse prison studies demonstrate similarly high rates of regular cannabis use among incarcerated African American men prior to and after incarceration (Holliday et al., 2016; Rowell et al., 2013; Valera et al., 2009). Yet, extant literature on racism and drug use among U.S. incarcerated populations is scarce, older, and only theoretically-driven (Kilty & Joseph, 1999; Reasons, 1974).

The relationship between race-related stress and regular cannabis use has been largely unexplored among incarcerated African American men who may be particularly vulnerable given the disproportionate legal consequences associated with their cannabis use in Kentucky. There is a need to study cannabis use and cultural race-related stress among incarcerated African American men since most are imprisoned for non-violent drug offenses, receive harsher sentences, and are often convicted on the basis of racist stereotypes (Oliver, 2001; Owusu-Bempah, 2017). This study aims to increase knowledge of cultural racism as a psychosocial stressor that can trigger drug use. Awareness of the connection between cannabis use and race-related stress can inform interventions to increase adaptive coping strategies such as stress management and seeking positive social support and reduce drug use among incarcerated African American men.

Cultural racism informs and shapes the beliefs, norms, and values that undergird racial bias and discrimination. In other words, culturally racist ideologies translate to culturally racist

practices. For example, recent commentary from Robert Solomon (2020) highlights cannabis regulation and laws were inherently racist as they disproportionately targeted African American men. National campaigns such as the War on Drugs developed federal laws to support racist beliefs that those who smoked cannabis were usually African Americans who were violent and sexual promiscuous (Solomon, 2020). Further, persuading public opinion to associate African Americans with drug use and criminalization allowed these policies to facilitate mass incarceration and community disruption (Solomon, 2020). Thus, African American men may subsequently encounter cultural race-related stress at every aspect of the criminal justice system – from policing, arrest, conviction, sentencing, to re-entry.

African Americans in Kentucky are ten times more likely than Whites to be arrested for cannabis possession (ACLU, 2020). This rate is six times higher than the national average (ACLU, 2020). African Americans are also more likely to receive longer prison sentencing for cannabis-related offenses (U.S. Sentencing Commission; USSC, 2018) and less likely to receive culturally-tailored drug treatment for cannabis use after release (Montgomery et al., 2018). Considering these racial disparities, we argue cultural racism is a social practice that justifies the racially discriminatory practices that African Americans experience in society, especially regarding drug use. The current study sought to examine the relationship between cultural race-related stress and years of regular cannabis use among incarcerated African American men in Kentucky. Findings from this brief report have implications for cannabis-specific interventions and treatment with this population prior to and after release from prison.

Literature Review

Clark and colleagues' (1999) Biopsychosocial Model of Perceived Racism can be used as a guiding framework for examining the consequences of race-related stress among African

Americans. This conceptual model explicates how racism is a stressor that individuals respond to with adaptive (i.e., problem-solving) or passive (i.e., emotional suppression) coping strategies (Clark et al., 1999). Without adaptive skills, the deleterious effects of race-related stress, or chronic emotional and psychological pain associated with experiences of racism and racial discrimination, can increase one's risk for maladaptive behaviors such as drug use (Jelsma & Varner, 2020). There are three types of racism - individual, institutional, and cultural - that cumulatively impact one's mental and physical health (Helms, 1995). Individual racism refers to conscious and unconscious attitudes and behaviors that prevent African Americans from obtaining resources and experiences (Jones, 2000). Institutional racism refers to policies and practices that advantage White people and limit the upward mobility of African Americans (Jones, 2000). Last, cultural racism is defined as an ideology that White values, language, and customs are superior and a practice that omits or diminishes the cultural integrity of African Americans (Helms, 1995; Oliver, 2001). Most research has focused on the consequences of individual- and institutionally-mediated racism, leaving a dearth of research that examines the impact of cultural race-related stress (Williams et al., 2019).

Cultural racism occurs when African American culture is displayed as incompetent and inferior (Bonilla Silva, 2006). A common manifestation of cultural racism is stereotypes that deem African American men as dangerous, unintelligent, violent, and unable to contribute to society (Harrell, 2000). An example of cultural racism is exhibited in beliefs that African Americans are criminal drug users and dealers, whereas White drug users are considered sick and in need of treatment (Kerrison, 2018). This belief of African American cultural deficiency undergirds institutional policies such as the "three strikes" law for drug-related offenses (Kovera, 2019) and individual bias such as over-policing in African American communities, which both

contribute to the disproportionate prevalence of African American men in the criminal justice system (Owusu-Bempah, 2017; Williams et al., 2019). Despite the inaccuracy of these cultural stereotypes, they are used to rationalize and justify African American men's societal devaluation (Case & Huner, 2014; Rosino & Hughey, 2018).

Extant research highlights experiences of racial discrimination are positively associated with cannabis use among African Americans in the general population (Assari et al., 2019; Gerrard et al., 2012; Gibbons et al., 2010; Parker et al., 2017). For example, Gerrard and colleagues (2012) posit racial discrimination likely leads to substance use among African Americans who endorse drugs as a coping mechanism. Results from a longitudinal study among 595 African American young adults (278 males; 317 females) further revealed racial discrimination had a stronger association with cannabis use for African American men more than a decade later compared to African American women (Assari et al., 2019). This finding suggests there are intraracial gender differences in the use of cannabis to cope with race-related stressors. Relatedly, among a nationally representative sample of African American men ($N = 1,833$), those who experienced major events of discrimination had higher odds of recent cannabis use (in the last 12 months) (Parker et al., 2017). The authors indicated participants in this study may have used cannabis to cope with racism in employment and housing sectors (Parker et al., 2017). These studies combined demonstrate cannabis may be used to alleviate race-related stress among African American men. We seek to expand the literature to incarcerated African American men.

There is limited research examining chronic cannabis use among African Americans (Bechtold et al., 2015), including incarcerated African American men who encounter cultural racism through frequent interactions with law enforcement for drug-related offenses (Smiley & Fanukle, 2017). Further, although extant research provides a convincing relationship between

race-related stress and cannabis among community-based individuals (Assari et al., 2019; Gerrard et al., 2012), little is known about how this association may manifest among justice-involved African Americans. Last, there is limited discussion regarding the various types of racism that cumulatively impact African Americans' health and subsequent coping strategies. Cultural racism is arguably one of the most pervasive types of racism as it informs instances of individual and institutional discrimination (Williams et al., 2019). Given this knowledge, we hypothesized reports of cultural race-related stress would be positively and significantly associated with regular cannabis use among our sample. Addressing this gap in literature increases our knowledge of possible targeted interventions that can mitigate cultural race-related stress among incarcerated African American men who regularly use cannabis.

Methods

Sample and Procedures

This study uses secondary data from the HIM (Helping Incarcerated Men) study to examine the relationship between cultural race-related stress and years of regular cannabis use. Data were derived from a non-probability sample of $N = 208$ incarcerated African American men nearing community re-entry in 2015. Participants nearing 90 days of release were recruited from four medium-to-low security prisons in Kentucky. Informed consent was obtained, and participants completed interviews related to drug use, mental health, and HIV risk behaviors with trained study staff. Participants were paid \$25 on their prison account as an incentive. The majority of the sample was comprised of high school graduates ($Md = 12$ years, $SD = 2.10$) and who were on average 36 years old ($SD = 10.89$; Range 19-88). A total of 86.1% of our participants reported regular cannabis use (3 or more times a week) for at least a year. This study was approved by the Department of Corrections and the university's Institutional Review Board.

Measures

Race-Related Stress. Participants self-reported their experiences of racism using the Brief Index of Race-Related Stress (IRRS-B; Utsey, 1999). This instrument assesses perceived racism on a 4-point Likert-scale (0 - “This never happened to me”) to (4 - “This event happened and I was extremely upset”), with scores ranging from 0-84. The IRRS-B assesses three domains of race-related stress: Individual Racism (6-items; $\alpha = .084$), Institutional Racism (6-items; $\alpha = .080$), and Cultural Racism (10-items $\alpha = .086$). In this study, only cultural racism subscale was included for analysis since this overlooked form of racism causes chronic stress for African Americans (Case & Hunter, 2013; Williams et al., 2019). Sample items for this subscale include, “...observed situations where other Blacks were treated harshly or unfairly by Whites/non-Blacks due to their race,” “...seldom hear or read anything positive about Black people on radio, TV, in newspapers, or history books.”, and “...observed the police treat White/non-Blacks with more respect and dignity than they do Blacks.” Higher scores reflect higher levels of cultural race-related stress. Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for this subscale was 0.86 for our sample, demonstrating very good internal consistency (see Table 1).

Years of Regular Cannabis Use. Participants were asked “How many years in your life have you regularly used cannabis (3 times or more a week) prior to incarceration?” The average years of regular cannabis use in our sample was 13.56 (SD = 10; Range 0–50).

Demographics. Participants reported their age, years of education, incarceration before age 18 (yes or no), and length of lifetime incarceration (months).

Results

Data screening eliminated 31 cases due to missing data and outliers. All assumptions were met among the study variables as variance inflation factor (VIF) scores were less than five

and the tolerance scores were greater than two (Craney & Surls, 2002). VIF scores and tolerance values are diagnostic indicators used to determine the presence of multicollinearity among study variables. After data cleaning, the final sample included $N = 177$ participants who reported cannabis use. Bivariate analyses showed age was significantly correlated with length of incarceration before ($r = -0.17, p < .05$) and after age 18 ($r = 0.36, p < .01$). Length of incarceration was also associated with number of years of regular cannabis use ($r = 0.17, p < .05$). There was a statistically significant correlation between cultural race-related stress and number of years of regular cannabis use ($r = 0.22; p < .01$; see Table 1). Years of education was not associated with any of the study variables; therefore, it was eliminated from further analyses.

Multivariate regression analyses showed cultural race-related stress was significant and positively associated with the number of years of regular cannabis use ($\beta = .22, p = .003$), after controlling for age, incarceration prior to age 18, and length of incarceration after age 18 (see Table 2). The length of incarceration after age 18 was the only covariate significantly associated with the number of years of regular cannabis use prior to incarceration ($\beta = .11, p = .071$). The final model significantly predicted the number of years of regular cannabis use prior to incarceration [$F(4, 172) = 4.18, p = .003$]. It should be noted individual and institutional race-related stress subscales were not significantly associated with years of regular cannabis use prior to incarceration (see supplementary tables).

Discussion

This study sought to examine the relationship between cultural race-related stress and number of years of regular cannabis use among incarcerated African American men. Our results showed a significant and positive association between years of regular cannabis use prior to incarceration and cultural race-related stress among our sample. Our results are consistent with

research suggesting African American men's cannabis use is associated with race-related stress (Buckner et al., 2016). These findings also demonstrate cultural racism may predict and explain years of regular cannabis use among incarcerated African American men.

The number of years of regular cannabis use prior to incarceration may be associated with cultural race-related stress due to pervasive negative stereotypes of African American men (Najdowski et al., 2015; Taylor et al., 2019). For example, African American men are depicted as lazy, uneducated, drug users and dealers, and prone to danger and violence (Smiley & Fakunle, 2017). These characterizations are used to justify the subordination of African American men, as they report frequent racial discrimination (Hudson et al., 2016) and a higher likelihood of being shot and killed by law enforcement (Hester & Gray, 2018). Additionally, the disproportionate rates of arrests and convictions of cannabis use among African American men further demonstrates encounters with cultural racism within the criminal justice system.

Our sample may also endorse heightened cultural race-related stress after release. Due to existing stereotypes about African American men and criminality, their felony offender status decreases their likelihood of being hired for a job, obtaining reliable housing, or being admitted to school (Western & Sirois, 2019). National professional organizations such as the American Psychological Association (APA), American Public Health Association (APHA), and American Medical Association (AMA) have recently issued statements declaring racism as a "pandemic" and "public health crisis" that produces adverse mental and physical health outcomes for African Americans (American Medical Association; AMA, 2020; American Psychological Association; APA, 2020; American Public Health Association; APHA, 2020). In the case of cultural racism, encountering insidious racial stereotypes creates stress and drains cognitive and emotional resources (Najdowski et al., 2015). Further, internalizing these stereotypes reduces one's self-

esteem and self-worth (Molina & James, 2016). Franklin and Boyd-Franklin (2000) coined the concept of psychological invisibility to explain how some African American men believe their abilities, talents, and worth are disregarded due to others' prejudice of them (Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000). Insidious cultural racism can undermine their resilience, leading to maladaptive coping strategies such as frequent cannabis use (Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000). In other words, cannabis may be used regularly to cope with inner turmoil, discriminatory interactions, and institutional policies that reflect the presumed inferiority of African American men.

Limitations

There are a few limitations to the current study. First, these findings are preliminary and warrant further exploration to understand the relationship between cultural race-related stress and illicit drug use. Second, the cross-sectional design of this study limits the ability to infer causality between cultural race-related stress and years of regular cannabis use prior to incarceration. Our findings are also limited in generalizability as the men in our sample were incarcerated and recruited from only one state. Last, participants' recall of years of regular cannabis use prior to incarceration was based on their retrospective memory, which could introduce bias; however, this method of data collection has been used in other prison studies to assess drug use (Tangley et al., 2016; Wheeler et al., 2018) and this data was collected through interviews with trained study staff. To expand our findings, future research should examine the relationship between cannabis use and cultural race-related stress among incarcerated African American men who were incarcerated specifically due to their cannabis use and possession. Additionally, it may be interesting to compare reports of cultural race-related stress and cannabis use between incarcerated and non-incarcerated African American male populations to inform drug treatment interventions.

Implications

Our findings have implications for African American male prisoners nearing community re-entry. These men will continue to encounter cultural racism and negative stereotypes that influence their identity. Research suggests African American men return to drug use as early one day after release from prison (Rowell-Cunsolo et al., 2018). Cannabis use after re-entry can result in positive drug screens during parole and increase recidivism rates, as cannabis use and possession is illegal in most Southern states, including Kentucky (Freeman et al., 2017). Further, African American men have the highest rates of recidivism beyond criminogenic risk compared to Black women and White men and women (Ropes Berry et al., 2018). Hence, there is need to refocus treatment efforts to address cannabis use among African American men after release from prison, particularly in the current sociopolitical climate of racial injustice.

Positive social support is cited as a way to combat cultural race-related stress (Lewis-Coles, et al., 2006; Utsey et al., 2000) due to positive interactions and beliefs about the African American cultural group (Hudson et al., 2016). Increasing positive social resources is a point of intervention for African American men who report regular cannabis use, are newly released from prison, and will need support to successfully reintegrate into society (Rowell-Consulo et al., 2016). Without social support, some African American men may return to the use of cannabis and other drugs to cope with cultural race-related stress. Substance abuse treatment efforts with African American men should also emphasize alternative strategies for coping with race-related stress, specifically from cultural racism (Assari et al., 2019). These strategies can include interventions that emphasize self-empowerment through acknowledgment and validation of their identities as African American men, to counter the harmful effects of cultural stereotypes.

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