Introduction

- The goal of this study was to examine actor and partner effects of perceived discrimination on African American couples’ stress and cortisol levels.
- Perceived discrimination is positively associated with levels of cortisol in scalp hair among African Americans (Lehrer et al., 2020).
- Assessing cortisol concentration in hair reveals information about long-term responses to stress up to 3 months or longer (Stadler & Kirschbaum, 2012).
- Vicarious racism such as maternal experiences of discrimination influence child health and biomarkers of stress (Condon et al, 2019). This suggests that there is a stress spillover effect onto close relationship partners.

Hypotheses:
- African Americans who reported more discrimination over the past 3 months would have higher perceived stress and higher cortisol levels.
- African Americans whose partners reported more perceived discrimination over the past 3 months would have higher perceived stress and higher cortisol levels.

Methods

Participants:
- 41 African American couples were recruited via CTA red line ads.
  - 30 opposite gender couples
  - 11 same gender couples
- Average age = 44.2 years
- Average relationship length = 9.17 years

Procedure:
- African American couples were recruited via advertisements on the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) Red Line
- Participants were asked basic demographic questions. They completed a measure asking about their daily life experiences and how bothered they were by these experiences.
- Participants also provided a hair sample to measure cortisol concentration.

Measures:
- Perceived Discrimination: The 18-item Daily Life Experiences scale (Harrell, 1994) was used (e.g., “Being observed or followed while in public places”) to assess discrimination and bother over the past 3 months. For each item, participants rated their agreement on an 8-point Likert-scale (0 = Did not occur, 1 = Not at all negative, 7 = Extremely negative).
- Cortisol: Collected hair samples were shipped overnight to an endocrine laboratory in Germany (Kirschbaum lab) for assaying for cortisol levels.

Results:
- Participants’ reports of their own microaggression experiences and how much it bothered them were associated with their own perceived stress.
- However, participants’ partners’ reports of their microagression experiences and how much it bothered them were associated with participants' hair cortisol levels.

Discussion:
- Results suggest that there is a stress spillover in cortisol when participants’ partners were more bothered by the microaggressions they experienced.
- There is a slew of health and psychological effects related to high cortisol levels.
  - Understanding how daily life experiences of microaggressions impact couples’ stress levels can inform interventions to cope with stress.
- One limitation of this pilot study was the small sample size.

References:

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