

Study focuses on suicide resilience and vulnerability

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Rheeda Walker (standing), associate professor and director of the Culture, Risk and Resilience Lab at the University of Houston. Credit: University of Houston

Religious beliefs and practices may reduce thoughts of suicide among African-American adults in stressful life events induced by racial discrimination, according to a new research study conducted at the University of Houston (UH).

"African-Americans experience an inordinate amount of psychological strain through [racial discrimination](#), leading to depression, hopelessness and other high risk factors for [suicide](#), but demonstrate significantly lower rates of suicide relative to European-Americans," said Rheeda Walker, associate professor and director of the Culture, Risk and Resilience Lab at UH.

Walker is the principal investigator of a new research study, "Perceived Racism and Suicide Ideation: Mediating Role of Depression but Moderating Role of Religiosity among African American Adults," published in the journal *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*. The goal of the study is to assess suicide ideation (thinking about, considering or planning for suicide), depressive symptoms, intrinsic/extrinsic religiosity (religious orientation) and perceived racism in a community sample of 236 African-American men and women.

Walker notes suicide does exist for African-Americans, but it's rarely noticed and understudied. She cites suicide as one of the leading causes of death among African-Americans and that approximately, 1,900 African-American adults and youth die by suicide each year.

"There is a belief that if one creates psychological science and knowledge, such knowledge ought to apply universally to everyone. That is simply not the case," said Walker. "We need to spend more time finding out what depression means for African-Americans and across ethnic groups. What does suicide look like for African Americans? Are there self-destructive behaviors that are suicidal, but not considered as suicide?"

The findings from Walker's research provide evidence that perceived racism may play a role in suicide vulnerability. The study's contributions are important in the context of providing evidence that despite the harmful effects of racism, extrinsic religiosity (external motivation for being religious, such as meeting people, community conformity, cultural heritage, etc.) buffered these effects. People in the study who reported higher levels of more socially oriented, extrinsic religiosity did not report suicide ideation when experiencing symptoms of depression.

"To our knowledge, this is the first study to examine the moderating capacity of religiosity in the context of perceived discrimination and

depression symptomatology so that we can understand the vulnerability and the resilience operating in tandem. Although discrimination can have adverse emotional consequences, the findings suggest that the 'use' of religion perhaps to connect with others or to meet some other need can be emotionally helpful among individuals who experience racism," said Walker.

In this context, Walker hopes religion might be used to obtain social cohesion and relief from emotional distress that might be experienced by others in similar circumstances. Previous research observed that people who experience high levels of stress experience relief in supportive religious settings.

Provided by University of Houston

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