

Autistic Community Connectedness as a Moderator of the Effect of Minority Stress on Mental Health in the Autistic Population

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INTRODUCTION

Autistic people have a higher rate of mental illness compared to the non-autistic population (Lai et al., 2019).

The minority stress model (MSM) suggests that marginalized minorities are exposed to a greater stress burden (minority stress) resulting in health inequalities (Meyer, 2003).

Greater exposure to minority stress predicts worse mental health for autistic people (Botha & Frost, 2020).

Marginalized minorities may also have access to a unique in-group community which also provide a degree of protection (Meyer, 2015).

For example, belongingness to LGBTQ community for sexual and gender minorities weakens the impact of perceived stigma on both depression and suicidality (Kaniuka et al, 2019).

Autistic community connectedness (ACC) may play a role in buffering the impact of minority stress on mental health for the autistic community.

AIMS

RQ1 To test whether minority stress predicts worse mental health for the autistic sample.

RQ2 To investigate whether autistic community connectedness buffers against the effects of minority stress on mental health in the autistic community.

METHOD

Participants and procedure:

Eligibility criteria

1. Consider yourself autistic (both diagnosed and self-diagnosed).
2. Be 18 years of age or above.
3. Have proficiency in English required to take the survey.

Participants

Autistic (N =195) (Mean age = 37.3, SD = 11.6) partook in an online Qualtrics-based survey. Recruitment was internet based and not limited geographically.

Procedure and measures

Participants took part in a 30-minute survey measuring demographics; general life stress; minority stress; autistic community connectedness (belongingness, social connectedness, and political connectedness); and psychological distress.

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Surrey prior to data collection.

RESULTS

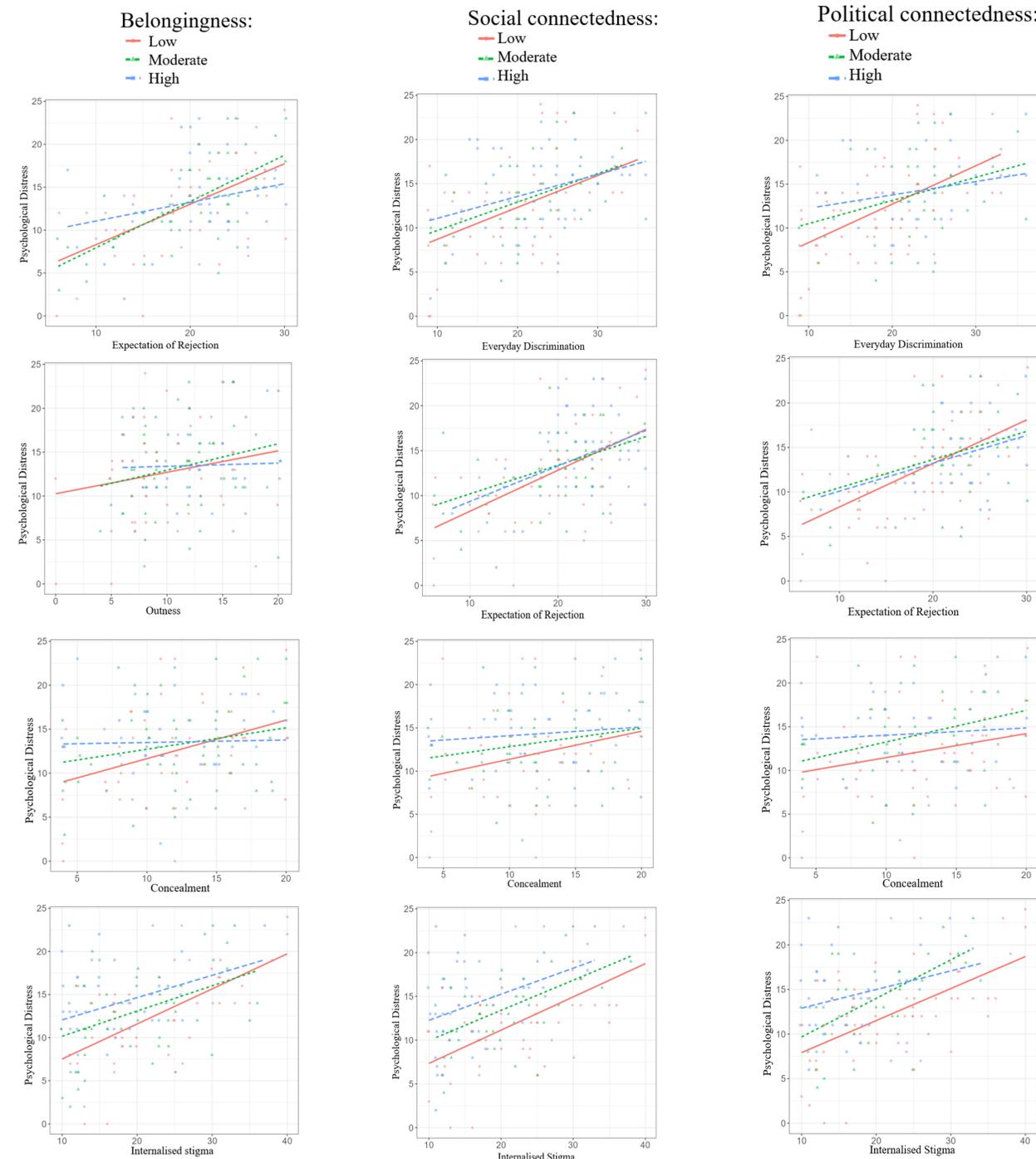
RQ 1: Exposure to minority stress predicted higher distress.

Hierarchical regression was used. Model 1 contained demographics and general stress; model 2 added MSM variables. Everyday discrimination, expectation of rejection, outness, concealment, and internalised stigma predicted higher distress ($ps < .001$; $\Delta R^2 = .54$).

RQ2: ACC moderated the effect of minority stress on psychological distress.

Model 3 added ACC (belongingness, social, and political connectedness) while model 4 included any interaction effects on previously significant (model 2) minority stressors. Model 4 explained more variance ($p < .001$; $\Delta R^2 = .76$). Moderation effects are shown in exploratory graphs according to type of MS and ACC in figure 3.

Figure 3. moderation effects



DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Mental health and wellbeing could not be explained by demographics or general stress, - exposure to minority stress predicted worse mental health demonstrating utility of the MSM (Botha & Frost, 2020)

Different types of autistic community connectedness moderated the relationships between different types of minority stressors – it is a complex relationship.

High belongingness to the autistic community moderates the impact of outness (disclosure), and concealment (masking) on psychological distress.

Belongingness and social connectedness were less effective at moderating the effect of internalized stigma on distress – this effect is similar for people with mental health conditions (Treichler & Lucksted, 2018).

Political connectedness moderated the impact of internalized stigma on distress more so than belongingness or social connectedness – pointing to the utility of political aspects of the autistic community.

LIMITATIONS & FUTURE RESEARCH

The sample was relatively small compared to the complexity of the models tested – in future larger samples are needed.

The sample is skewed towards autistic people who can read, use screen readers, or access the survey with some assistance. More research with autistic people with learning disabilities is required on this topic.

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