

REVERBERATION THEORY: STRESS AND RACISM IN HIERARCHICALLY STRUCTURED COMMUNITIES

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In the 21st century, historians of the social sciences and particularly psychology might look back and conclude that two research topics, stress and racism, received an exorbitant amount of attention in the 20th century. They might argue that this scientific interest reflected the fact that these two issues -- stress and ethnic and racially based conflicts -- were of central personal, social and political significance in this era. While researchers engage in specific, relatively isolated analyses of these issues, however, a person living in the 20th century will not experience these two problems in the neatly compartmentalized way that researchers treat them. Quite the contrary, on a personal as well as on a community level, stress and racism are uniquely intertwined. In this chapter we propose that it is time for social scientists to recognize the intimate intermingling among community stress, racial and ethnic conflict, and racism and to bring together these concepts in one theoretical framework.

The purpose of this chapter is to investigate and explore the role of community stressors and perceived economic stress on dominant group prejudice, subordinate group economic stress and well-being outcomes. The Reverberation Theory of Stress and Racism conceptualizes stress and racism as mutually inter-related phenomena (see figure 1) and points to their combined reciprocal relationship with (social, psychological and physical) health outcomes.

Furthermore, we argue that it is crucial to explore the relationships among stress, racism and health within racially and ethnically hierarchically structured societies (see figure 2). The theory states that: (a) personal as well as community level stressors influence members of dominant as well as subordinate groups in a society, (b) this stress contributes directly to increased intergroup conflict/racism in these groups, which in turn will increase the stress level experienced by these different groups, and (c) this stress will influence social, psychological, and physical health outcomes of group members at all hierarchical positions.

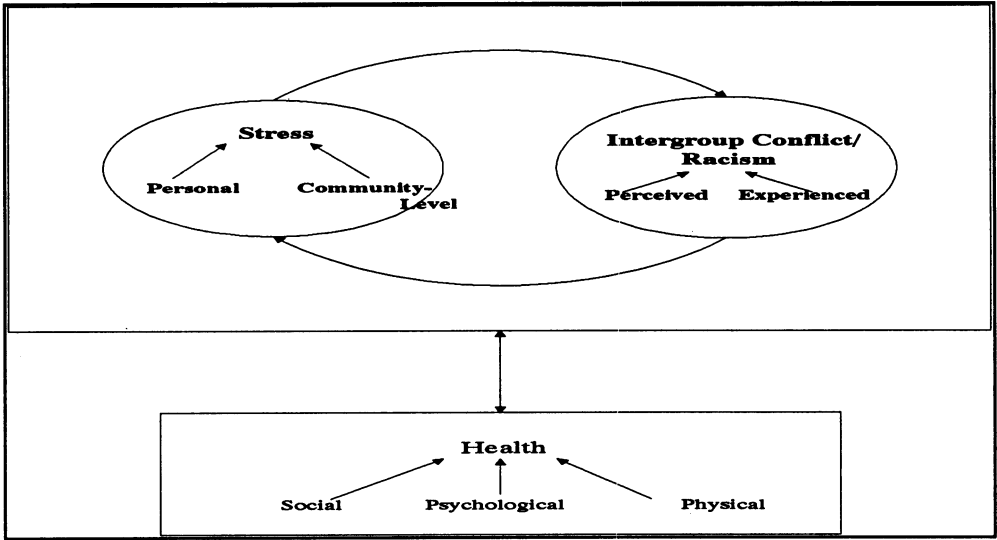


Figure 1. The Interdependence of Stress and Intergroup Conflict/Racism in Communities and Its Significance for Health Outcomes

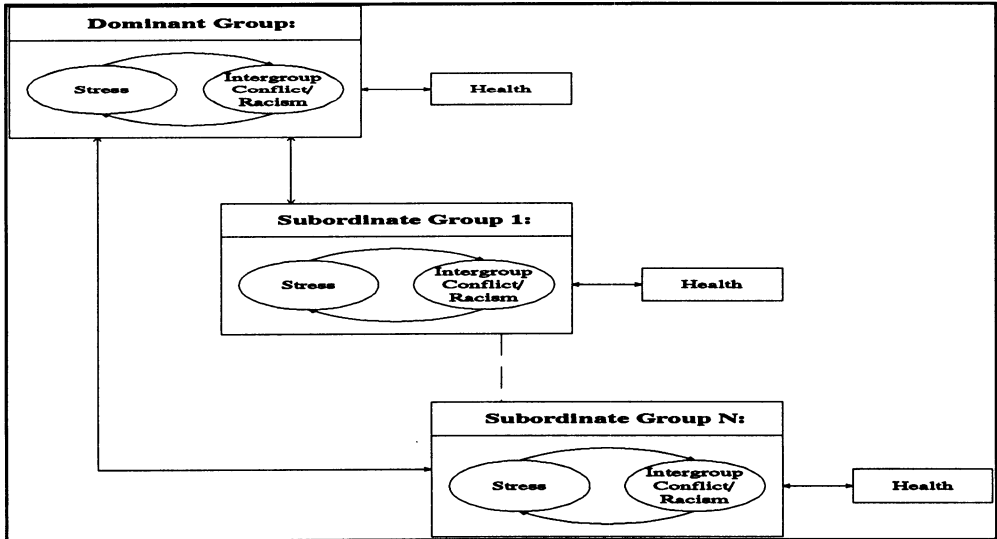


Figure 2. The Interdependence of Stress and Intergroup Conflict/Racism in Hierarchically Structured Communities