



Social Determinants of Subthreshold Psychotic Symptoms Among Racial & Ethnic Minorities

Problem: Over 40,000 non-Latino Black adults (age 18 and older) were treated for schizophrenia-spectrum disorders in the New York State public mental health system in 2009. In fact, on any given day Black children and adult patients are over-represented in New York State Office of Mental Health (OMH) inpatient facilities compared to non-Hispanic Whites, most frequently for psychotic disorders. National and international studies suggest that underserved racial/ethnic groups, particularly Black individuals, are at increased risk for schizophrenia and other related conditions. This includes higher risk for psychotic symptoms that do not meet full disorder criteria, yet are commonly associated with social adversity and mental health burden. These “subthreshold” symptoms may be a marker for non-psychotic disorders, and may also put the person at risk for misdiagnosis of more severe psychotic disorders, such as schizophrenia.

It remains unclear why Black individuals are at increased risk for clinical and subthreshold psychotic symptoms and disorders. Data from European studies implicate social and environmental factors, such as discrimination and ethnic isolation, but these findings have not been studied sufficiently in the US or in New York State. Culturally relevant factors related to racial/ethnic minority status and elevated psychotic symptoms and disorder include:

- **Racial Discrimination:** Discrimination, harassment and stigma faced by Black individuals in predominantly White countries, in multiple sectors of society (e.g. employment and health care).
- **Ethnic Density:** In predominantly White societies, living in neighborhoods with fewer members of African descent (low ethnic density), compared with residence in neighborhoods where Blacks comprise >25% of the population.
- **Childhood Trauma and Loss:** Racial/ethnic minorities with psychotic symptoms are more likely than Whites to report early traumatic experiences, a known risk factor for schizophrenia and psychotic symptoms.
- **Psychological Burden of Subthreshold Psychotic Symptoms:** Among US Latinos, these symptoms are associated with more severe anxiety and depression as well as greater suicidal ideation and traumatic exposure.

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Strategies: Dr. Deidre Anglin, an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology, City College of New York, affiliated with the Center of Excellence for Cultural Competence (CECC) at the New York State Psychiatry Institute (NYSPI) has developed an integrated model of risk for subthreshold psychotic experiences and symptoms that takes into account these culturally relevant factors. The CECC is collaborating with Dr. Anglin to test this model in a large college-based young adult sample in New York City. The goal of the study is to assess how the stress associated with racial/ethnic minority status is related to subthreshold psychotic symptoms. Study results may help identify new ways to correctly diagnose and treat vulnerable racial/ethnic groups who report these impairing symptoms that do not meet full criteria for psychotic disorder but can easily result in higher rates of hospitalization.



Preliminary Findings: Subthreshold psychotic symptoms among young adult racial/ethnic minorities appear to be associated with exposure to racial discrimination. Focusing on how individuals at risk cope with discrimination and ethnic isolation and identifying the protective aspects of ethnic identity may help refine targeted early interventions for this population, especially for those whose symptoms persist. Dr. Anglin is planning a follow-up evaluation of this study cohort to ascertain changes in their clinical status over time. Findings from these studies can help OMH identify social factors that put Black individuals at increased risk of schizophrenia and related disorders. They can also facilitate early intervention efforts in racial/ethnic minority populations.