



The Relationship between Caregiver Grief and Psychological Distress: The Moderating Role of Social Support.

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Introduction

Caregiver grief refers to the losses experienced by caregivers both before and after the death of a care recipient (Marwit & Meuser, 2002; Lindauer & Harvath, 2014). Caregiver grief is a significant positive correlate of psychological distress, with higher levels of grief consistently associated with elevated depression, anxiety, and burden among caregivers (Chan et al., 2013; Liew et al., 2023). It is important to note, however, that grief does not affect all caregivers the same, and contextual resources may shape the degree to which grief translates into distress. Social support, which refers to the perception or experience of being cared for, valued, and embedded in a network of mutual assistance (Taylor, 2011), is one such resource. According to the stress-buffering hypothesis, social support protects individuals from the effects of stress primarily when stress levels are high, attenuating the relationship between stressors and negative psychological outcomes (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Limited research has explored social support as a moderator of the relationship between caregiver grief and psychological distress, particularly among active caregivers experiencing pre-death grief.

Present Study

The present study seeks to examine the relationship between caregiver grief and psychological distress, while clarifying the moderating role of social support. The findings may provide valuable insights for developing grief interventions tailored to caregivers' needs.

Hypotheses

- Higher levels of caregiver grief will predict higher levels of psychological distress.
- Higher levels of caregiver grief will predict higher levels of psychological distress at low levels of social support.
- Lower levels of caregiver grief will predict lower levels of psychological distress at high levels of social support.
- Social support will moderate the relationship between caregiver grief and psychological distress.

Method

➤ Procedure

102 Participants completed the online research questionnaire which took about 20-30 minutes.

➤ Measures

1. The Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale

- The measure is comprised of 21 items ($\alpha = .95$) that range from 0 (Did not apply to me at all) to 3 (Applied to me very much or most of the time).
- Sample item: “I couldn’t seem to experience any positive feeling at all.”

2. The Medical Outcomes Study Social Support Survey

- The measure is comprised of 19 items ($\alpha = 0.95$) that range from 1 (None of the time) to 5 (All of the time).
- Sample item: “Someone to love and make you feel wanted.”

3. The Marwit-Meuser Caregiver Grief Inventory

- The measure is comprised of 18 items ($\alpha = .94$) that range from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).
- Sample item: “I have this empty, sick feeling knowing that my loved one is “gone.”

➤ Analysis

A moderation analysis were conducted using Model 1 of the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2022), with 5,000 bootstrap samples and 95% bias-corrected confidence to examine the relationships between caregiver grief and psychological distress (*Figure 1*), while considering the potential mechanisms of social support.

Results

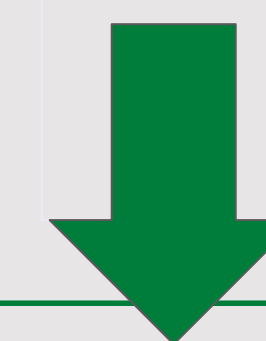
Hypothesis 1: Grief was not significantly associated with psychological distress, $b = 0.90$, 95% CI $[-0.73, 2.54]$, $p = .277$.

Hypothesis 2: Social support was not significantly associated with psychological distress, $b = 0.19$, 95% CI $[-0.26, 0.65]$, $p = .407$.

Hypothesis 3: The interaction between grief and social support was not significant, $b = -0.05$, 95% CI $[-0.20, 0.10]$, $p = .513$, indicating that social support did not moderate the relationship between caregiver grief and distress.

Hypothesis 4: The overall model was significant, $F(3, 102) = 6.66$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .16$, accounting for approximately 16% of the variance in psychological distress.

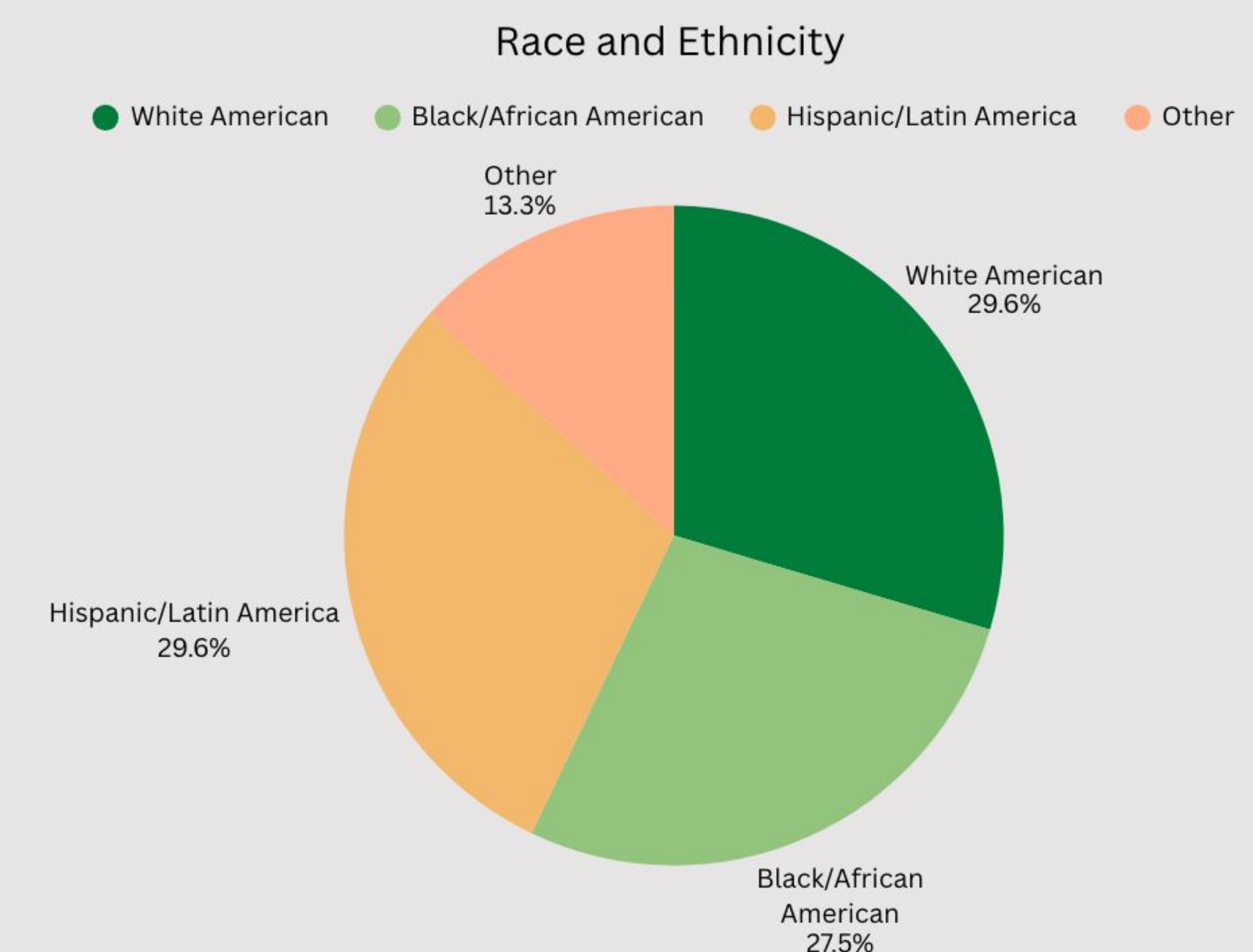
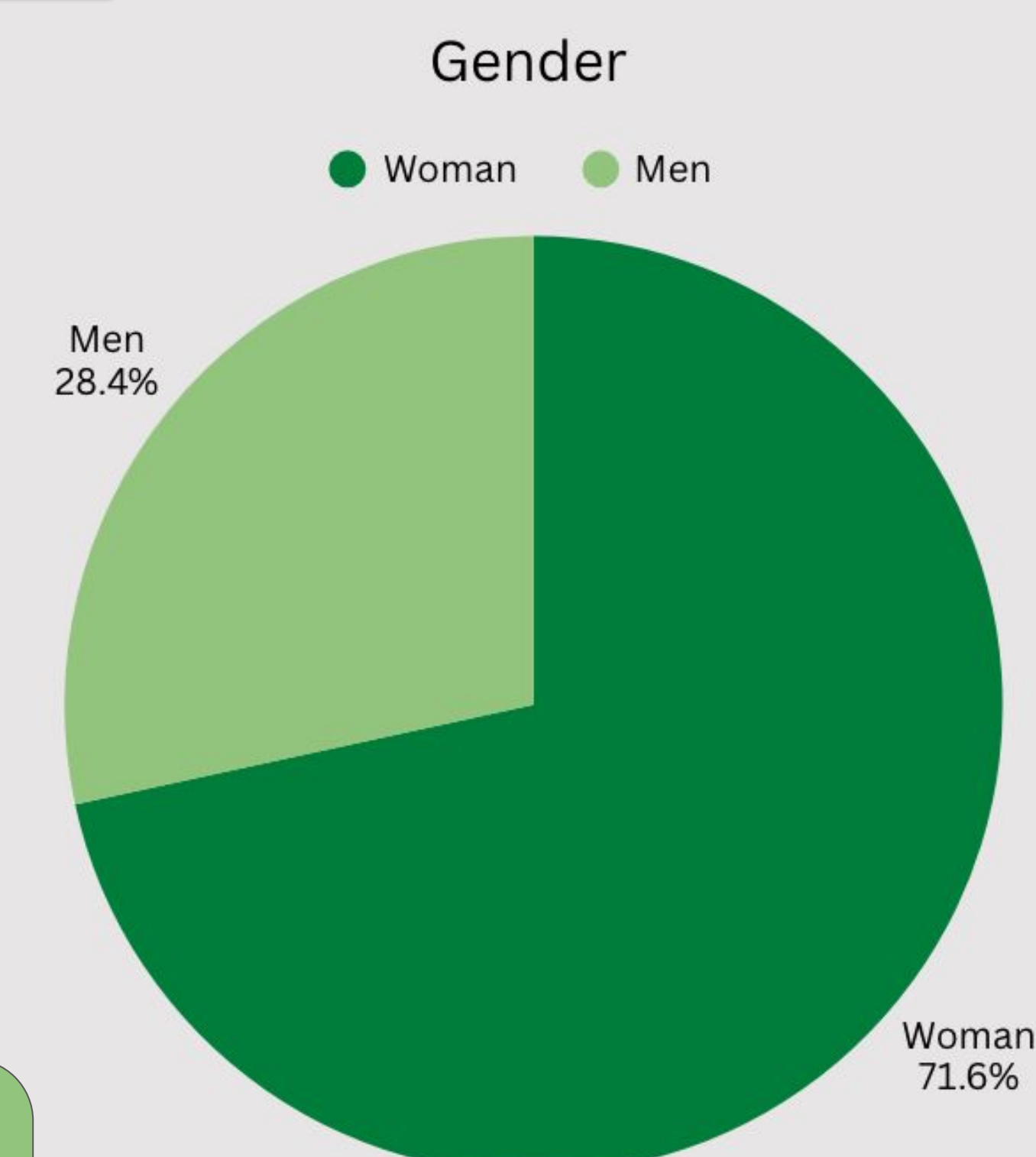
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Discussion

- Grief and social support were not significantly associated with psychological distress. Social support did not moderate the relationships between grief and psychological distress. These findings suggest that, within this sample, higher levels of social support did not buffer the effects of grief on psychological distress.
- Although no individual predictor reached significance, the overall model was significant, $F(3, 102) = 6.66$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .16$, indicating that grief, social support, and their interaction jointly accounted for approximately 16% of the variance in psychological distress. The substantial unexplained variance suggests that additional factors likely contribute to caregivers' distress.
- **Implications:** These findings suggest important implications for future research. Psychological distress among caregivers is likely influenced by multiple factors beyond grief and perceived social support, such as coping strategies, resilience, attachment style, caregiving burden, or the quality of social support instead of the quantity. Future studies should examine these variables to better understand the complexity of caregiver well-being.
- **Limitations:** The relatively small sample size limited statistical power to detect modest effects; and the cross-sectional design prevents causal conclusions from being drawn. Therefore, future research should involve larger and more diverse samples and a longitudinal design may provide a clearer understanding of the relationships among grief, social support, and psychological distress.

Participant Demographics



(Figure 1)

