



Mitigating Post-Election Trauma through Mindfulness and Decentering among First-Time Voters in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study examined predictive influence of mindfulness and decentering on post-election trauma of first time voters. The participants were undergraduate students of Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam Campus, Nigeria (males = 38.4%; females = 61.6%). Ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 32 ($M_{age} = 20.77$; $SD = 3.26$) years. Test of hypotheses using multiple linear regression analysis (Enter Method) indicated that mindfulness negatively predicted post-election trauma. Also, decentering was a negative predictor of post-election trauma among undergraduate first time voters. This study concluded that post-election trauma could be mitigated through mindfulness therapy in the presence of decentering. The implication is that positive psychotherapy intervention built on the premises of mindfulness and decentering could enhance reduction in post-election trauma.

Keywords:

*Decentering,
First-Time Voter,
Mindfulness,
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Introduction

Voting for the first time comes with some level of efforts such as determination to register as a voter and expectations that voters' efforts will bring about positive change in governance. First-time voters (those young people who have reached the voting age and are facing their first opportunity to vote) place importance on the outcome of the election; thus, they become actively involved in the process. Negative psychological state may ensue when the outcome of the election turns out against their favourable expectation. When the expectations are not met afterwards, voters feel stressful (Hagan et al., 2018). Significant to this stress can be the perceived value placed on the outcome of elections in developing countries, like Nigeria whose electoral process and governance are marred by corruption.

Situations like these become more pronounced when there is discord among the electorates or political parties prior to and after the election, leading to deep dislike among members of different political parties, which is termed affective polarization (Iyenger et al., 2012). In line with this, high stakes are put on the outcome of the election (Ward & Tavits, 2019), complementing the evident discord. Due to the attachment to political party or candidate, which becomes part of electorates' social identity, the electorate of each particular group feels that a loss at the poll signifies a loss for their party and candidate (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019). Through this, an election-linked trauma develops, which has varying effects on the individuals experiencing electoral loss.

The incidence of trauma after election has its root in *moral trauma* (Norman & Marguen, 2021). Moral trauma explores distress that surfaces when beliefs and expectation contradict each other, and may emanate due to failed expectations on the outcome of an election (Norman & Marguen, 2021). Such was observed in the study of Fraser et al. (2023), in which post-traumatic stress disorder was seen among people who had deep negativity with people of opposing parties at the end of an electoral outcome. Similarly, Hagan et al. (2020) reported increase in stress level among college students after the outcome of an election in the United States of America. These traumatic experiences observed after election may be well understood with the concept of trauma in general.

Trauma explores a dynamic situation describing how event(s), such as how an individual's predisposition to being vulnerable, as well as the factors that might mitigate such vulnerability interact (Kimberg, 2016), to negatively affect the life of an individual (Spiegel, 2008). In simpler terms trauma is a negative life event, which has the tendency to affect the overall functioning of an individual. Such effect is however dependent on factors, ranging from how vulnerable the individual is to the event, the degree of the event, the emotional attachment to the event, and the level of resources available to cope with the negative outcome of the event. Generally, experiences of these negative events have been found to bring about negative health outcomes such as suicidal tendency, mental illness, as well as dysfunction; traumatic experiences bring about substance use, depression, anxiety (Olugbemi, 2023; Center for Disease Control, 2019), as well as lowered quality of life (Nuno et al., 2018). Trauma may also lead to cardiovascular disease, issues with sleep, arthritis and autoimmune disease (Ryder et al., 2018). Trauma, specifically post-election trauma also has an effect on the well-being of individuals. Smith et al. (2019) showed that politics and its outcome brought about poor state of physical health, sleep disorders, as well as people losing friends, because they had diverse opinion on political issues during the electoral process.

Mindfulness and Post-Election Trauma

The effects of post-election trauma can be prevented with proper intervention. Such intervention rests on mindfulness, with mindfulness serving as a mechanism against trauma related problems (Boughner et al., 2016). Mindfulness refers to conscious awareness of the present moment, through attention and being neutral in the evaluation of the experiences (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). In mindfulness, the focus is on the present state through conscious awareness; however, the individual paying attention makes no attempt to control or change what he or she is feeling (Jazaieri & Shapiro, 2017), and this helps the individual to regulate emotions and understand what he or she is internally feeling (Tang et al., 2015). Mindfulness is cultivated through constant practice (Garland et al., 2009), and enhanced through different mindfulness based interventions, which are important in increasing trait mindfulness (Goldberg et al., 2015). Trait mindfulness is an inherent personality characteristic where an individual becomes consciously aware of the present moment, feelings or

experiences without judging or reacting to them (Carpenter et al., 2019). Importance is placed on trait mindfulness due to the role of self-examination and reflection in the healing process, and the need to possess mindfulness traits to deal with issues relating to trauma.

Specifically, through mindfulness, one becomes aware of the events leading to the trauma, such as being on the losing side of an election, as it helps one not to consciously react to the trauma cues, which may predispose one to post-traumatic stress disorder (Thompson et al., 2011). Furthermore, mindfulness helps one to come to terms with reality by balancing the thought process; there would be reduction in cyclical thinking, which would subsequently reduce negative emotions and depressive symptoms experienced (Nitzan-Assayag et al., 2015). Also, mindfulness helps an individual to come to terms with stimulus that represents the traumatic situation, thus, reducing the tendency of the individual to avoid cues to such triggers (Lang et al., 2012). With this, individuals are better able to cope with negative internal experiences brought about by the trauma, which is aided through concentration, and dealing with conflicting thoughts (Zerubavel & Messman-Moore, 2015). Through mindfulness, exposure to a traumatic situation can be prevented from degenerating into post-traumatic symptoms (Thompson et al., 2011).

While scholars have reported relationship between mindfulness and post-traumatic stress disorder (e. g. Bremner et al., 2017; Hanley et al., 2014; Hopwood & Schutte, 2017; Okeowata et al., 2024), the niche of mindfulness and post-election trauma in a developing country with associated flawed electoral process and high incidences of exposure to trauma is yet to be explored; hence, the need to determine how mindfulness would help first time voters to cope with post-election trauma in Nigeria. We tested the hypothesis:

***H1:** Mindfulness will negatively and significantly relate with post-election trauma*

Decentering and Post-Election Trauma

Holding different perspectives to an event or situation in decentering may serve as a protective factor to prevent mental health challenges. Naragon-Gainey

and Demarree (2016) defined decentering as “a present-moment awareness of one’s mental experience marked by a detached observed perspective” (p.935). The adoption of different perspectives to an event helps in preventing negative reaction to cues that trigger symptoms related to trauma, due to individuals adopting to these cues (Gecht et al., 2014). Through decentering, the individual objectively analyzes the situation or event; thus there is a reduction in negative perception about the event (Gillanders et al., 2014). Furthermore, Fresco et al. (2007) opined that the absence of decentering brings about psychological and social dysfunctions, drawing on the importance of decentering in dealing with negative emotional states after exposure to trauma. This is achieved by shutting down further cognitive processes on the outcome of an event, with different perspective explored (Keesman et al., 2017). In such situation, the individual tends to experience positive emotions, aided by positive thought processes from the different perspective held (Keesman et al., 2017). There seems to be a dearth of research on relationship between decentering and trauma with only Okeowata et al. (2024) which showed that a higher level of decentering brought about lower levels of trauma symptoms of sexual abuse. However, there is no evidence of research linking decentering and post-election trauma, as such, we tested the hypothesis that: ***H2:** Decentering will negatively and significantly relate with post-election trauma*

Method

Participants

Five hundred and ninety-four (male = 228; female = 366) young persons were chosen through purposive sampling method to participate in this study. The participants were Nigerian undergraduate students from Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University who reported their experiences following the conduct and offshoots of the 2023 general elections organised by the Nigerian Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the body which, among other functions, conducts elections into various political offices in the country. The participants have knowledge and experiences about election, election processes, election outcomes, and were enthusiastic about the positive outcome of the 2023 elections of federal and state. Participants’ ages ranged between 18 and 32 years ($M = 20.77$, $SD = 3.26$).

Instruments

Participants responded to three items: 20-item PCL5 (Fraser, et al., 2023), 11-item Experience Questionnaire Decentering Subscale (EQDS: Soler et al., 2014) and Toronto Mindfulness scale (TMS: Lau et al., 2006). For post-election trauma, we used Post Election-related trauma (PTSD), which is a modified version of the 20-item PCL-5, that assesses symptoms of post-traumatic stress based on definitions from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition. Participants responded on 5-point option of 0 - 4, ranging from not at all = 0, a little bit = 1, moderately = 2, quite a bit = 3 and extremely = 4. Some of the items included: Repeated, disturbing and unwanted memories of the election; Feeling very upset when something reminded you of the election; Blaming yourself or someone else for the election results; Trouble falling asleep or staying asleep; Having strong negative feelings about the election such as fear, horror, anger, guilt or shame. We validate the scale in a pilot study using 80 individuals who exercised their franchise during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria but felt traumatised with the process and outcomes ($M_{age} = 20.80$, $SD; 3.26.22$). The reliability (Internal consistency) of this scale is at Cronbach's alpha 0.90. The confirmation factor analysis (CFA) measure of reliability revealed the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy at 0.84, with the Bartlett's test of sphericity at approxi. Chi-square 198.82, $df = 190$, $p < .001$. This reveals that the test is valid for the present study.

TMS: This is a 13-item scale designed to measure mindfulness in state-like experience during mediation. Each participant will respond to a 5-point option format ranging from 0 – not at all to 4 – very much. Some of the items in the scale include, “I experienced myself as separate from my changing thoughts and feelings”, “I remained curious about the nature of each experience as it arose”, “I was more invested in just watching my experiences as they arose, than in figuring out what they could mean”. The self-measure questionnaire was subjected to validity measures, using 80 individuals who exercised their franchise during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria ($M_{age}; 20.80$, $SD; 3.26$). The reliability (Internal consistency) of this scale is at Cronbach's alpha 0.66. The confirmation factor analysis measure of reliability revealed the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO)

measure of sampling adequacy at 0.674, with the Bartlett's test of sphericity at approximately Chi-square 198.82, $df = 78$, $P < .001$. This reveals that the test is valid for the present study.

EQDS: This is an 11-item self-report measure designed to measure decentering or disidentification with contents of negative thinking, hypothesised to be a process of change under two dimensions, e.g., rumination and wider perspective. Each participant responded on a 5-point option format ranging from 1 – never to 5 – all the time. Some of the items in the scale include, “I am more capable of accepting myself as I am”, “I can slow down my thinking in times of stress”, “I realize that I don't take difficulties so personal”. This questionnaire on decentering was subjected to validity measures, using 80 individuals who experience the 2023 federal and state in Nigeria. ($M_{age} = 20.80$, $SD; 3.26$). The reliability (Internal consistency) of this scale is at Cronbach's alpha 0.64. The confirmation factor analysis measure of reliability revealed the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy at 0.62, with the Bartlett's test of sphericity at approxi. Chi-square 107.23, $df (55)$, $p < .001$. This reveals that the test is valid for the present study.

Procedure

We approached the undergraduate students of Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, who reported for their usual lecture, 98% of whom experienced voting the first time in the 2023 general elections. The participants were requested to fill out the questionnaire on mindfulness, decentering, and post-election trauma. Regarding ethical considerations, the participants were informed that the study was to ascertain how stressful they felt from their participation in the 2023 federal and state elections vis-à-vis their traumatic experience. Informed consent was obtained by providing in the section of the questionnaire in which they were asked to check "yes" or "no" on their willingness to participate in the study. Those who chose "yes" were requested to complete the questionnaire. We assured the participants of confidentiality of the information they were to supply. The data collection lasted two weeks.

Design/Statistics

Cross-sectional design was adopted for this study. Cross-sectional design is a type of design used when

investigating relationship between two or more variables, and it is suitable when data are collected at one point in time. Multiple linear regression analysis was employed to analyze the data collected for this study. Multiple

linear regression analysis is a statistical tool that allows a researcher to examine how multiple independent variables are related to a dependent variable (Higgins, 2005).

Results

Table 1

Mean, standard deviation and inter-correlation among variables (n = 594)

| Variables | Mean | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|----------------|-------|-------|--------|-------|------|--------|-------|------|---|
| 1. PT | 38.42 | 15.09 | - | | | | | | |
| 2. Decentering | 38.02 | 6.69 | -.20** | - | | | | | |
| 3. Mindfulness | 37.71 | 6.16 | -.18** | .13** | - | | | | |
| 4. Age | 20.77 | 3.26 | -.01 | -.02 | .06 | - | | | |
| 5. Gender | 1.61 | .48 | .06 | -.06* | -.01 | -.14** | - | | |
| 6. Location | 1.36 | .48 | -.00 | .06* | -.01 | .04 | .06 | - | |
| 7. Voting | 1.75 | .42 | -.06 | -.08 | -.02 | -.33** | .13** | .07* | - |

*Note: SD = Standard Deviation, PT = Post-election Trauma * < .05; ** < .001*

The result from the Pearson correlation analysis showed that decentering was negatively correlated with post-election trauma ($r = -.20, p < .001$), mindfulness was negatively correlated with post-election trauma ($r = -.18, p < .001$), and decentering was positively correlated with mindfulness ($r = .13, p < .001$). The result also showed that gender was negatively correlated with mindfulness ($r = -.06, p < .05$), positively correlated with voting ($r = -.13, p < .05$), and negatively correlated with gender ($r = -.14, p < .001$). Also, the result showed that location was positively correlated with mindfulness ($r = .06, p < .05$), and positively correlated with voting ($r = .07, p < .05$). In addition, age was negatively correlated with voting ($r = -.33, p < .001$).

Table 2

Predicting Post-Election Trauma from Decentering and Mindfulness

| Model | <i>B</i> | <i>SEB</i> | β | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> | 95% <i>CI</i> | <i>R</i> ² | <i>F</i> |
|-------------|----------|------------|---------|----------|----------|---------------|-----------------------|-----------|
| Age | -.13 | .19 | -.03 | -.70 | .481 | [-.52; .24] | .747.80 | (6,593)** |
| Gender | 1.76 | 1.25 | -.05 | 1.40 | .160 | [.70; 4.23] | | |
| Location | .12 | 1.25 | .00 | .10 | .918 | [-2.33; 2.59] | | |
| Mindfulness | -.38 | .09 | -.15 | -3.92 | .001 | [-.58; .19] | | |
| Decentering | -.39 | .09 | -.17 | -4.31 | .001 | [-.57; -.21] | | |

Note: β = Regression coefficient; SE = Standard Error; t = Population t value; p = Probability level; CI = Upper & Lower Confidence Interval.

In Table 2, predictor variables; mindfulness and decentering significantly predicted post-election trauma, with significant model fit $F(6,593) = 7.80, p < .001$, accounting for 74% of the variance in post-election trauma. Independently, mindfulness negatively predicted post-election trauma ($\beta = -.15, t = -3.92, 95\% CI [-.58, .19], p < .001$), and decentering negatively predicted post-election trauma ($\beta = -.17, t = -4.31, 95\% CI [-.57, -.21], p < .001$).

Discussion

The present study explored how mindfulness and decentering help in mitigating post-election trauma. From the result, the study showed that mindfulness negatively predicted post-election trauma; thus, higher levels of mindfulness reduce the incidences of post-election trauma faced by first time voters. In this way, this finding affirmed the first study hypothesis,

which stated that mindfulness would significantly and negatively predict post-election trauma. The premise of this finding rests on the notion that paying attention to the present moment in mindfulness protects one from further negative experiences related to post-election trauma (Boughner et al., 2016). This is done by conscious awareness, which limits how an individual reacts to the different cues relating to the

trauma (Thompson, 2011). Through mindfulness, self-blame, shame and guilt relating to the event triggering the trauma (such as election) is reduced (Banks et al., 2015), and the individual feels better regarding the situation. This finding aligns with Okeowata et al. (2024), which showed that mindfulness negatively predicted trauma among individuals with a history of sexual abuse. Similarly, Wang et al. (2022) showed that mindfulness served as a protective factor against the development of post-traumatic stress disorder after exposure to corona virus disease. In addition, Hanley et al. (2014) showed that mindfulness helped in the prevention post-traumatic growth. These findings from the literature are evident validity of the present study.

Furthermore, the finding showed that decentering negatively predicted post-election trauma; thus, higher levels of decentering would mitigate the negative effect of post-election trauma, which may lead to election related post-traumatic stress disorder. With this, the second study hypothesis, which stated that decentering would significantly and negatively predict post-election trauma was confirmed. Decentering builds objectivity in perception, which helps in limiting negative perception, held about an event (Gillanders et al., 2014). Post-election trauma may be influenced by a negative perception of the electoral defeat of a rival party candidate, a negative perception attributable to observed incidences of election malpractice, weak and corrupt election tribunal and judicial system handling election petitions, the realities of events and projected future of the nation. Having different evaluations of the event may help one not to negatively react to stimulus which may trigger post-traumatic stress; thus, the individual is able to adapt well to the situation (Gecht et al., 2014). Also, negative thinking about election events is reduced through holding a decentered perspective (Fresco et al., 2007). Studies linking decentering to trauma related variables are scarce; however, this study concurs with Okeowata et al, (2024) which showed that decentering negatively predicted trauma.

By implication, the forgoing is a highlight of the importance of building trait mindfulness in young people to prepare them for negative outcomes of an event, such as election outcome. It also highlights the importance of shaping thought processes by accommodating different perspectives in evaluating

an experience or an event as it helps to objectively analyze the situation, which prevents the individual from further cognitive processes that may trigger post-traumatic stress. In addition, it is a call for government to initiate policies that would accommodate exposing first time voters in an election year to psychotherapy involving mindfulness and decentering after the conduct of the election, so as to limit the negative impact of the election outcome on first time voters.

The study was limited in making use of one institution to carry out a study meant for inference purpose. Only one tertiary institution in South-East Nigeria served as the study population. This may hinder the possibility of generalising the study data, and accommodating its implications for policy making. Also, the political parties supported by the first time voters were not determined; hence, not all first time voters supported the political party that lost an election, which has the potential of triggering post-election trauma. Building on this is that post-election trauma symptoms are more dominant among members of political parties whose candidates lost an election, thus dashing their hopes of victory in the election. Future studies on this theme should accommodate different institutions of learning across the different Nigerian regions to enable inferences to be made on their outcomes and their policy implications. Moreso, further studies should differentiate between first-time voters whose political parties lost the election and those that their parties won an election, so as to rule out other factors that may trigger trauma symptoms.

In conclusion, post-election trauma is inevitable, especially among voters whose candidates lost at the polls. Mindfulness and decentering should form part of the post-election phase, as it has been shown, from the present study, to mitigate the impact of election outcome on post-election trauma.

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