

# RACE, PERCEIVED DISCRIMINATION, AND EMOTION-FOCUSED COPING

Christa T. Vassillière, Charles J. Holahan,  
and Carole K. Holahan  
*University of Texas at Austin*

*This study examined the associations among race, perceived discrimination, and emotion-focused coping. Participants were 3,688 respondents (160 Blacks and 3,533 non-Hispanic Whites) to the National Survey of Midlife Development in the United States. We tested our hypotheses with analyses of covariance and multiple regression, and we confirmed mediation with bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals. All analyses controlled for age and gender; educational attainment and household income were included as covariates in additional analyses. Consistent with previous research, Blacks engaged in more emotion-focused coping than did Whites. However, as predicted, perceived discrimination explained the association between race and emotion-focused coping. Being Black compared with White predicted more perceived discrimination; in turn, perceived discrimination predicted more emotion-focused coping. Perceived discrimination fully mediated the association between race and emotion-focused coping. Findings demonstrate that relying on emotion-focused coping is a function of facing daily discrimination rather than racial status. © 2016 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.*

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Please address correspondence to: Charles J. Holahan, Department of Psychology (A8000), University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX 78712. E-mail: holahan@utexas.edu

Most coping approaches distinguish between strategies that are oriented toward directly confronting the problem and strategies that entail an effort to regulate the emotional distress caused by the stressor (see Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). These contrasting problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies are often conceptualized as an approach–avoidance dichotomy (Moos & Holahan, 2003). Avoidance-type strategies have received particular attention because in most circumstances avoidance coping is adversely associated with psychological adjustment (Elliot, Thrash, & Murayama, 2011; McMahon & Watts, 2002). For example, avoidance-type strategies have been linked prospectively to increased anxiety and depression (Grant et al., 2013), more future stressors (Holahan, Moos, Holahan, Brennan, & Schutte, 2005), and an adverse course of depression among depressed patients (Cronkite et al., 2013).

In racial comparisons, a number of studies have found that Black Americans use more emotion-focused and avoidant coping strategies than do White Americans (Plummer & Slane, 1996). For example, among women coping with breast cancer, Blacks relied more heavily on suppressing emotions and wishful thinking than did Whites (Reynolds et al., 2000). Similarly, among adolescents with type 1 diabetes, minority youth reported significantly higher levels of disengagement coping than did non-Hispanic Whites (Jaser et al., 2012). Moreover, among individuals coping with epilepsy, Blacks compared with Caucasians relied more on denial (Bautista, 2013). Further, among individuals faced with the need for kidney transplantation, Black recipients were more likely than non-Blacks to rely on denial and behavioral disengagement as coping mechanisms (Lunsford et al., 2006).

We speculated that the association between being Black and relying on avoidant-type coping efforts was a function of race-linked discrimination rather than Black heritage. Considerable research indicates that individuals facing discrimination turn to avoidant coping strategies that divert attention from stressful experiences (Ruggiero, Taylor, & Lydon, 1997). For example, among Black youth and college students, racial discrimination is associated with avoiding being with people, avoiding thinking about or engaging in the problem, and feeling sorry for oneself (Scott & House, 2005; Seaton, Upton, Gilbert, & Volpe, 2014; Utsey, Ponterotto, Reynolds, & Cancelli, 2000). Consistent with research on the adverse consequences of avoidant strategies more generally, avoidance coping among Blacks dealing with discrimination is linked to increased distress (Thomas et al., 2008), higher depressive symptoms (Seaton et al., 2014), and lower life satisfaction (Utsey et al., 2000).

Designing community-based interventions in Black communities requires an understanding of community members' preferred coping styles. However, viewing coping independent of the role of discrimination in the lives of Black Americans leads to erroneous assumptions about coping deficits linked to racial status. The purpose of the present study was to examine race and emotion-focused coping in the context of discrimination. Participants were 3,693 respondents (160 Blacks and 3,533 non-Hispanic Whites) to the second wave of the National Survey of Midlife Development in the United States (MIDUS II). Based on previous research on race and emotion-focused/avoidant coping (Bautista, 2013; Jaser et al., 2012; Lunsford et al., 2006; Plummer & Slane, 1996; Reynolds et al., 2000), we hypothesized that Blacks would engage in more emotion-focused coping than would non-Hispanic Whites. However, integrating research on race and coping with that on discrimination and coping (Scott & House, 2005; Seaton et al., 2014; Utsey et al., 2000), we predicted that perceived discrimination would explain the association between race and emotion-focused coping.

## METHOD

After oral consent, MIDUS II data were collected between 2004 and 2006 via a phone interview and follow-up self-administered questionnaires. The core MIDUS II sample was selected through a nationally representative random digit dialing procedure with metropolitan oversampling (Ryff et al., 2012). The present study did not require institutional review board approval because it involved secondary analyses of a publicly available, fully deidentified dataset. There were no actual or perceived conflicts of interest in the conduct of this research on the part of any authors. The participants in the present study were 3,693 respondents (160 Blacks and 3,533 non-Hispanic Whites) to MIDUS II. Mean age was 56.11 years (standard deviation [ $SD$ ] = 12.31), with a range from 30 to 84 years. The sample included 2,036 women and 1,657 men. Mean years of educational attainment were 14.45 ( $SD$  = 2.74). Median income was \$58,250.

### Measures

*Sociodemographic variables.* Age (in years) and gender (male = 0; female = 1) were covariates in all analyses. Educational attainment (in years) and household income (in dollars) were included as covariates in additional analyses.

*Race.* Race was indexed by combining three responses: a first and second indication of racial origins and an indication of Spanish/Hispanic/Latino descent. Respondents who reported Black for either their first or second indication of racial origins were coded as Black (score = 1). Respondents who reported White for their first indication of racial origins and who indicated that they were non-Hispanic were coded as non-Hispanic White (score = 0).

*Perceived discrimination.* Perceived discrimination was indexed by nine items ranging from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*often*) that assess the frequency of chronic discrimination experienced by the respondent on a daily basis (Williams, Yu, & Jackson, 1997). Sample items are "People act as if they think you are not smart" and "You are threatened or harassed." Perceived discrimination was the sum of the nine items (mean [ $M$ ] = 12.71,  $SD$  = 4.36; Cronbach's  $\alpha$  = .92).

*Emotion-focused coping.* Emotion-focused coping was measured by 12 items from three subscales of the COPE (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989). Each subscale included four items ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*a lot*) and measured how the respondent "generally" coped with stress. Focus on and venting of emotion consisted of four items, such as "I get upset, and am really aware of it" and "I let my feelings out." Denial consisted of four items, such as "I say to myself 'this isn't real'" and "I act as though it hasn't even happened." Behavioral disengagement consisted of four items, such as "I admit to myself that I can't deal with it, and quit trying" and "I reduce the amount of effort I'm putting into solving the problem." Emotion-focused coping was the sum of the 12 items ( $M$  = 22.39,  $SD$  = 5.56; Cronbach's  $\alpha$  = .84).

## RESULTS

Following Dambrun (2007) and Holahan, Moos, Holahan, Cronkite, and Randall (2004), we tested our hypotheses with analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) and multiple regression.

We confirmed mediation with bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals. All analyses controlled for age and gender.

### ***Race and Emotion-Focused Coping***

We began by examining the direct relationship between race and emotion-focused coping in an ANCOVA, controlling for age and gender. Race was significantly associated with emotion-focused coping,  $F(1,3689) = 11.41, p < .01$ . Blacks reported higher levels of emotion-focused coping than did Whites (for Blacks,  $M = 23.98, SD = 6.83$ ; for Whites,  $M = 22.32, SD = 5.48$ ). The relationship between race and emotion-focused coping did not vary by gender,  $F(1,3688) = .70, p = .40$ .

### ***Race and Perceived Discrimination***

Next, we examined the association between race and perceived discrimination in an ANCOVA, controlling for age and gender. Race was significantly associated with perceived discrimination,  $F(1,3689) = 196.37, p < .01$ . Blacks reported higher levels of perceived discrimination than did Whites (for Blacks,  $M = 17.33, SD = 6.29$ ; for Whites,  $M = 12.50, SD = 4.13$ ).

### ***Perceived Discrimination and Emotion-Focused Coping***

We then examined the association between perceived discrimination and emotion-focused coping in a multiple regression analysis, controlling for age and gender. Perceived discrimination was significantly positively associated with emotion-focused coping,  $\beta$  (standardized) = .22,  $t(3689) = 13.54, p < .01$ .

### ***Perceived Discrimination as a Mediator***

To further test the hypothesized mediational role of perceived discrimination, we repeated the ANCOVA examining the relationship between race and emotion-focused coping, including perceived discrimination as an additional covariate. Controlling for perceived discrimination along with age and gender, race was no longer associated with emotion-focused coping,  $F(1,3688) = 0.18, p = .67$ . Perceived discrimination remained significantly positively associated with emotion-focused coping independent of race as well as age and gender,  $F(1,3688) = 171.52, p < .01$ .

The above-mentioned set of analyses represents Baron and Kenny's (1986) four steps for demonstrating mediation. We confirmed significant mediation with bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals (CIs) of the indirect effect (95% CI [0.98, 1.69]; Hayes & Scharkow, 2013).

### ***Additional Analyses***

The above-mentioned analyses emphasize ecological validity by allowing the race effect to include the underlying effects of education and income as they occur in contemporary U.S. society. To explore the effect of race independent of education and income, we repeated the above-mentioned analyses controlling for educational attainment and household income in addition to age and gender. The  $N$  for these analyses was 3,541.

Blacks had lower educational attainment,  $F(1,3539) = 9.79, p < .01$ , than did Whites (for Blacks,  $M = 13.81, SD = 2.81$ ; for Whites,  $M = 14.52, SD = 2.72$ ). Blacks also had lower household incomes,  $F(1,3539) = 18.09, p < .01$ , than did Whites (for Blacks, median income = \$39,000; for Whites, median income = \$59,375). Because educational attainment and household income were significantly associated with race, we conducted these additional analyses in a multiple regression format. Tests of the study hypotheses replicated controlling for educational level and household income in addition to age and gender. Race remained associated with emotion-focused coping ( $p < .05$ ) and perceived discrimination fully mediated the association between race and emotion-focused coping.

## DISCUSSION

The present study examined the associations among race, perceived discrimination, and emotion-focused coping. Participants were 3,688 respondents (160 Blacks and 3,533 non-Hispanic Whites) to MIDUS II. Consistent with previous research, Blacks engaged in more emotion-focused coping than did Whites. However, as predicted, perceived discrimination explained the association between race and emotion-focused coping. Being Black compared with White predicted more perceived discrimination; in turn, perceived discrimination predicted more emotion-focused coping. Perceived discrimination fully mediated the association between race and emotion-focused coping.

These results integrate and extend those of earlier studies related to race and coping. Our findings are consistent with those of other researchers who found that Blacks exhibit more emotion-focused/avoidant coping than do Whites (Bautista, 2013; Jaser et al., 2012; Lunsford et al., 2006; Plummer & Slane, 1996; Reynolds et al., 2000). In addition, these results are consistent with previous findings that perceived discrimination is related to emotion-focused/avoidant coping (Scott & House, 2005; Seaton et al., 2014; Utsey et al., 2000). Moreover, our findings are also consistent with those of Hoggard, Byrd, and Sellers (2012), who found that Black college students used significantly more avoidance and rumination in racially stressful compared with nonracially stressful situations, in that racially stressful situations are more likely to elicit perceptions of discrimination.

### *Limitations*

Some limitations should be kept in mind in interpreting these results. The study was cross-sectional and cannot establish causality. In addition, the data were self-report and are subject to recall bias, common method variance, and social desirability. In addition, the MIDUS II sample was restricted to English-speaking adults and underrepresented racial and ethnic minorities. Further, we examined only one aspect of coping. Blacks use a diverse array of coping strategies, including strategies that reflect the relational and spiritual values that are central in Black communities (Mattis & Jagers, 2001).

### *Conclusion*

Overall, our findings can help to discourage victim blaming in studying race and coping. We place coping in the context of discrimination by demonstrating that relying on

emotion-focused coping is a function of facing daily discrimination rather than racial status. Perceptions of low social status predict avoidant-type coping independent of race (Jackson, Twenge, Souza, Chiang, & Goodman, 2011). In sum, research on race and coping needs to include a focus on the central role of discrimination in the daily lives of Black Americans.

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