Becoming an adult in the face of racism

The transition from adolescence to adulthood has unique physiological, psychological and sociopolitical consequences for African-American youth.

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Overview
CE credit: 1
Learning objectives:
1. Describe how racial discrimination is both an institutional and interpersonal stressor.
2. Identify physiological, psychological and sociopolitical consequences of racial discrimination.
3. Identify practices and programs that promote wellness and positive development for African-American emerging adults.

Emerging adulthood, ages 18 to 29, is a critical developmental period bridging adolescence and adulthood. During this phase, individuals further develop their identities through education, vocation, relationships and culture.

But for African-Americans, these critical life events occur in the context of systematic and institutional racial discrimination that disadvantages them. African-American youth experience residential segregation and aggressive policing, and are less likely than other emerging adults to attend...
This article details the consequences of racial discrimination and the protective factors that can mitigate its negative consequences for African-American emerging adults. In addition, we recommend areas for future research and discuss research applications that may help to support this population.

**Physiological and physical health effects**

Research shows that racial discrimination takes a serious biological toll on African-Americans. For those ages 16 to 18, racial discrimination over the past year has been positively associated with allostatic load — the wear and tear of the biological systems — by age 20. Cumulative and chronic racial discrimination are associated with many negative biological and health outcomes, including elevated blood pressure, increased heart rate and risk for cardiovascular diseases, and cellular aging. Racial discrimination is also linked to the dysregulation of the hypothalamic pituitary-adrenal axis, which helps the body control reactions to stress and regulates such key functions as the immune system, mood and emotions, sexuality, digestion, and energy storage and expenditure.

Research shows how discrimination leads to these physical effects in African-Americans: When an African-American perceives or experiences racial discrimination, his or her body may activate an exaggerated fight-or-flight response. For example, in one study, African-American college women who attributed an imagined shoplifting accusation to racial discrimination had greater increases in their blood pressure compared with African-American college women who did not attribute the charge to racial discrimination.

Importantly, such fight-or-flight responses to racial discrimination may linger long after the offending incident. This is noteworthy because prolonged fight-or-flight responses to stressful events lead to disease and premature death.

Research has also found that greater exposure to racial discrimination exacerbates cardiovascular reactivity. As a result, racial discrimination may “get under the skin” first by activating chronic fight-or-flight responses that contribute to dysregulation (such as heightened cardiovascular activity) and, second, by contributing to more acute cardiovascular responses to later stressful situations, both racial and nonracial.

Worry, rumination and anticipatory stress about discrimination may also exacerbate an individual’s physiological stress responses — and that, in turn, may make one susceptible to multiple disease conditions. For example, several researchers have posited that African-Americans’ elevated nocturnal blood pressure levels and poorer sleep quality — compared with whites’ — may be manifestations of chronically heightened vigilance about the constant threat of discrimination. Further research has found that racism-related vigilance was associated with more sleep difficulty for black adults than white adults and that the disparity in sleep quality between the two groups was eliminated after adjusting for racism-related vigilance.

Fortunately, not all African-Americans experience severe racial discrimination-related consequences. For example, one study found no association between racial discrimination and allostatic load for African-American emerging adults who received high levels of parental and peer emotional support — a finding that suggests emotional support may buffer the negative effects of racial discrimination.

**Psychological effects of racial discrimination**

Empirical research has suggested that racial discrimination is related to depression, suicide, violence, stress disorders and maladaptive coping strategies, such as substance use, among African-Americans. Some literature has shown that such negative psychological outcomes are worsened as perceptions of discrimination increase. Daily discrimination appears to increase psychological risk.

Further, there is consensus among scholars that suicidal ideation and suicidal behavior are linked to racial discrimination. Perceived discrimination increases the risk for a suicide attempt by decreasing the individual’s feelings of efficacy or mastery of his or her environment, increasing social isolation and reducing social support and other positive coping strategies.

Racial discrimination is also associated with violent behavior. Suicide and physical violence (self- and other-directed) may be construed as coping mechanisms in response to a stressful, traumatic experience. Emerging adults who experience or perceive racial discrimination may cope with this experience by acting out in defensively violent ways. One 2011 study supported a positive association between internalized racism and physical violence and delinquent behavior among
adolescents. A 2014 study of African-Americans ages 18 to 59 found direct and indirect associations between perceived discrimination and suicidal ideation.

Some positive news is that racial identity may protect against the deleterious effects of racial discrimination. A 2004 study, for example, found that African-American males were less likely to engage in racial discrimination-related violence when they saw race as a central component of their identities. In addition, a 2007 study found that students whose identities were characterized by a desire to assimilate into the mainstream and who ascribed less significance to race as a central component of their identities had the strongest association between discrimination and depressive symptoms. This finding emphasizes the protective potential of a racial identity that values race as a core component of self, reinforces the value of African-Americans as a group, and does not suggest that African-Americans assimilate to mainstream culture in response to race-based discrimination.

**Sociopolitical effects of racial discrimination**

Discrimination also influences the development of sociopolitical consciousness and behavior among African-American emerging adults. As a wealth of literature shows, the civic subcultures of today were built on the racial exclusion of history — times in which black people’s participation in politics was illegal at worst and discouraged at best. Not only does this history shape how African-Americans engage as citizens today, but any discrimination they may experience now reinforces the racial exclusion of the past and further alienates this population from traditional sociopolitical processes.

However, for many African-American emerging adults, engaging in civics — such as volunteerism, social action, activism and traditional political participation — may counteract the stressful experiences of discrimination, helping them feel less vulnerable and promoting positive development of self and community. Although more research is needed, empirical evidence so far establishes a positive, and potentially protective, relationship between civic engagement and racial discrimination, particularly engagement that seeks to improve the social conditions for one’s own racial group.

**Research applications: promoting well-being**

In light of the physical, psychological and sociopolitical consequences of racial discrimination, we present several recommendations to promote positive development among African-American emerging adults. They are to:

- **Foster racial pride.** It may be important for African-American parents and caregivers to emphasize the importance of race and racial pride. In the Strong African American Families program, for example, parents received a seven-week curriculum where they learned adaptive racial socialization strategies. The goal is to teach children about the realities of racial oppression, while also emphasizing the possibility of achieving success in the face of these obstacles.

- **Develop interventions.** Researchers should develop coping-based interventions that can help African-American emerging adults combat the short- and long-term psychological effects of racial discrimination. One promising approach may be values-based and self-affirmation psychological interventions, wherein individuals write about their most important value and why it is important to them. The exercise enhances individuals’ psychological resilience and mitigates the negative impact of stressors via the enhancement of self-efficacy and self-worth. In addition, research suggests that high levels of valued living — attending to and making choices on the basis of one’s values — mitigate the anxiety and depression brought on by racial discrimination among African-American undergraduate and graduate students.

- **Tap mental health expertise.** Given that racial discrimination is a traumatic and often chronic experience that relates to psychological distress, suicide, violence and risk for cardiovascular diseases, it may be vital for many African-Americans to consult with mental health professionals. Those who provide such services should carefully probe their African-American clients for their experiences with racial discrimination and provide culturally sensitive assessment and treatment. Use of values-based and self-affirmation psychological interventions may also be useful in a mental health service context. Further, all health professionals should consider the role of racial discrimination when treating African-American patients who have cardiovascular complications.

- **Confront institutionalized racism.** Finally, encouraging African-American emerging adults to become involved in civic engagement and analyze systematic injustice may help address institutionalized racial discrimination. For example, youth

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participatory action research is related to positive development outcomes, including reduced drug and sex risks, increased positive attitudes toward education, increased critical analysis and problem-solving skills, and increased sense of self and positive identity formation.

**Conclusion**

Research on racial discrimination interventions is a burgeoning and promising area. Although it has become evident that parental support is an important protective factor, additional research is needed to further elucidate the *kinds* of racial socialization messages that may be protective of psychological, physiological/physical health, and sociopolitical functioning. Future research should also aim to answer the question: *For whom* are these messages most protective?

Moreover, it is important to further assess the effectiveness of values-based and self-affirmation psychological interventions, and whether these interventions actually lead to high levels of valued living. Similarly, scholars must further assess the effectiveness of civic engagement interventions for psychological and physiological/physical health. It is also vital that clinicians develop effective and culturally sensitive approaches to assess their patients’ experiences with racial discrimination events and their concerns about experiencing racial discrimination in the future.

Finally, it is important for future research to focus on African-American emerging adults who are not enrolled in college since this population is disproportionately less likely to attend and graduate from college.

In the end, any attempt to address the inequity faced by African-American emerging adults should first deeply consider how this population’s experiences with racial discrimination influence their psychological, physiological and sociopolitical health — and how that makes an already challenging developmental period even more difficult.

This article is condensed from “Emerging Into Adulthood in the Face of Racial Discrimination: Physiological, Psychological, and Sociopolitical Consequences for African American Youth,” which appeared in *Translational Issues in Psychological Science, 1*(4), 342–351. To read the full article — which includes all citations — go to www.apa.org/pubs/journals/features/tps-tps0000041.pdf.

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