Coping With Discrimination Among Mexican American College Students

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There is limited research directly examining the process of how Mexican American college students cope with unique experiences of racial discrimination. The present study used a multiple mediation model to collectively examine the indirect effects of engagement (i.e., problem solving, cognitive restructuring, expression of emotion, and social support) and disengagement (i.e., social withdrawal, self-criticism, problem avoidance, and wishful thinking) coping strategies on the relationship between perceived racial discrimination and subjective well-being of 302 Mexican American college students. Results suggested that perceived racial discrimination was negatively correlated with subjective well-being. Moreover, of the engagement coping strategies examined, only problem solving had a significant mediating effect that was associated with elevations in subjective well-being. Specifically, perceptions of racial discrimination were positively related to problem solving, which, in turn, was positively related to subjective well-being. Of the disengagement coping strategies examined, self-criticism, wishful thinking, and social withdrawal had a significant mediating effect that was negatively associated with subjective well-being. Specifically, perceptions of racial discrimination were positively related to self-criticism, wishful thinking, and social withdrawal, which, in turn, were negatively related to subjective well-being. Ultimately, these findings highlight the indirect and complex ways in which multiple coping strategies are used to effectively, and sometimes not effectively, deal with racism experienced by Mexican Americans college students.

Keywords: coping, perceived discrimination, multiple mediation, Mexican American, college students

Over the past few decades, research supporting the deleterious effects of perceived racial discrimination on the well-being of racial minority groups has grown exponentially (Lee & Ahn, 2012; Yoo & Pituc, 2013). Although there is a growing body of literature examining the psychological correlates of racism among Hispanics and Latina/o1 (Edwards & Romero, 2008), few have focused on the unique racialized experiences and coping process of specific subgroups, including Mexican American college students. The present study examined how engagement (i.e., problem solving, cognitive restructuring, expression of emotion, and social support) and disengagement (i.e., self-criticism, social withdrawal, problem avoidance, and wishful thinking) coping strategies mediated the relationship between perceived racial discrimination and subjective well-being of Mexican American college students.

Racism and Mexican Americans

Mexican Americans, the largest and fastest growing Latina/o subgroup in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011), share unique demographic, historical, sociopolitical, and immigration experiences. The overall growth of this subgroup is reflected in the enrollment among Mexican Americans in postsecondary educational institutions. In 2010, Latina/o enrollment accounted for 1.8 million, or 15% of the overall enrollment in postsecondary institutions, outnumbering African Americans as the largest minority group in postsecondary education (Fry, 2011). This rise in Mexican American enrollment in post-secondary institutions has occurred in spite of discrimination, such as anti-bilingual education, anti-affirmative action, and anti-immigrant policy movements (Carlo, McGinley, Hayes, & Martinez, 2012).

For Mexican Americans, discrimination transcends multiple pathways, including occupational, academic, housing, and health care domains (Collado-Proctor, 1999). Mexican Americans are stereotyped as foreigners and labeled as “illegals” and “aliens” based on skin color and ethnic surnames (Jimenez, 2008). They often are exploited in the work place, work long hours, and are exposed to hazardous occupational environments (Perez, Fortuna, & Alegria, 2008). Mexican Americans who overcome graduation barriers and continue on to higher education are often dismissed as having been granted admission based on affirmative action policies (Stone & Han, 2005). Discriminatory practices also occur in rental and housing markets, extending beyond purchase to include loan distribution (Pager & Shepherd, 2008). Lastly, Mexican Americans often are given culturally insensitive medical service or

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1 There are numerous terms used interchangeably to refer collectively to the inhabitants of the United States who are of Latin American or Spanish origin, that is, Hispanic, Latino/as, Chicano/as. Despite controversy of the use of the terms, the relationships between and within these minority groups may offer a different way of understanding the process of racialization and, consequently, of discrimination. Latina/o is used throughout as a more expansive term referring to both persons from Spain and Spanish-speaking Latin American countries, of which Mexican American is a subgroup referring to Americans of Mexican ancestry or descent.
are denied treatment in health care settings due to their racial identity (Davies, Larson, Contro, & Cabrera, 2011).

Understanding the relationship between perceived racial discrimination and the subjective well-being of Mexican American college students is particularly important given the evidence suggesting a rise in discrimination on college campuses (McCormack, 1998). Researchers have found that college and community samples are exposed to similar experiences of discrimination (Landrine, Klonoff, Corral, Fernandez, & Roesch, 2006). Further, college campuses are not isolated from, and are not immune to, the atmosphere and issues of the broader society. Due to the continual and cumulative discrimination experiences experienced by Mexican American college students, a look at this unique subgroup is necessary.

Discrimination and Well-Being

Perceived racial discrimination is the perception of differential treatment, or denial of opportunities in education, work, health care, and other settings (Thompson & Alexander, 2006). Stress theories posit that the cumulative and pervasive experiences of racism can contribute to stress and poor psychological well-being among racial minorities (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999). Numerous studies link perceived racial discrimination among Mexican Americans to depression (Lee & Ahn, 2012) and to poor mental and physical health (Berkel et al., 2010). Finally, research studies have suggested a link between discrimination and educational outcomes for Mexican Americans, such as lower academic motivation and grade point average (Alfaro, Umaña-Taylor, Gonzales-Backen, Bámaca, & Zeiders, 2009).

Although these studies illustrate the potential negative mental and physical health outcomes of racism faced by Mexican Americans, some key limitations exist. First, the majority of discrimination measures used in these studies were validated and created for use among African Americans (Alamilla, Kim, & Lam, 2010); American Indians (Alfaro et al., 2009); and lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations (Bianchi, Zea, Poppen, Reisen, & Echeverry, 2004)—not Latina/os or Mexican Americans. Thus, they do not account for unique experiences with discrimination Latina/os may encounter. A measure designed for Latina/o/os containing items relevant to their history (i.e., assumption of legal status, blame for U.S. problems, being called names such as “wetback” and “illegal”) would more accurately represent their experience of discrimination. Second, these studies often used single or two-item measures of perceived racial discrimination (Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007), thus greatly reducing the validity and reliability of the instrument.

Finally, the current literature almost uniformly uses negative adjustment measures in understanding the experience of discrimination for racial minority groups. As a result, researchers miss the differential effect of positive adjustment in the face of discrimination (Yoo & Lee, 2005). Subjective well-being, or the evaluation of one’s life satisfaction and frequency of positive and negative affect, for example, moves beyond the paradigm of negative adjustment (Diener, 2000). When researchers shift their thinking from negative adjustment, they may uncover the underlying protective processes and factors contributing to positive outcomes and adjustment. The current study splits from the existing body of literature, which focuses on expressions of poor functioning, to provide insight into factors to foster within Mexican American college students that contribute to subjective well-being.

Coping With Discrimination

It is important to explore how individuals cope with discrimination given the adverse mental and physical outcomes that discrimination may have. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) theorized coping as a cognitive or behavioral response used to manage or tolerate stressors. In particular, coping is viewed as a mediator between a stressor and the outcome of experiencing the stressor. This conceptualization is consistent with the biopsychosocial model of racism as a stressor (Clark et al., 1999) and Harrell’s (2000) racism-related stress model. Both theories have conceptualized coping as a mechanism that explains the relations between race-related stress and its outcomes. Prior research on racial discrimination and minority groups have also provided empirical support for coping as a mediator (Alvarez & Juang, 2010). Thus, we examined the role of coping strategies as mediators in the relationship between perceived racial discrimination and subjective well-being.

In recent studies, researchers have begun to move away from the use of general coping styles in an attempt to gain more specificity and understanding of the types of strategies used when coping with discrimination. Although a broad definition of coping can be useful conceptually, it often hides the variability in specific types of coping. Researchers such as Alvarez and Juang (2010) have used multiple mediation models of coping to examine the complexity, intentions, and effects of specific coping strategies when responding to stressors like discrimination. Harrell (2000) suggested that racial minorities often employ multiple coping strategies when facing racial discrimination with differential adaptive and maladaptive psychological outcomes. Adaptive outcomes contribute to the resolution of the stressor and increase functioning, while maladaptive outcomes worsen problems associated with the stressor and hinder functioning.

Individuals cope with the stress associated with racial discrimination in various ways—from confronting the discrimination to minimizing or avoiding the discrimination altogether (Miller & Kaiser, 2001). Broad dimensions of coping are used in the literature, and serve as organizing principles that represent characteristic responses to stress (Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001). Coping behaviors can be broadly organized into types, including engagement and disengagement coping (Tobin, Holroyd, Reynolds, & Wigal, 1989). Numerous researchers have used this framework for understanding coping with discrimination, acculturative stress, and perceived racism (e.g., Alvarez & Juang, 2010; Edwards & Romero, 2008; Yoo & Lee, 2005).

Engagement coping is defined as attempts to actively manage the stressful situation or event through social support, cognitive restructuring, expression of emotion, and problem solving (Tobin, Holroyd, & Reynolds, 1984). Social support refers to seeking emotional support from people and one’s family and friends. Cognitive restructuring refers to cognitive strategies that alter the meaning of the stressful event. Expression of emotion refers to the verbal and nonverbal communication of an internal emotional or affective state. Problem solving refers to behavioral and cognitive strategies designed to eliminate the source of stress by changing the situation. Respectively, when experiencing discrimination, one
may seek out emotional support from others, attribute the stressor to something other than racism, vent or cry to relieve frustrations of injustice, or create an action plan to deal with the racist event.

Alternatively, *disengagement coping* is defined as attempts to remove or orient mentally, emotionally, and physically away from stressors, which includes problem avoidance, self-criticism, wishful thinking, and social withdrawal (Tobin et al., 1989). *Problem avoidance* refers to the denial of problems and avoidance of thoughts or actions about the stressful event. *Self-criticism* refers to blaming oneself for the situation and criticizing oneself. *Wishful thinking* refers to cognitive strategies that include denial that an event occurred, reframing, or symbolically altering the situation. *Social withdrawal* refers to withdrawing from family and friends. Respectively, when experiencing discrimination, one may act as if nothing was happening, punish oneself for the racist event, hope the stressor goes away, or isolate oneself from family and friends.

The literature supports the use of engagement coping strategies by Latina/os and Mexican Americans in a variety of different contexts. Studies have shown that engagement coping strategies are associated with improved functioning and reduced negative outcomes when used by Mexican Americans dealing with general stress (Farley, Galves, Dickinson, & de Jesus, 2005), cultural stressors (Nair, 2008), and difficult life event stressors (Kobus & Reyes, 2000). The literature has also indicated that engagement coping strategies are adaptive for Latina/os when facing racial discrimination (Lee & Ahn, 2012). Edwards and Romero (2008) found that engagement coping buffered the effects of racial discrimination stress on self-esteem among Mexican American youth, reducing the negative effect of discrimination on self-esteem. However, the study was limited by a restricted five-item measure of general engagement coping, discrimination measure based on acculturative stress, and outcome measures (such as self-esteem) with low reliability (Edwards & Romero, 2008). In general, systematic tests of different types of engagement coping strategies in relation to one another remain unclear, and few studies have examined engagement coping among Mexican American college students specifically.

The literature also supports the use of disengagement coping strategies by Latina/os and Mexican Americans in a variety of contexts (Beltran, 2006). Studies have shown that disengagement coping strategies are frequently associated with poorer mental and physical functioning when used by Mexican Americans dealing with occupational, economic, and familial stress (Aranda, Castaneda, Lee, & Sobel, 2001), general stress (Farley et al., 2005), and acculturative and sociocultural stress (Crockett et al., 2007). The literature has suggested that disengagement coping strategies are also maladaptive for Latina/os when facing racial discrimination (Lee & Ahn, 2012). Santana (2004) found that self-blame was associated with anxiety when negotiating cultural stressors such as discrimination. Similarly, Edwards and Romero (2008) demonstrated a positive association between racial discrimination and disengagement coping in Mexican American adolescents, but they found no significant associations between disengagement coping and self-esteem. More specificity in the definition and measurement of disengagement coping strategies is needed to advance the field. Overall, the literature has been plagued by a lack of examination and systematic tests of specific disengagement coping strategies, relying instead on the benefits and correlates of engagement coping strategies.

**Current Study and Hypotheses**

The current study used a multiple mediation model to examine how engagement (i.e., problem solving, cognitive restructuring, expression of emotion, and social support) and disengagement (i.e., social withdrawal, self-criticism, problem avoidance, and wishful thinking) coping strategies indirectly influenced the relationship between perceived racial discrimination and subjective well-being of Mexican American college students. First, we hypothesized that Mexican American college students who perceive more racial discrimination will report lower subjective well-being. Second, we hypothesized that the relationship between perceived racial discrimination and subjective well-being will be mediated by engagement and disengagement coping strategies. Specifically, perceptions of racial discrimination will be positively associated with the use of engagement coping strategies (i.e., problem solving, cognitive restructuring, expression of emotion, and social support), which, in turn, will be positively associated with subjective well-being. Conversely, perceptions of racial discrimination will be positively associated with the use of disengagement coping strategies (i.e., social withdrawal, self-criticism, problem avoidance, and wishful thinking), which, in turn, will be negatively associated with subjective well-being.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants consisted of 302 self-identified Mexican American college students at a major Southwest university and community college. The sample was comprised of 121 males and 181 females. The sample age for participants ranged from 18 to 70 years, with a mean age of 25.78 years (SD = 10.83). Nativity status included 143 foreign-born and 159 U.S.-born. Class standing was 116 freshmen, 79 sophomores, 22 juniors, 9 seniors, and 67 graduate students (7 other).

**Procedure**

The researcher obtained Institutional Review Board approval and contacted professors and student organization leaders soliciting participation. Participants were recruited to fill out a survey packet which took approximately 30 min to complete. Students who expressed interest for participation either received a survey packet with the measures to be completed individually or received a link to the survey packet online. Both Spanish and English versions of the survey were offered, though all participants took the survey in English. Of the 302 participants, 115 received paper copies, and 187 completed the survey online. At the completion of the survey, participants were entered into a raffle with the opportunity to win a Visa gift card with a cash value of either $25 or $50. Participants were informed about confidentiality, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time, and informed consent was obtained. All participants received a written debriefing explaining the purpose of the study.

**Measures**

**Demographic questionnaire.** A demographic questionnaire was included in the survey packet, asking students to self-identify for sex, age, ethnicity, nativity status, and year in school.
Perceived Racism Scale for Latina/os (PRSL). Collado-Proctor (1999) developed the PRSL to assess experiences unique to Latina/o discrimination across occupational, academic, and public settings. It is a 35-item self-report inventory, available in Spanish and English, in which participants report how often they have perceived each event within the last year ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (several times a day). Sample items include the following: “Because I am Latina/o, people assume that I do not have legal status in this country,” and “I have been called names (e.g., spic, wetback, bean picker, etc.) or stereotyped because I am Latina/o.” Higher scores on the PRSL indicate greater perceived frequency of racial discrimination events occurring. The PRSL has good internal reliability estimates, alpha reliabilities ranging from .81 to .94 (Collado-Proctor, 1999), and test–retest reliability alphas range from .82 to .99. The PRSL has also been used with Latina/o American samples and has demonstrated similar reliability estimates (e.g., Moradi & Risco, 2006).

Coping Strategies Inventory (CSI). Tobin et al. (1989) developed the CSI to assess coping strategies and responses to stressors. The CSI consists of eight primary subscales, measured by nine items each, and answered in a 5-point Likert format ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). It has two higher order factors, engagement and disengagement coping, with four specific coping strategies each. The engagement coping factor consists of Problem Solving, Cognitive Restructuring, Expression of Emotion, and Social Support. The disengagement coping factor consists of Problem Avoidance, Self-Criticism, Wishful Thinking, and Social Withdrawal. Sample items include the following: “I find myself just needing to talk to others about the issue in order to relieve some stress,” and “I pretend the issue isn’t as serious as it really is so it doesn’t seem quite as bad.” A higher score on each specific subscale represents more use of that coping strategy. Cronbach’s alpha coefficients for the CSI have been reported from .71 to .94 (Tobin et al., 1989). Test–retest reliability over a 2-week period range from .67 to .82 (Tobin et al., 1989). The CSI has not been used with a Mexican American college student sample, although it has been used with other minority group and college student samples (e.g., Yoo & Lee, 2005).

Subjective Well-Being. Subjective Well-Being includes three primary components: satisfaction with life, presence of pleasant affect, and absence of negative affect (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). Thus, subjective well-being consists of a cognitive evaluation of life and a report of one’s emotional experiences (Diener, 1984). See Diener et al. (1999) for a review of the construct and correlates of Subjective Well-Being and methods of assessing it. Specifically, Diener et al. suggested that Subjective Well-Being is one’s Life Satisfaction plus Positive Affect minus Negative Affect. This formula has been utilized by numerous researchers evaluating subjective well-being (e.g., Diener et al., 1999; Durayappah, 2011).

Plan of Analysis
A multiple mediation model was used to examine the mediating effects of engagement (i.e., Problem Solving, Cognitive Restructuring, Expression of Emotion, and Social Support) and disengagement (i.e., Social Withdrawal, Self-Criticism, Problem Avoidance, and Wishful Thinking) coping strategies on the relationship between Perceived Racial Discrimination and Subjective Well-Being. Advantages of performing multiple mediation rather than separate univariate mediation tests include (a) the ability to test that an overall mediation effect exists prior to examining specific effects of proposed mediators; (b) the ability to determine the unique mediating effect that specific variables have within a single model, controlling for the presence of other mediators as well as covariates; and (c) greater precision and parsimony in model specification, which enhances statistical power and decreases the probability of Type I errors (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

Bootstrap tests using bias corrected and accelerated 95% confidence intervals were used to test the significance of indirect effects in our multiple mediation models (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). As recommended by Preacher and Hayes (2008) for multiple mediation models, this calculation was repeated with 5,000 samples to yield a parameter estimate for both total and specific indirect effects. Confidence intervals not containing zero were indicative of a statistically significant indirect effect (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). A bootstrap analysis in testing for mediation effects have greater advantages than other common methods of mediation analysis (e.g., Baron and Kenny’s, 1986, causal steps approach or Sobel’s, 1982, product-of-coefficients approach), as it provides greater statistical power and does not assume multivariate normality in the sampling distribution, which is especially relevant in small samples (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).
## Results

### Preliminary Analyses

A summary of the correlation matrix, mean item scores, standard deviations, internal reliability estimates, and response scale for main study variables is presented in Table 1. All scales demonstrated good internal reliability (Cronbach’s α > .80). In the current study, participants’ average PRSL score of 1.58 suggested they experienced discrimination on at least one occasion during the last year. This is comparable to other research that has used the PRSL (e.g., Moradi & Risco, 2006). We examined whether there were significant differences of survey method (i.e., paper vs. online) on our main study variables (i.e., Perceived Racial Discrimination, Problem Solving, Cognitive Restructuring, Expression of Emotion, Social Support, Social Withdrawal, Self-Criticism, Problem Avoidance, Wishful Thinking, and Subjective Well-Being) using independent t-tests. Results suggested no significant differences across survey methods.

We also examined whether there were significant demographic group differences (i.e., Age, Sex, Academic Class Standing, and Nativity Status) on our main study variables (i.e., Perceived Racial Discrimination, Problem Solving, Cognitive Restructuring, Expression of Emotion, Social Support, Social Withdrawal, Self-Criticism, Problem Avoidance, Wishful Thinking, and Subjective Well-Being). Bivariate correlational analyses were conducted for ordinal and ratio variables and independent t-tests were conducted with nominal variables. Bivariate correlational analyses indicated that Age was significantly positively correlated with Subjective Well-Being and was negatively correlated with Problem Avoidance, Wishful Thinking, and Self-Criticism (see Table 1). Academic Class Standing was significantly positively correlated with Perceived Racial Discrimination, Problem Solving, Cognitive Restructuring, Expression of Emotion, Social Support, Social Withdrawal, Self-Criticism, Problem Avoidance, Social Withdrawal, Self-Criticism, and Wishful Thinking (see Table 1).

In regards to Sex, we found significant differences between men and women in Problem Solving, t(300) = 2.25, p = .025; Social Withdrawal, t(300) = 1.99, p = .048; and Self-Criticism, t(300) = 2.43, p = .016, with men compared to women using more Problem Solving (M = 17.60 vs. M = 15.41), Social Withdrawal (M = 12.11 vs. M = 10.18), and Self-Criticism (M = 10.31 vs. M = 7.73). In regard to Nativity Status, we found significant differences between U.S.-born and foreign-born in Perceived Racial Discrimination, t(300) = 2.62, p = .009; use of Social Support, t(300) = 2.23, p = .027; Expression of Emotion, t(300) = 2.35, p = .020; Cognitive Restructuring, t(300) = 2.62, p = .009; Problem Avoidance, t(300) = 5.34, p < .001; Social Withdrawal, t(300) = 4.39, p < .001; Wishful Thinking, t(300) = 4.26, p < .001; Self-Criticism, t(300) = 4.40, p < .001; and Subjective Well-Being, t(300) = –4.03, p < .001. Foreign-born compared to U.S.-born reported more Perceived Racial Discrimination (M = 57.07 vs. M = 50.35), using Social Support (M = 18.71 vs. M = 16.38), Expression of Emotion (M = 15.51 vs. M = 13.38), Cognitive Restructuring (M = 18.56 vs. M = 15.97), Problem Avoidance (M = 16.12 vs. M = 11.58), Social Withdrawal (M = 13.08 vs. M = 9.01), Wishful Thinking (M = 17.48 vs. M = 12.96), and Self-Criticism (M = 11.12 vs. M = 6.62). Moreover, U.S.-born compared to foreign-born reported lower Subjective Well-Being (M = 38.53 vs. M = 29.85). Subsequently, in the main mediation analysis, we controlled for Age, Sex, Academic Class Standing, and Nativity Status.

### Main Analysis

Figure 1 contains the parameter estimates for the total and specific indirect effects on the relationship between Perceived Racial Discrimination and Subjective Well-Being as mediated by engagement (i.e., Problem Solving, Cognitive Restructuring, Social Support, and Expression of Emotion) and disengagement (i.e., Wishful Thinking, Self-Criticism, Problem Avoidance, and Social Withdrawal) coping strategies. Total and direct effects of the independent variable on dependent variable were significant (p < .05).

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### Table 1

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* p < .05.

Note. N = 302 after listwise deletion.
We examined the specific indirect effects of the relationship between Perceived Racial Discrimination and Subjective Well-Being as mediated by engagement and disengagement coping strategies.

Table 2 contains the specific indirect effects of coping strategies on the relationship between Perceived Racial Discrimination and Subjective Well-Being. Regarding engagement coping, the specific indirect effect of coping through Problem Solving was significant as hypothesized, based on zero not contained in the confidence intervals. Thus, Perceived Racial Discrimination was positively related to the use of Problem Solving to cope ($B = .11$), which in turn, was positively related to Subjective Well-Being ($B = .73$). Finally, the specific indirect effects of Social Support, Cognitive Restructuring, and Expression of Emotion were not significant, based on zero in the confidence intervals (see Table 2).

Regarding disengagement coping, the specific indirect effects of coping through Social Withdrawal, Wishful Thinking, and Self-Criticism were significant as hypothesized, based on zero not contained in the confidence intervals. Thus, Perceived Racial Discrimination was positively related to the use of coping through Social Withdrawal ($B = .12$), which, in turn, is negatively related to Subjective Well-Being ($B = -.48$). Also, Perceived Racial Discrimination was positively related to the use of coping through Wishful Thinking ($B = .18$), which, in turn, is negatively related to Subjective Well-Being ($B = -.84$). Finally, Perceived Racial Discrimination was positively related to the use of coping through Self-Criticism ($B = .12$), which, in turn, was negatively related to Subjective Well-Being ($B = -.48$). The specific indirect effect of Problem Avoidance was not significant, based on zero in the confidence interval (see Table 2).

**Discussion**

The present study used a multiple mediation model to collectively examine whether the relationship between perceived racial discrimination and subjective well-being was mediated by the use of engagement (i.e., problem solving, cognitive restructuring, expression of emotion, and social support) and disengagement (i.e., social withdrawal, self-criticism, problem avoidance, and wishful thinking) coping strategies for Mexican American college students. Results suggested perceived racial discrimination was negatively correlated with subjective well-being. Moreover, of the
engagement coping strategies examined, only problem solving had a significant mediating effect that was associated with elevations in subjective well-being. Specifically, perceptions of racial discrimination were positively related to the use of problem solving, which, in turn, was positively related to subjective well-being. Of the disengagement coping strategies examined, self-criticism, wishful thinking, and social withdrawal had a significant mediating effect. Specifically, perceptions of racial discrimination were positively related to the use of self-criticism, wishful thinking, and social withdrawal, which, in turn, were negatively related to subjective well-being.

As expected, Mexican American college students who perceived greater racial discrimination in occupational, academic, and public settings reported lower subjective well-being. This finding is consistent with the literature suggesting that the experience of discrimination in racial and ethnic minority groups is negatively associated with psychological and physical health and with life satisfaction (Araújo & Borrell, 2006). The current study extends the literature on discrimination by using thePRS (Collado-Proctor, 1999), a measure designed to measure the discrimination experiences unique to the Latina/o and Mexican American population. Encouraging the development and use of culturally specific measures such as the PRS can facilitate the negotiation of different cultural contexts from which discrimination can be understood, and key resources from each culture can be identified that provide positive psychological functioning.

Contrary to the hypothesis, we received mixed support for the adaptive properties of engagement coping strategies on the relationship between perceived racial discrimination and subjective well-being. Only problem solving was found to be a significant mediator of the relationship between perceived racial discrimination and subjective well-being. There are multiple explanations for this unexpected result. On the one hand, it is possible that the general use of engagement coping is not adaptive when dealing with racial discrimination, especially when racism is perceived and measured as chronic, systemic, and pervasive in all domains of one’s life (Araújo & Borrell, 2006). Thus, actively trying to engage, solve, and modify experiences of repeated and often uncontrollable instances of racial discrimination may seem futile. In fact, Yoo and Lee (2005) found that a combination of a strong ethnic identity and engagement coping (specifically, cognitive restructuring and problem solving) buffered the effects of racial discrimination when racial discrimination was low, but not when it was high.

On the other hand, it is possible that engagement coping is adaptive, depending on how one defines engagement coping. The engagement coping model used in the current study may have been too broad of a model. For instance, when defining engagement coping as problem solving, this study suggests that the relationship between perceived racial discrimination and subjective well-being is mediated by problem solving. In fact, multiple studies indicate that problem solving is adaptive in the experience of discrimination (Edwards & Romero, 2008). For instance, Aldridge and Roesch (2008) found that Mexican American adolescents using more direct problem solving reported more positive affect dealing with daily stressors.

The study also hypothesized that perceptions of racial discrimination would be positively associated with the use of disengagement coping strategies, which, in turn, would be negatively associated with subjective well-being. Perceptions of racial discrimination were positively associated with disengagement coping strategies when measured by self-criticism, wishful thinking, and social withdrawal, and these were, in turn, negatively related to subjective well-being. This finding is consistent with the literature that suggests that the use of disengagement coping is maladaptive when dealing with racial discrimination, especially when discrimination is pervasive, uncontrollable, and ongoing (Miller & Kaiser, 2001). In fact, Compas et al. (2001) found an association between disengagement coping and depression, anxiety, and lower social and academic competence.

However, it is important to consider that not all disengagement coping may be maladaptive when dealing with perceived racial discrimination. In particular, culturally congruent and specific disengagement coping strategies such as reliance on espiritismo and curandismo (i.e., belief that good or evil spirits can affect health), fatalistic avoidance, or beliefs in destino (destiny or fate) and controlar (be in control) may be effective for Mexican Americans when dealing with racism (Aranda et al., 2001). For instance, Cohen (1992) provided support that traditional folk medicine and a belief in the healing power of God are beneficial to individuals of Mexican origin. Despite the results of the current study and the prevailing belief that disengagement coping strategies are generally maladaptive, several scholars (e.g., Aranda et al., 2001; Beltran, 2006) have suggested that disengagement coping defined in more culture-specific terms may be a more practical response to the daily discrimination experienced my Mexican Americans.

Although the total and indirect effects of perceived racial discrimination on subjective well-being were significant among the eight coping subscales, only four of the eight coping subscales were found to be significant when looking at specific indirect effects of coping—with expression of emotion, social support,
cognitive restructuring and problem avoidance appearing to not play significant roles in subjective well-being. Despite the literature on the importance of social support and the expression of emotion to cope with stressors in the Latina/o culture, the current findings did not support this trend. The conceptual framework underlying the dimensions of each coping strategy may be an explanation for the lack of significance of these specific coping strategies in the current study. It may be possible that for the engagement coping strategies, problem solving subsumes all the other coping strategies. In fact, modern coping research began with the distinction between problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping (Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007), and in the current study it may be that participants did not distinguish between the engagement coping strategies and responded to them all as problem solving. Likewise, it may be possible that problem avoidance was not found significant because participants considered each of the disengagement coping strategies measured to be problem avoidance and are not distinguishing between the other strategies.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are a number of limitations in this study to be considered and addressed. First, our measure of perceived racial discrimination only captures a limited experience of racism. The PRSL is one of few culturally valid measures assessing unique racialized experiences of Mexican Americans (Yoo & Pituc, 2013). Though it remains a strength of our study, it does not capture other experiences of racism, for instance, related to skin tone, education level, or language fluency. Future studies are encouraged to examine how Mexican American college students cope with these other types of racism and racism-related stress.

Second, our measure of coping strategies, though popular and empirically supported, does not include culture-specific engagement and disengagement strategies that may be more relevant for Mexican American college students coping with discrimination. Future studies should not only examine culturally specific and grounded coping strategies but should examine which specific coping strategy is effective, for whom, and in response to specific types of discrimination encountered.

Third, the nature of our correlational design limits the directionality of our variables. Thus, our results could equally suggest that higher subjective well-being is associated with the use of problem solving coping strategies and negatively associated with the use of wishful thinking, self-criticism, and social withdrawal, which, in turn, are positively associated with perceptions of racial discrimination. Future studies should consider the use of longitudinal or experimental designs to examine causal relationships further.

Fourth, the sample for the current study consisted of mainly traditional college students, though included some non-traditional students based on the sample age range. Developmentally and based on life experiences, there may be differences in age when exploring how one experiences and copes with racial discrimination. Similarly, our sample is from a state close to the U.S.-Mexico border with a large Mexican American population indirectly shaped by the many anti-immigration legislations. Future studies should investigate how these contextual factors influence the choice and efficacy of coping with racism.

Despite these limitations, this study extends the research in understanding how Mexican American college students cope with perceived racial discrimination. Our study looked beyond the main effects of discrimination and coping on well-being, by investigating the specific, indirect mechanisms of engagement and disengagement coping strategies on relations between perceived racial discrimination and subjective well-being. As our study highlights, Mexican American college students utilize a wide range of engagement and disengagement coping strategies when dealing with racial discrimination—though problem solving, self-criticism, wishful thinking, and social withdrawal differentially contributed to their subjective well-being. In particular, our results suggested problem solving was an adaptive response, while self-criticism, wishful thinking, and social withdrawal were maladaptive responses, on the subjective well-being of Mexican American college students when dealing with unique instances of discrimination across occupational, academic, and public settings.

Clinical Implications

The results of this study have clinical implications for the understanding and treatment of mental health issues as they relate to discrimination. Researchers and practitioners should be cautioned from underestimating the impact and frequency of racial discrimination faced by Mexican American college students. The study’s examination of discrimination suggests that clinicians and researchers need to attend to these experiences given their negative association with well-being. The present research suggests the need for clinicians to assess and initiate conversations about discrimination and the nature and efficacy of the coping styles that their clients are using. For clinicians, validating and attending to the psychological impact of discrimination is encouraged, as discussing these experiences with clients can be normalizing and empowering. A primary goal of this study was to help clinicians recognize and explore clients’ stressors in relation to their minority status and specifically as Mexican Americans college students.

Further, clinicians should review and help clients apply adaptive coping strategies (i.e., explore with clients how certain engagement and disengagement coping can be adaptive or maladaptive). Awareness of different coping strategies and the influence these responses have on presenting problems in treatment is pertinent. The current study demonstrates that engaging in problem solving, and not wishful thinking, social withdrawal, and self-criticism, would be beneficial to clients experiencing racial discrimination. Clinicians with clients dealing with these types of discriminatory experiences can explore with their clients the many ways to problem solve, such as making a plan of action, role playing, or developing pros and cons lists. This research, and a growing body of research beyond this, suggest helpful and useful coping strategies, and advise against those that are maladaptive. Exploring common coping behaviors can provide investment in, and use of, resources both within clinicians themselves as well as within clients, communities, families, and environments. For mental health practitioners, exploring coping mechanisms with clients not only acknowledges and validates their experience but is also a testament of their resiliency. Finally, the clinician should pay particular attention to those coping strategies that are negatively associated with psychological distress and that are positively associated with positive emotions and life.
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