

BRIEF REPORT

Racial Discrimination and Relationship Functioning Among African American Couples

Justin A. Lavner, Allen W. Barton, Chalandra M. Bryant, and Steven R. H. Beach
University of Georgia

Racial discrimination is a common stressor for African Americans, with negative consequences for mental and physical well-being. It is likely that these effects extend into the family, but little research has examined the association between racial discrimination and couple functioning. This study used dyadic data from 344 rural, predominantly low-income heterosexual African American couples with an early adolescent child to examine associations between self-reported racial discrimination, psychological and physical aggression, and relationship satisfaction and instability. Experiences of discrimination were common among men and women and were negatively associated with relationship functioning. Specifically, men reported higher levels of psychological aggression and relationship instability if they experienced higher levels of racial discrimination, and women reported higher levels of physical aggression if they experienced higher levels of racial discrimination. All results replicated when controlling for financial hardship, indicating unique effects for discrimination. Findings suggest that racial discrimination may be negatively associated with relationship functioning among African Americans and call for further research on the processes underlying these associations and their long-term consequences.

Keywords: African American couples, racial discrimination, relationship functioning, aggression

Supplemental materials: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/fam0000415.supp>

Racial discrimination is a chronic stressor in African Americans' lives. In addition to facing institutional and cultural discrimination (e.g., Jones, 1997), African Americans frequently contend with "everyday" experiences of discrimination such as being treated with less courtesy than others or being called racially derogatory names (e.g., Ajrouch, Reisine, Lim, Sohn, & Ismail, 2010; Peters & Massey, 1983). These experiences are associated with worse physical and mental health outcomes (see Pascoe &

Smart Richman, 2009) and thus can be considered a unique, culturally specific source of stress and strain for this population (e.g., Boss, Bryant, & Mancini, 2017), with a potentially strong erosive impact on many facets of health, social connection, and well-being.

Relationship scholars have argued that the negative effects of everyday discriminatory experiences among African Americans are likely to extend to their romantic relationships as well (Bryant et al., 2010). Research on stress spillover indicates that stressors outside the home (e.g., workload, health difficulties, extended family) are commonly associated with lower relationship quality (e.g., Randall & Bodenmann, 2009). In this view, racial discrimination may be a *minority-specific* stressor that is negatively associated with relationship quality, including lower levels of relationship satisfaction and/or higher levels of relationship instability. Clark and colleagues' (1999) biopsychosocial model provides another useful framework for considering how perceived discrimination may prove problematic in the relationship context. In this model, perceptions of racism lead to psychological (e.g., anger, helplessness, fear, and frustration) and/or physiological (e.g., immune, neuroendocrine, and cardiovascular) responses, which in turn trigger coping responses ranging from avoidance and passivity to efforts to gain control. For example, "perceptions of racism that engender anger may lead to coping responses that include anger suppression, hostility, aggression, verbal expression of the anger, or the use of alcohol or other substances to blunt angry

This article was published Online First May 21, 2018.

Justin A. Lavner, Department of Psychology, University of Georgia; Allen W. Barton, Center for Family Research, University of Georgia; Chalandra M. Bryant, Department of Human Development and Family Science, University of Georgia; Steven R. H. Beach, Department of Psychology and Center for Family Research, University of Georgia.

This research was supported by Award R01 HD069439 to Steven R. H. Beach funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development and by Award P30 DA027827 to Gene H. Brody funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health. The authors thank the families for their willingness to participate in this research and the staff at the Center for Family Research for their assistance implementing this study.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Justin A. Lavner, Department of Psychology, University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602. E-mail: lavner@uga.edu

feelings” (Clark et al., 1999, p. 811). These feelings of hostility and anger associated with experiences of discrimination may spill over into romantic relationships as well.

Relatively little research has examined the association between discrimination and relationship functioning, calling for basic descriptive work to advance understanding of this common minority stressor. The limited available research generally supports the notion that racial discrimination is negatively associated with relationship functioning among African Americans, although this work has focused entirely on relationship quality. A study in the United States combining samples of African Americans, Dominicans, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans indicated that everyday perceived discrimination was significantly associated with relationship quality (Doyle & Molix, 2014). Other results from samples specifically examining African Americans similarly indicate negative associations between racial discrimination and relationship satisfaction (Lincoln & Chae, 2010), as well as between discrimination and relationship stability (Murry, Brown, Brody, Cutrona, & Simons, 2001). However, not all findings are consistent: A recent study examining cross-sectional associations between African American men’s and women’s experiences of racial discrimination and own or partner relationship quality at two different time points indicated mostly nonsignificant associations (Clavé, Cutrona, & Russell, 2017). Given these mixed findings, additional research clarifying the nature of the association between racial discrimination and relationship satisfaction and stability would be beneficial.

To date, no research has examined the association between racial discrimination and aggression among African American couples. However, research among African American young adults indicates a positive association between racial discrimination and aggressive behaviors (e.g., Caldwell, Kohn-Wood, Schmeelk-Cone, Chavous, & Zimmerman, 2004), a pattern attributable to increased anger and other negative emotions following discriminatory experiences (Brody et al., 2006, p. 1172). Findings from a sample of newlywed Latino couples indicated that husbands with weaker ethnic identity who experienced higher levels of discrimination engaged in higher levels of verbal aggression toward their wives (Trail, Goff, Bradbury, & Karney, 2012). Whether these findings replicate for African American couples—who, like Latino couples, report higher rates of intimate partner violence compared to White couples (e.g., Caetano, Field, Ramisetty-Mikler, & McGrath, 2005)—is an open question.

The current study aims to build on these findings and advance understanding of discrimination and its association with relationship functioning among low-income African American couples. Specifically, we use data from 344 low-income heterosexual African American couples living in rural Georgia to examine the cross-sectional association between men and women’s reports of everyday racial discrimination on psychological and physical aggression, relationship satisfaction, and relationship instability (i.e., steps toward dissolution). We hypothesize that perceived discrimination will be negatively associated with relationship functioning, reflected in higher levels of aggressive behavior, lower levels of relationship satisfaction, and higher levels of relationship instability.

This study is the first to examine the association between racial discrimination and relationship aggression among African American couples and the first to address these questions using dyadic

data from African American couples, thus filling an important gap in the literature on the social effects of discrimination in this population. The use of dyadic data is a notable strength of the study, allowing us to examine the association between individuals’ experiences of racial discrimination and their own relationship functioning and their partner’s relationship functioning. We also examine whether any significant effects hold after controlling for financial hardship, given previous findings suggesting that some effects of racial discrimination on relationship functioning may be due to financial hardship instead (Lincoln & Chae, 2010). Finally, the focus on families from the rural South is also an important feature of this study. Southern states (including Georgia) have been identified as having the highest levels of anti-Black stereotyping among non-Black populations (Elmendorf & Spencer, 2013), making it likely that most participants will report experiencing some level of discrimination.

Method

Participants

Participants in the study were African American couples with at least one pre- or early adolescent youth residing in the home. The study received approval from the Institutional Review Board at the University of Georgia (study title: “Protecting Strong African American Families”; institutional review board approval number: 2012104112). All participants lived in small towns and communities in Georgia, where poverty rates are among the highest in the nation and unemployment rates are above the national average (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2014). Of the total sample of 346 families, 63% were married; the mean length of marriage was 9.97 years (range: 0–56 years). Unmarried couples had been living together for an average of 6.73 years (range: 0.25–23). Men’s mean age was 39.84 years (range: 21–83), and women’s mean age was 36.54 years (range: 23–73). Men’s median education level was high school or GED, and women’s median education level was some college or trade school (ranging from less than Grade 9 to a master’s degree). The majority of men (76%; 66% full-time, 9% part-time) and women (60%; 45% full-time, 16% part-time) reported full- or part-time employment. Median monthly pretax income was \$1,400 (range: \$1–\$7,500) for men and \$1,400 (range: \$1–\$8,900) for women. The incomes of 53% of the families were below 100% of the poverty line, and incomes of 69% of the families were below 150% of the poverty line. The number of children residing in the home ranged from 1–8, with a mean of 2.96. For the current study, we excluded data from two same-sex couples and from two caregivers (from different families) who were identified by field staff as being Caucasian,¹ resulting in data from 344 couples (343 mothers, 343 fathers, and 342 complete dyads).

Procedures

Families were informed about the study by mail and phone from school lists as well as through study advertisements. To be eligible,

¹ Eligibility guidelines required the target child to be African American but not both parents.

the couples had to be in a relationship for 2 years or more, living together, and coparenting an African American child between the ages of 10 and 13 years for at least 1 year (given the aims of the broader study). Project staff visited couples' homes, explained the study in more detail, and obtained participant consent. Assessments were completed using audio computer-assisted self-interviewing software installed on laptop computers. Adults were compensated with a \$50 check for completing data collection.

Measures

All measures were adapted based on feedback from focus groups with the target population to increase understanding, improve cultural relevance, and reduce participant burden.

Racial discrimination. Everyday experiences of perceived racial discrimination were assessed using nine items from the daily life experiences subscale of the Racism and Life Experiences Scale (Harrell, Merchant, & Young, 1997), which asks participants to report the frequency with which they experienced several racial stressors over the past 6 months (sample items: "Have you been treated rudely or disrespectfully because of your race?" "Have you been called a name or harassed because of your race?") using a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *never*, 2 = *once or twice*, 3 = *a few times*, 4 = *frequently*). This measure has been widely used to assess perceptions of racial discrimination in several different racial groups, including African Americans (e.g., Caughy, O'Campo, & Muntaner, 2004; Hammond, 2010). Given its association with other relevant constructs, including collective self-esteem, cultural mistrust, and salience of racial identity (Harrell et al., 1997), it has been identified as being "psychometrically valid and reliable for examining one's perceptions of racism" (Alvarez, Juang, & Liang, 2006, p. 483). Internal consistency in the current study was high (men: $\alpha = .92$; women: $\alpha = .90$). The majority of men (87.5%) and women (81.3%) reported at least one discriminatory experience (men: $M = 17.57$, $SD = 6.55$; women: $M = 14.89$, $SD = 5.31$).

Psychological and physical aggression. Self-reported perpetration of psychological and physical aggression was assessed using items adapted from the Revised Conflict Tactics Scales (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996). Individuals were asked, "When you and your partner have an argument, how often do these things happen?" and responded using a 4-point scale (1 = *never*, 2 = *once*, 3 = *a few times*, and 4 = *often*) such that higher scores reflected higher levels of aggression. Psychological aggression was assessed using six items: (1) I insult, swear, or yell at my partner; (2) I destroy or break something belonging to my partner; (3) I threaten my partner; (4) I call my partner names and insult [her/him]; (5) I stomp out of the room or out of the house; and (6) I shout at my partner. The majority of men (74%) and women (87.5%) reported engaging in at least one act of psychological aggression (men: $M = 8.09$, $SD = 1.83$; women: $M = 9.17$, $SD = 2.24$). Physical aggression was assessed using two items: (1) I push, shove, or slap my partner and (2) I punch or kick my partner. Few men (4.7%) and women (12.5%) reported engaging in at least one act of physical aggression (men: $M = 2.06$, $SD = .29$; women: $M = 2.19$, $SD = .57$). Coefficient alphas were .63 for men's psychological aggression, .11 for men's physical aggression, .75 for women's psychological aggression, and .70 for wom-

en's physical aggression. Given the low alpha for men's physical aggression, we excluded this variable from the primary analyses.

Relationship satisfaction. The six-item Quality of Marriage Index (Norton, 1983) assesses global perceptions of relationship satisfaction. As not all participants were married, items were adapted to refer to their "relationship" rather than their "marriage" (sample item: "My relationship with my partner is happy") and were scored on a 1–5 scale. Higher scores reflected greater satisfaction (men: $M = 25.25$, $SD = 4.10$; women: $M = 24.34$, $SD = 4.85$). Coefficient alpha was .92 for men and .93 for women.

Relationship instability. Four yes-no questions from the Marital Status Inventory (Weiss & Cerreto, 1980) were used to index relationship instability: (1) In the past year, have you or your partner ever seriously suggested the idea of splitting up/divorce? (2) In the past year, have you discussed splitting up/divorce or separation with a close friend? (3) Even people who get along quite well with their mate sometimes wonder whether their relationship is working out. In the past year, have you ever thought your relationship might be in trouble? and (4) In the past year, has the thought of splitting up/divorce or separation crossed your mind? Higher scores reflected more instability (men: $M = 1.42$, $SD = 1.49$; women: $M = 1.77$, $SD = 1.57$). Coefficient alpha was .81 for men and .83 for women.

Financial hardship. Couples' levels of financial hardship were assessed using a two-item indicator of inability to make ends meet that has appeared in previous studies of family economic pressure (e.g., Masarik et al., 2016). The items were "How much difficulty have you had paying your bills?" (1 = *a great deal of difficulty* to 5 = *no difficulty at all* [reverse coded]) and "Generally, at the end of each month did you end up with . . .?" (1 = *more than enough* to 5 = *not enough to make ends meet*). Higher scores reflected more hardship (for men: $M = 5.18$, $SD = 1.88$; for women: $M = 5.64$, $SD = 2.03$). Coefficient alpha was .61 for men and .73 for women.

Results

Bivariate association between racial discrimination and relationship functioning (see full correlation matrix in Table 1) indicated that men who experienced higher levels of racial discrimination reported engaging in higher levels of psychological aggression toward their female partners and reported higher levels of relationship instability (both $p < .05$). Women who experienced higher levels of discrimination reported engaging in more physical aggression toward their male partners ($p < .05$). There were no significant associations between men or women's discrimination and relationship satisfaction ($p > .10$) or between men or women's discrimination and any of their partner's reports of relationship functioning (all $p > .05$). Significant correlations were small in magnitude, consistent with meta-analytic findings indicating that associations between external stressors such as financial assets, income, and employment and marital functioning are typically in the small range (Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

To examine the independent influence of men and women's racial discrimination on their own and their partner's relationship functioning, we used a series of multilevel, multivariate models and the HLM 7.0 computer program (Raudenbush, Bryk, & Congdon, 2010). We used the two-intercept model outlined by Raudenbush, Brennan, and Barnett (1995). This model simultaneously estimates separate effects for men and women while ac-

Table 1
Correlations Among Study Variables (*N* = 344 Couples)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Men's racial discrimination	—										
2. Men's psychological aggression	.12*	—									
3. Men's physical aggression	-.07	.22**	—								
4. Men's relationship satisfaction	-.06	-.40**	-.22**	—							
5. Men's relationship instability	.18**	.43**	.11†	-.50**	—						
6. Men's financial strain	.12*	.11*	.01	-.14**	.02	—					
7. Women's racial discrimination	.10†	-.09†	-.02	.07	.06	.03	—				
8. Women's psychological aggression	-.09†	.24**	.06	-.22**	.13*	.05	.04	—			
9. Women's physical aggression	-.07	.05	.06	-.12*	.08	-.05	.11*	.38**	—		
10. Women's relationship satisfaction	-.01	-.14*	-.04	.38**	-.22**	-.17**	-.02	-.28**	-.16**	—	
11. Women's relationship instability	.04	.16**	.10†	-.38**	.39**	.06	.09†	.41**	.30**	-.52**	—
12. Women's financial strain	.00	.09	.04	-.22**	.05	.36**	.13*	.16**	.11†	-.31**	.24**

† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

counting for the interdependence between them. We analyzed the following cross-sectional multilevel model:

$$\text{Level 1: } Y_{ij}(\text{Outcome}) = \pi_{m1i}(\text{men})_{ij} + \pi_{w1i}(\text{women})_{ij} + e_{ij}$$

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Level 2: } \pi_{m1i}(\text{men}) &= \beta_{m10} + \beta_{m11}(\text{male racial discrim.}) \\ &\quad + \beta_{m12}(\text{female racial discrim.}) + \mu_{m1i} \\ \pi_{w1i}(\text{women}) &= \beta_{w10} + \beta_{w11}(\text{male racial discrim.}) \\ &\quad + \beta_{w12}(\text{female racial discrim.}) + \mu_{w1i} \end{aligned}$$

Men's and women's experiences of racial discrimination were included simultaneously at Level 2, allowing us to examine whether individuals' relationship functioning was associated with their own racial discrimination (actor effects) and with their partner's racial discrimination (partner effects). Of note, in these types of models, when partner effects are significant, this indicates an impact above and beyond actor effects, making them more conservative than the zero-order correlations reported above. We analyzed separate models for psychological aggression, relationship satisfaction, and relationship instability.²

Results, shown in Table 2, mostly replicated the correlational analyses. Specifically, men reported higher levels of psychological aggression and relationship instability if they experienced higher levels of racial discrimination, and there were no significant effects for racial discrimination on relationship satisfaction for men or women. In addition, men's racial discrimination was negatively associated with women's psychological aggression. The findings generally remained robust after controlling for men's and women's reports of financial hardship (see online supplemental materials Table S1): With these controls, the positive associations between men's discrimination and their own psychological aggression and relationship instability remained significant $p < .05$, and the negative association between men's discrimination and women's psychological aggression dropped slightly to $p = .053$.

Last, to test the independent effects of men's and women's discrimination on women's physical aggression, we conducted a multivariate regression analysis in which women's physical aggression was regressed on men's and women's discrimination (entered simultaneously). As in the correlational analyses, women reported higher levels of physical aggression if they experienced higher levels of racial discrimination ($\beta = .12$, $t = 2.26$, $p < .05$). When we added men's and women's reports of financial hardship

to the model (entered simultaneously), women's discrimination remained significant and positively associated with women's physical aggression ($\beta = .11$, $t = 1.98$, $p < .05$).

Discussion

Racial discrimination is a common stressor among African Americans, with well-documented adverse effects on mental and physical health (e.g., Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009), but its association with relationship functioning among this population has largely been overlooked. Using dyadic data from 344 predominantly low-income African American heterosexual couples living in the rural South, more than 80% of whom reported experiencing at least some level of racial discrimination in the past 6 months, we found that experiences of discrimination were positively associated with self-reported psychological aggression in men and self-reported physical aggression in women. There were no significant associations between racial discrimination and relationship satisfaction for men or women, although men reported higher levels of relationship instability if they experienced higher levels of discrimination. In addition, men's discrimination was negatively associated with women's psychological aggression in the dyadic analyses. All effects held when controlling for financial hardship, indicating that effects of racial discrimination are additive to the erosive effects of financial hardship (Conger, Conger, & Martin, 2010). Given the low-income level of the sample, with 53% of the families below 100% of the poverty line and 69% of the families below 150% of the poverty line, the fact that discrimination was uniquely associated with relationship functioning is noteworthy and underscores the importance of examining racial discrimination as a unique minority-specific stressor among African American couples.

Before discussing the implications of these results, we acknowledge some limitations. First, these were cross-sectional data and thus cannot address directionality in effects. Furthermore, although this was a cross-sectional study, the assessment of discrimination and relationship functioning asked about experiences over a period

² Because we did not include men's physical aggression as an outcome variable due to the low alpha of the scale, we did not have the dyadic data necessary to run a multilevel model for physical aggression and instead ran a multivariate regression analysis.

Table 2
Multilevel Models for Men's and Women's Experiences of Racial Discrimination and Relationship Functioning (N = 344 Couples)

Outcome	Men's outcomes			Women's outcomes		
	Estimate (SE)	t ratio	Effect size r	Estimate (SE)	t ratio	Effect size r
Psychological aggression						
Men's discrimination	.04 (.02)	2.20*	.12	-.03 (.02)	-1.98*	.11
Women's discrimination	-.04 (.02)	-1.85†	.10	.02 (.02)	0.95	.05
Relationship satisfaction						
Men's discrimination	-.05 (.04)	-1.20	.07	.00 (.04)	-0.06	.00
Women's discrimination	.06 (.04)	1.57	.08	-.01 (.05)	-0.25	.01
Relationship instability						
Men's discrimination	.04 (.01)	3.01**	.16	.01 (.01)	0.49	.03
Women's discrimination	.01 (.01)	0.89	.05	.03 (.02)	1.52	.08

Note. Men's and women's experiences of racial discrimination were entered simultaneously and were grand-mean centered within sex. $N = 342$, $df = 339$ for all analyses. Effect size $r = \sqrt{t^2/(t^2 + df)}$.

† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

of several months, so we cannot ascertain whether these were contemporaneous associations. Future research using diary designs could examine daily or weekly experiences of discrimination and more immediate effects on relationship functioning. Second, the sample consisted of heterosexual African American couples living in the rural South. Effects may be different for couples with other backgrounds, including mixed-race couples and same-sex couples. Third, we were unable to examine men's physical aggression because the alpha for this measure was low, reflecting very infrequent endorsement of physical aggression by male participants and our use of a two-item measure. Fourth, we used only reports of perpetration of aggression and not reports of victimization, suggesting that our results may underestimate the level of aggression in the sample. Finally, previous research suggests that the effects of racial discrimination on relationship functioning may differ based on the strength of the ethnic identity of the partners (Trail et al., 2012), but this variable was not available in our data set. Future research should consider the possible moderating influence of this variable among African American couples, with the hypothesis that the main effects observed here might be even stronger for couples in which ethnic identity is weak.

Notwithstanding these limitations, these findings support the idea that racial discrimination, a chronic stressor for African Americans, is negatively associated with family functioning (Bryant et al., 2010). In particular, our results indicated higher levels of negative relationship functioning, including increased aggression (men and women) and increased relationship instability (men only), rather than decreased levels of positive relationship functioning (satisfaction). These findings are consistent with Clark and colleagues' biopsychosocial model, in which experiences of discrimination give rise to negative emotions and behaviors, including anger and aggression. The lack of significant association with satisfaction was somewhat surprising given previous evidence for this association, although other recent findings with a similar sample (Clavé et al., 2017) also failed to find significant associations between discrimination and satisfaction. Additional research examining the association between discrimination and positive (e.g., social support, sexual satisfaction, capitalization) and negative (e.g., aggression, hostility, demand-withdraw patterns) aspects

of relationship functioning is needed to determine whether racial discrimination is more commonly associated with increased negative aspects of relationship functioning rather than decreased positive aspects of relationship functioning. This research could also use longitudinal data to examine whether discrimination may lead to decreased positive relationship functioning only to the extent that it increases negative relationship functioning (e.g., discrimination at one time point is associated with higher levels of aggression, which in turn lead to decreases in relationship satisfaction over time).

Clinically, these findings point to the importance of therapists addressing issues relating to race and racial discrimination when working with African American couples. Therapists can help couples learn to identify the influence of race-based stressors on their relationships and improve their ability to address them in the future (Boyd-Franklin, Kelly, & Durham, 2008). This might involve working with the partners to develop a strong, positive racial identity, including resolving any differences in racial identity between them, as well as more general work focused on strengthening the couple relationship so that the partners are better positioned to rely on each other as a source of support to cope with racial discrimination (Boyd-Franklin et al., 2008).

In sum, these findings indicate that racial discrimination is negatively associated with relationship functioning for African American couples living in the rural South. This work underscores the importance of examining the experiences of diverse couples and particularly evaluating how stressors unique to these couples' minority status are associated with relationship functioning. Future research examining the processes underlying these associations, the factors that buffer or exacerbate them, and long-term effects on family well-being would be valuable.

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Received July 28, 2017

Revision received December 27, 2017

Accepted December 30, 2017 ■