Racial Discrimination and Health Outcomes in African Americans

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Running Head: Perceived discrimination

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Introduction

While differences in rates of mortality and morbidity for the African American population as contrasted to other racial/ethnic groups is a well documented fact, the reasons for these disparities are not quite as clear (Cochran & Mays, 1994; Kington & Smith, 1997; Lillie-Blanton, Parsons, Gayle, & Dievler, 1996; Mays, Cochran & Sullivan, 1997). Public health in recent years has refocused its attention on the role of social inequality in accounting for the health status and health outcomes of racial/ethnic groups, especially African Americans. One area of concern, in particular, is the role of racial discrimination in physical and mental health outcomes (Staples, 1996; Satel, 1996). While there are a number of studies whose conclusions are that racial discrimination may be a factor in accounting for a number of different health outcomes such as low-birth weight, hypertension, and depressive distress these studies did not directly examine the relationship between real or perceived discrimination and physical or mental health outcomes. More recent studies such as those of Krieger’s examination of racial discrimination and blood pressure (Krieger & Sidney, 1996) Williams’ series of studies on the relationships between racial discrimination, health status, socioeconomic status, and stress (Williams, Yu, Jackson & Anderson, 1997; Williams and Chung in press) and two previous studies of mine on Black women, race and gender discrimination and stress have tried directly to explore how racial discrimination affects physical or mental health (Mays, 1995; Mays, Coleman & Jackson, 1996). This current study represents a preliminary examination of the relationship between perceived discriminations and psychological distress.

Method

Subjects

Anonymous questionnaires were completed by 305 self-identified heterosexual African-
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Americans. The sample consisted of 232 women and 73 men who ranged in age from 18 to 25 years ($\bar{X} = 19.9$ years S.D. = 1.9). Participants were Black men and women in colleges, universities, and junior colleges. Participants reported having completed a median of 13 years of schooling ($\bar{X} = 13.5$ years, S.D. = 2.4). There were no statistically significant differences between men and women in their ages or educational attainment.

Questionnaire

Participants completed gender-specific questionnaires assessing their perceptions of discrimination, psychological distress, frequency of life stressors in the past year, and demographic background.

Perceived discrimination was assessed in 6 domains. First, respondents were asked about the frequency with which discrimination occurs in general due to three social attributes (gender, race/ethnicity, and the combination of race/ethnicity). For each factor, they were asked to indicate on a 7-point likert-like scale how often people were treated badly or unfairly (ranging from "never:" to "very often"). Second, respondents were asked, using the same 7-point likert-like scale, how frequently they personally experienced discrimination for each of three factors: their gender, their race/ethnicity, and their gender and race/ethnicity combination. Third, respondents indicated how frequently discrimination arising from three sources (Black men, Black women, and White men) is directed at Blacks of the same gender as the respondent. Fourth, they were asked to report how frequently each of these three sources actually treated them personally badly or unfairly. Fifth, respondents indicated how frequently discrimination by other African Americans (Black men and Black women) was directed at Blacks who might lack resources (money, education, or status). Finally, they were asked how frequently they themselves had been discriminated against by other African American men and women because of lacking social or economic resources. Due to time constraints we won't talk
much about the resource results. For each situation of personally experienced discrimination, participants were also how upsetting this was (ranging from "not at all" to "upset me a great deal"). In addition, for those domains where the source of discrimination was specified, participants were asked to indicate what their relationship was to those who had treated them badly or unfairly on a 7-point likert-like scale (ranging from "mostly by those I know well" to "mostly by complete strangers").

Participants also completed the Center for Epidemiologic Studies--Depression Scale (CES-D), a 20-item instrument developed to assess depressive distress in nonpsychiatric populations (Radloff, 1977). For the current samples, scores ranged from 0 to 55 ($\bar{X} = 17.2$, S.D. = 10.4).

Finally, participants were asked to indicate the frequency with which they had experienced life stressors in the past year on 5-point items (anchored at "never," "seldom," "sometimes," "often," and "most of the time"). These problems were taken, with modification, from the National Survey of Black Americans. For this study we focused on reports of thoughts of doing harm to someone else, using this as a proxy for anger. Overall, 48% of respondents reported being troubled by such thoughts in the prior year, though only 15% of the these indicated having these thoughts "often" or "most of the time."

Results

Gender and racial/ethnic bases of perceived discrimination

Overall, both men and women agreed that discrimination as a function of racial/ethnic background occurred more frequently than did either gender-based discrimination or discrimination based on both race/ethnicity and gender (see Figure 1). Women perceived greater frequency of discrimination across all three social statuses than did men. A set of post-hoc comparisons of men and women’s responses suggest that this was due to women
perceiving greater frequency of gender discrimination against women in general, than men perceived occurred against men in general.

Considering personal/individual experiences with discrimination due to gender, race/ethnicity, or the combination of the two, respondents reported that race/ethnicity-based discrimination was their most frequent reason for being treated badly or unfairly by others (see Figure 2). The women in our study again reported more frequent personal experiences with discrimination than men, but this was again due to reports of more frequent discrimination for being female than men reported for being male. Post-hoc comparisons contrasting men’s and women's reports revealed no statistically significant differences in their frequency of being treated unfairly due to race/ethnicity or race/ethnicity and gender in combination. Only in the area of gender discrimination did women report more frequent unfair treatment for being female than men did for being male.

Race/ethnicity-based discrimination was also experienced as the most upsetting when compared to other forms of discrimination (See Figure 3). Although women did not report greater upset than men with personally experienced discrimination in general, a significant gender of respondent by social attribute interaction was observed, reflecting the greater upset from gender-based discrimination women reported in contrast to what men experienced for discrimination due to being male.
When reports of general levels of discrimination frequency were contrasted with individually experienced discrimination, both men and women reported that personally experienced discrimination occurred against themselves less frequently than what other people in general experience. This included discrimination due to race, gender, or race-gender combination (See Figure 4).

As would be expected given the findings reported above, comparison of perceived discrimination factor scores, combining reports of personal experiences of unfair treatment, extent of upset, and perceptions of the frequency with which such maltreatment occurs in general, did not reveal gender differences in levels of race-based, or race/gender-based discrimination. However, women did report greater perceived pure gender-based discrimination than did men.

Perpetrators of bad or unfair treatment.

As psychologists one thing that we have always believed is that not all discrimination is experienced equally the same. From my clinical work it would sometimes appear that unfair treatment by another African American would hurt more than that by a White or if one were treated unfairly by someone just like you in terms of both your gender and ethnicity it had a significant impact (Mays, 1995). So respondents were also asked how frequently in general Black males, Black females and White males treat African Americans of their same gender
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badly or unfairly just because they are Black (e.g., "How frequently do you think Black men in general are treated badly or unfairly by White males, or Black males or Black females just because they are Black men?"). Overall, respondents perceived differences in the frequency with which the three groups perpetrated unfair treatment (see Figure 5). Again, across the three categories, regardless of perpetrator, women perceived greater frequency of unfair treatment in general than did men.

However, men and women differed in their evaluations of the three groups, as evidenced by a significant gender of respondent by perpetrator interaction (See Figure 5). Results of post-hoc comparisons indicate that women viewed Black women in general as being treated badly or unfairly by Black males and Black females more frequently than men reported that Black men were maltreated by other Black males or Black females. In contrast, men reported that Black men were treated badly or unfairly by White males more frequently than women reported similar maltreatment of Black women by White males.

In terms of personally/individually being treated badly or unfairly, men and women did not differ significantly in their reports of how frequently they experienced maltreatment generated by the three perpetrating groups assessed nor, overall, did they report more frequent experiences with being badly or unfairly by one group in contrast to another (See Figure 6). But a significant gender of respondent by perpetrator of unfair treatment interaction was observed. This reflected the fact that women reported more frequent experiences than men with being treated badly or unfairly by Black males simply because they were a Black woman while men in the study reported that White males more frequently treated them badly or unfairly simply
because they were a Black man than women reported being treated badly for being a Black woman.

Among those who reported being treated badly or unfairly, there were no differences overall in the amount of upset reported based on the type of perpetrator, or the gender of the respondent (see Figure 6). But a significant gender of respondent by perpetrator of maltreatment interaction indicated differential levels of upset for men and women depending on the domain assessed. Post-hoc comparisons show that women reported more upset when experiencing bad or unfair treatment by Black males for being a Black woman than men reported from being maltreated by Black males for being a Black man, or from White males for being a Black man.

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Insert Figure 6 about here
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Men and women did not differ in their reports of how well they knew the perpetrators of discrimination (see Figure 7). Overall, maltreatment from White males was more likely to involve strangers than similar maltreatment by other Blacks.

As observed earlier, respondents perceived more frequent occurrence of discrimination by the three groups toward people in general than they individually reported experiencing.

Overall, women demonstrated significantly higher perceived discrimination scores than men when discrimination by Black males was considered. In contrast, men evidenced higher perceived discrimination scores than women when the perpetrators were White males. Finally no gender differences were observed in perceived discrimination factor scores for maltreatment by Black females. Both men and women reported similar levels of perceived discrimination from Black women.
Affective correlates of perceived discrimination

As women are more likely to report depressive symptomatology and men thoughts of doing harm to others which is our proxy for anger in this study, we thought it important to control for possible confounding due to gender in looking at these two variables. After controlling for gender, we found that for men, levels of perceived discrimination by Black women against either Black men in general or individually due to men lacking resources was positively associated with greater levels of depressive distress. However, perceived discrimination either for specific social attributes or by Black men or White men targeted at Black men was unrelated to levels of depressive distress. In addition, frequency of thoughts of doing harm (anger) in the past year was unrelated to perceptions of discrimination.

For women, higher levels of perceived discrimination by both Black males and Black females targeted at Black women in general or individually due to a lack of resources was positively associated with higher levels of depressive distress. Further, levels of perceived discrimination related to race/ethnicity and race/ethnicity and gender combined was positively related to frequency of thoughts of doing harm to someone else in the past year, our proxy for anger. In addition, levels of perceived discrimination by White males targeted at Black females and by Black males and Black females targeted at Black women who lack social resources demonstrated significantly positive associations with frequency of thoughts of doing harm.

Discussion

In summary the most common source of perceived discrimination is race/ethnic based for both African American men and women. However, for African American women gender...
based perceived discrimination is quite salient and its effect on women's sense of well-being should be further investigated.

Results of the present research support previous other studies of perceived discrimination in which minority individuals view discrimination directed at the group of which they are a member as substantially greater than discrimination experienced personally as a member of that group (Crosby, 1982, 1984; Ruggeiro & Taylor, 1997; Taylor, Wright & Porter, 1993; Taylor, Wright, Moghaddam & Lalonde, 1993). Social psychologists have left us with a number of speculations about this tendency to minimize personal discrimination by ethnic group members that may be relevant to our investigations of how the complex mechanisms between discrimination and health operate. These perspectives on minimization include positive coping, methods for gaining perceived control over the environment (see Thompson & Spacapan, 1991 for a review), illusions of unique invulnerability (Perloff, 1983; Perloff & Fetzer, 1986) optimism and a sense of high self-esteem (Taylor & Brown, 1988). Many of these are quite relevant to a sense of well-being and are often associated with better physical and mental health status. It is widely accepted that a sense of perceived control or high self-esteem put an individual at less risk for depression, depressive symptomatology and are central to a sense of overall emotional well-being. As Ruggerio and Taylor (1997) remind us, several of the processes associated with minimization of personal discrimination are ones which are typically found to be associated with better psychological adjustment. Future research may do well to determine when minimization of experiences of discrimination may act as a protective behavior.

Finally while there are other findings that could be highlighted one that raised by this study is that not all experiences of discrimination have equal impact. A salient finding is that intragroup discrimination, namely being treated badly or unfairly by other African Americans was associated with greater depressive distress and feelings of anger. While for men being
treated unfairly or badly by the opposite sex, i.e. women particularly if men lacked adequate social resources was associated with higher distress. Women felt similarly for being treated unfairly not only by the opposite sex but also by other African American women. The results of this study suggests that as we continue to explore the impact of discrimination on the physical and mental health of African Americans it may be important to incorporate data on the perpetrator of the maltreatment and to distinguish between personal and group based experiences of discrimination if we want to better elucidate the mechanisms at work.
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References


Figure 1
Perceived Frequency Of Sex, Race, or Combined Discrimination In General

Reason for Discrimination

- **Sex**
  - Women: 4
  - Men: 3

- **Race**
  - Women: 6
  - Men: 5

- **Sex and Race**
  - Women: 5
  - Men: 5

*p < .05

Mays & Cochran, 1997
Figure 2
Perceived Frequency Of Personally Experienced Discrimination

*p < .05
Mays & Cochran, 1997
Figure 3
Mean Level of Psychological Upset With Personally Experienced Discrimination

Rater

Women Men

Mean Rating

Sex*
Race
Sex and Race

Reason for Discrimination

*p < .05
Mays & Cochran, 1997
Figure 4
Perceived Frequency Of Discrimination Against African Americans By Type

Mays & Cochran, 1997
Figure 5
Perceived Frequency Of Discrimination By Different Perpetrators Targeted At Blacks of Same Gender As Rater

![Bar chart showing perceived frequency of discrimination by different perpetrators targeted at blacks of the same gender as rater.](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perpetrator of Discrimination</th>
<th>Mean Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black Males*</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Females*</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Males*</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05
Mays & Cochran, 1997
Figure 6
Perceived Frequency Of Discrimination By Different Perpetrators Targeted At Self

Rater
Women  Men

* p < .05
Mays & Cochran,
1997
Figure 7

Relationship to Perpetrators of Discrimination

Complete strangers only

Equally by both

People known well only

Perpetrator of Discrimination

Black Males*

Black Females

White Males

Rater

Women

Men

*p < .05 Mays & Cochran, 1997