Preparation for Racial Discrimination and Moving beyond Reactive Coping: a Systematic Review

R.C.T. DeLapp¹* and M.T. Williams²

¹Alvord, Baker, and Associates, 8401 Connecticut Ave, Chevy Chase, MD, 20015; ²Laboratory of Culture and Mental Health Disparities, Department of Psychological Sciences, University of Connecticut, 406 Unit 1020, Babidge Rd, Storrs, CT, 06269

Abstract: Racial discrimination is a commonly experienced stressor among African American that occurs in various forms. The stressful qualities of racial discrimination are highlighted by how such events are often cognitively appraised and the negative mental health outcomes associated with such racial stressors. Traditionally, existing conceptual models of racial discrimination have characterized the reactive experiences of African Americans, particularly identifying how African American typically respond cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally. Moving forward, it is vital that the conceptual models of racial discrimination extend beyond the reactive experience and further identify nuances in the anticipatory and preparatory processes associated with racial discrimination. As such, the current review draws upon a model of proactive coping (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997) to begin conceptualizes how African American may cope with anticipated discriminatory experiences and propose future research directions for generating conceptual models that more comprehensively capture experiences of racial stress among African Americans.

INTRODUCTION

Racism is a stressor that consists of a systemized, social race-based categorization of people groups that ascribes preferential goods and resources to people in those groups regarded as superior [1, 2]. The marginalization and domination of the disadvantaged groups are rooted in the belief that those in disadvantaged groups are somehow inferior [3]. Moreover, this ideology is embedded in the social norms and institutions of American society and provides an unspoken framework for the development and reinforcement of stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination [4]. As such, racial discrimination is the consequence of this ideology and negatively impacts the daily experience of African Americans.

Prior research has demonstrated a consistent relationship between experiences of major discrimination and indicators of psychological unwellness in racial and ethnic minorities [5], including anxiety disorders [6], posttraumatic stress [7], and even psychotic disorders [8, 9]. Experiences of everyday discrimination and microaggressions [10, 11] have also been linked to negative mental health outcomes, including serious psychological distress [12], depression and decreased life satisfaction [13], mood and substance use disorders [14, 15], somatic symptoms [16], anxiety [17], obsessive-compulsive disorder [18], and increased suicide risk [19]. Among the major ethnic and racial groups in the US, African Americans report the highest frequency of discriminatory experiences, including both overt discrimination and microaggressions [15, 20].

Extant literature has drawn upon stress and coping theory (e.g., cognitive appraisal and coping strategies; [21]) to explain how individuals attempt to mitigate the psychological consequences of racial stress due to discrimination [4, 22]. Specifically, stress and coping theory offers a framework for conceptualizing such experiences and helps to describe how coping varies depending on the psychological and environmental demands of the situation [21]. When encountering a stressful life event, an individual gauges the relevance of the stressor to their overall well-being by engaging in cognitive appraisal processes. Specifically, the individual conducts a primary appraisal in which the meaningfulness of the event is evaluated (e.g., whether the event might be harmful or threatening to one’s self) in addition to a secondary appraisal where the person determines what coping options are available to meet the demands of the stressor. At some point, the individual selects a coping strategy and then evaluates whether the implemented strategy satisfactorily addressed the presenting stressor.
Racial discrimination is typically appraised as a stressful event [23, 24] and the coping process has been traditionally described as occurring after exposure to the race-based stressor (i.e., reactive coping; [25]). More recent literature has begun to explore how the anticipation of future race-based stress may prompt people of color to engage in preliminary coping efforts to manage the onset and psychological impact of the racial biases within interracial interactions [26]. Inasmuch, the current review provides a systemic and critical overview of the intersection of racial discrimination, mental health, and coping in African Americans. We also propose recommendations for future research to refine our understanding of how African Americans cope with past, ongoing, and future experiences of discrimination.

METHODS

Eligibility Criteria

The current review included studies that explored the mediating and/or moderating role of coping strategies in the relationship between racial discrimination and psychological outcomes. More specifically, only studies with African American/Black-only samples were included. There were no restrictions on the age range or sampling method. There were no restrictions in terms of publication date; however, all studies were published in peer-reviewed journals and full-text versions were accessible in print or online. Neither dissertations nor unpublished articles were included.

Information Sources

Studies were found by searching electronic databases and reviewing references of related research articles. Search was conducted using PsychINFO, Google Scholar, and PsycARTICLES. The last search was conducted on 20 October 2018. Articles were reviewed based on inclusion criteria, and duplicate references were removed.

Search and Study Selection

The following key terms were used to conduct a search on databases: racial discrimination, racial stress, racism, psychological outcomes, psychological stress, anxiety, depression, coping, and African Americans. Articles were reviewed by the two authors to determine eligibility for inclusion. There was no disagreement regarding study inclusion. 20 articles were reviewed and 12 met inclusion criteria.

REACTIVELY COPING WITH RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

When a social encounter is cognitively appraised as meaningful and potentially threatening, the stress and coping theory proposes that cognitive, emotional, and behavioral strategies are used to manage stressors that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the person’s coping resources [21]. Models of racial discrimination have proposed that various coping strategies moderate or mediate the relationship between past racial discrimination and psychological responses [4, 22, 27]. Table 1 includes a literature review of articles exploring the moderating and/or mediating effects of coping strategies in African Americans. Though the coping literature is often inconsistent in its categorization of these coping strategies (e.g., active versus passive, individual versus collective, inner-directed versus outer-directed, self-focused versus situation-focused, culture-relevant versus mainstream), the current review utilizes the categorization of [22] that provides a parsimonious option for describing reactive coping strategies commonly used by African Americans. Specifically, the authors dichotomize coping responses into general versus race-specific coping responses.

General Coping Responses

General coping reflects strategies that are typically utilized to manage stressful stimuli, regardless of the source of the stress [22]. For African Americans, it was theorized that social support and religious participation are examples of their general coping responses. Specifically, Hayward and Krause [28] examined responses from 2,032 African American adults from the National Survey of American Life to better understand the relationship between religious participation and the use of religious coping in response to discrimination. African Americans with greater religious attendance, religious media usage (e.g., religious books, TV, and radio), church-based social support, and religiosity were more likely to endorse using prayer as a coping strategy after experiencing discrimination [28]. Additionally, evidence suggests that African Americans utilize social support as a means to deal with the effects of racial discrimination [29, 30, 32], potentially more so than other ethnic minority groups [31]. In our review of the literature, only two studies examined how social support affects the discrimination-psychological outcome relationship; no studies exploring the moderating effects of religious coping were found. Within African American marriages, McNeil [32] found that the more African American husbands sought spousal support, the less depressive symptoms they experienced from racial discrimination. This finding was not evident for African American women. For African American adolescents, Gaylord-Harden [33] found that communalistic coping, or seeking support from one’s cultural community, was associated with more anxiety in teens experiencing discrimination. Importantly, these findings [32, 33] demonstrate that social support is a nuanced construct that can be defined broadly as one’s general cultural community or more specifically reflect who an individual is seeking support from (e.g., spouse, religious community, peers). Along these lines, Gaylord-Harden [33] argue that who an individual seeks support from can reduce the protective effects of such support, especially if the supporting individuals are overwhelmed by similar racial stressors themselves. Moving forward, future research is needed to provide a clearer understanding of the types of social support that is best indicated when African Americans are coping with general and racially specific stressors.

Aside from religious and social supports, other general coping strategies have been shown to moderate this relationship with active anger/confrontation [34] and substance coping [35] acting as exacerbating factors. These studies [34, 35] demonstrate that general coping responses of emotional reactivity and avoidance by-way of substance abuse are ineffective strategies for managing the psychological
Table 1. Studies showing the effects of Reactive Coping on the relationship between Perceived Discrimination and Psychological Outcomes within African Americans.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors/Date</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Reactive Coping Strategy</th>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
<th>Design</th>
<th>Significant Main Effects of Coping on PO</th>
<th>Mediating/Moderating Effects of Coping on Relationship of Discrimination to Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fischer &amp; Shaw (1999)</td>
<td>119 AA college students</td>
<td>Racial Socialization Beliefs Racial Socialization Experiences</td>
<td>SORS-A (Stevenson, 1994) TERS (Stevenson et al., 1998)</td>
<td>Mental Health Index (MHI) Self-Esteem (SE)</td>
<td>Regression</td>
<td>No main effects examined</td>
<td>(Moderation) Racial Socialization Experiences X Discrimination on MHI. Low Racial Socialization Experiences + High Discrimination had lower MHI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gerrard et al. (2012) Study 1</td>
<td>100 AA young adult community sample</td>
<td>Substance Use Coping Modified version of brief COPE scale (Carver, 1997)</td>
<td>Substance use willingness (SW)</td>
<td>Regression</td>
<td>(POS) Substance coping on SW</td>
<td>(Moderation) Substance Coping X Discrimination on SW. High Discrimination + High Substance Coping related to more SW</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gerrard et al. (2012) Study 2</td>
<td>139 AA</td>
<td>Substance Use Coping Averaging responses to two items: “I drink alcohol or take drugs, in order to think less” or “… in order to feel better”</td>
<td>Substance use willingness (SW)</td>
<td>Regression</td>
<td>(POS) Substance coping on SW</td>
<td>(Moderation) Substance Coping X Discrimination on SW. High Discrimination + High Substance Coping related to more SW</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gerrard et al. (2012) Study 3</td>
<td>800 AA adolescents</td>
<td>Substance Use Coping 8 items: “Using alcohol [drugs] help me...[with cope with emotions]”</td>
<td>Self-reported Substance Use (SU)</td>
<td>Regression, longitudinal</td>
<td>(POS) Substance coping on SU</td>
<td>(Moderation) Substance Coping X Discrimination on SU. High Discrimination + High Substance Coping related to more SW</td>
<td></td>
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(Table 1 contd.)
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<th>Mediating/Moderating Effects of Coping on Relationship of Discrimination to Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hudson et al.</td>
<td>2,137 AA NSAL-R (Jackson et al., 2004)</td>
<td>John Henryism (High effort coping)</td>
<td>John Henryism (James et al., 1983)</td>
<td>Depressive symptoms (DS)</td>
<td>Regression</td>
<td>(POS) John Henryism on DS.</td>
<td>No significant mediating/moderating effects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pittman</td>
<td>366 AA adults</td>
<td>Active anger coping</td>
<td>1 dichotomous item about losing temper</td>
<td>Psychological distress (PD) General well-being (GW)</td>
<td>Regression</td>
<td>(POS) Active Anger on PD (POS) Active Anger on GW</td>
<td>(Moderation) Active Anger X Discrimination on PD. High Active Anger + Discrimination had higher PD. (Moderation) Active Anger X Acute Discrimination on GW. High Active Anger + Discrimination had lower GW.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seaton et al.</td>
<td>314 AA adolescents</td>
<td>Active coping style</td>
<td>Children’s Coping Strategies Checklist (Ayers et al., 1996)</td>
<td>Depressive symptoms (DS)</td>
<td>SEM</td>
<td>(NEG) Active coping on DS (POS) Distraction coping on DS (POS) Avoidant Coping on DS</td>
<td>(Mediation) Avoidant coping mediated Discrimination on DS.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utsey et al.</td>
<td>213 AA college students</td>
<td>Problem-solving</td>
<td>Coping Strategy Indicator (Amirkhan, 1990)</td>
<td>Self-esteem (SE) Life Satisfaction (LS)</td>
<td>Regression</td>
<td>(NEG) Avoidance coping on SE (NEG) Avoidance coping on LS</td>
<td>No mediating/moderating effects were examined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West et al.</td>
<td>91 AA women</td>
<td>Problem-focus coping</td>
<td>Coping Orientations to Problems Experience scale</td>
<td>Depressive symptoms (DS)</td>
<td>Regression</td>
<td></td>
<td>(Moderation) Problem Solving X Discrimination on DS. Higher Problem focused coping had lower DS. (Moderation) Avoidant coping X Discrimination on DS. Higher Avoidant coping had higher DS.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: AA = African Americans; POS = Positive Linear Relationship indicating there is a main effect such that higher coping behavior is associated with more of a psychological outcome; NEG = Negative Linear Relationship indicating a main effect such that higher coping behavior is associated with less of a psychological outcome.
distress associated with racial discrimination. Altogether, the reviewed literature demonstrated a well-supported, positive relationship between perceived racial discrimination and general coping responses; however, there is limited evidence describing how these variables moderate or mediate discrimination-psychological outcome relationship. Such a gap in literature undermines efforts to identify effective coping strategies for African Americans victimized by racial discrimination. As such, future research examining the use of general coping responses should include measures of psychological well-being and utilize more specific definitions of coping strategies in an effort to identify which aspects of these strategies are most effective in managing the psychological consequences of racial discrimination.

Racism-specific Coping Responses

Racism-specific coping responses have been described as cognitions and behaviors used to mitigate the negative impact of racial discrimination [22]. Due to the dearth of available literature at the time of its publication, Clark and colleagues [22] only provided broad descriptions of racism-specific coping responses by utilizing categories of active coping (directly dealing with the stressor) versus passive coping (indirectly managing the stressor). Based upon more recent studies examining racism-specific coping responses, research has found that different types of coping are related to psychological outcomes. Specifically, avoidant coping, a strategy similar to Clark et al.’s definition of passive coping, appears to be less effective in reducing the stress of racial discrimination. Particularly, avoidant coping has exhibited a positive relationship with measures of psychological distress among college students [36] and adolescents [37] and has demonstrated a negative relationship with measures of life satisfaction and overall well-being in college students [30]. The adverse psychological consequences associated with avoidant coping has been theorized to result from perceived helplessness in one’s ability to control the occurrence of discrimination. [36] Also, active forms of coping, or coping strategies that demonstrate a perceived sense of control to change the dynamics of the stressor, have also demonstrated relationships with psychological outcomes in college students [31, 36]. For example, problem-solving [36] and logical analysis [31] are considered active coping strategies because these cognitive approaches to racial stress imply a belief that one can logically interpret the factors influencing the occurrence of racial stress and generate solutions to effectively reduce the stress of racial discrimination [36]. In sum, racism-specific coping responses that reflect a sense of perceived control over the situation rather than perceived helplessness appear to be more effective in reducing the psychological consequences of racial discrimination. It is recommended that future research better identify which coping strategies inspire a sense of control and explore under what conditions (e.g., type of racial discrimination) such control/agency is most likely experienced among African Americans.

A CRITIQUE OF THE REACTIVE COPING LITERATURE FOR RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

Based on stress and coping theory, existing models are most often reflective of the processes described in Fig. 1 [4, 22, 38]. As illustrated, an Environmental Stimulus must activate one’s perception of discrimination. African Americans can be exposed to different kinds of discriminatory stimuli, which may include major life events, microaggressions, or institutional/systemic racism, and these experiences can be encountered directly as well as indirectly (e.g., vicariously through family, friends, or the media).[4] Given there is variability in the likelihood that African Americans may explain their unfair treatment as caused by racial discrimination [39], Fig. 1 includes ethnic identity, discrimination prototypes, and social costs of discrimination as Mediators/Moderators of the relationship between exposure to discriminatory stimuli and perceptions of racial discrimination. As described previously, there are a number of mediating/moderating variables that may influence variability in perceived racial discrimination among African Americans (e.g., group identification, discriminatory stereotypes). Consistent with the Clark et al. [22] model, the attributional ambiguity following discriminatory stimuli can be captured by breaking the Perception of Racial Discrimination variable into three conditions: 1) perceived racial stressor, 2) perceived nonracial stressor, and 3) no perceived stressor.

Following an individual’s perception of racial discrimination, reactive coping processes (e.g., cognitive appraisal of the discriminatory stimuli and coping behavior) influence the perceived discrimination-psychological outcome relationship. As noted previously, cognitive appraisals characterize the stressor as threatening/harmful [23, 27] and the individual’s implementation of reactive coping strategies impacts psychological responses (e.g., [36]). Although coping processes are typically included within coping models of discrimination [4, 22, 27], there is little clarification in the reactive coping literature regarding the interaction between exposure to perceived racial discrimination and the selection of certain coping efforts [27], thus limiting our understanding of how African Americans select and gauge the effectiveness of their coping after encountering racially stressful events. In her discussion of reactive coping, Harrell [4] proposes that coping strategies are selected based upon the most prevalent emotional response elicited; the emotion of anger may provoke a more confrontation reaction whereas anxiety might breed an avoidant response. This explanation reflects an emotionally reactive and situation-contingent conceptualization of coping strategy selection where emotion activation governs the allocation of coping efforts, however, there is no literature to provide evidence for this conceptualization. If relevant studies had assessed the immediate emotional response elicited by the stressful event and then examined which strategies were employed based upon the elicited emotion, then it would shed some light on Harrell’s proposition.

Furthermore, the reactive coping model in Fig. 1 highlights the importance of Perceived Coping Efficacy, which is a construct that is alluded to, but omitted from previous models of reactive coping strategies (e.g., [22]). Clark and colleagues [22] described that coping strategies for racial discrimination are considered adaptive or maladaptive depending upon how successfully they result in the reduction and/or prevention of adverse psychological outcomes, which represents one way of defining coping effectiveness. Commonly, it appears that the reactive coping literature identifies this form of coping efficacy (as illustrated in Fig. 1) by
measuring the overall tendency to employ a specific coping style and examining the relationship between coping style and health outcomes [27]. Typically, researchers operationalize coping style by asking participants to recall whether they used a certain coping strategy to manage a previous stressful event using a self-report format. A drawback of this approach is that it separates the specific coping strategy from the context in which it was implemented and relies on respondent memory recall, which may be inaccurate. Along these lines, the coping literature does not clearly describe the function or intended outcome that is connected with the implemented coping strategy [27]. These approaches are unable to measure moment-by-moment decisions regarding the selection and subsequent evaluation of coping strategies following discrimination. As such, there remains little evidence describing how this selection-evaluation process is related to the mitigation of psychological outcomes following experiences of racial discrimination, thus restricting our understanding of effective strategies for this population.

Besides the prevention of adverse psychological outcomes, other studies focused on racial discrimination have utilized broad definitions to operationalize perceived coping efficacy. For example, Hoggard and colleagues [24] measured daily ratings of whether an array of coping strategies (e.g., rumination, avoidance, confrontation, problem-solving) were implemented to cope with racially stressful events. By capturing the coping strategy used on the day the event occurred, it minimizes the use of retrospective recall to gauge coping efficacy. Based upon their findings, Hoggard et al. [24] argue that the more prevalent coping strategies (i.e., rumination, avoidance, confrontation) endorsed by their African Americans sample were more adaptive than the less frequently endorsed problem-solving strategy in racially stressful interpersonal settings. However, their assessment procedure does not measure the perceived efficacy of specific coping strategies, thereby restricting their ability to label certain strategies as more or less adaptive.

Fig. (1). A refined model of Reactive Coping for African Americans who have experienced racial discrimination based on an existing model by Clark and colleagues [22]. (a) An environmental stimulus activates an attributional process that results in perceived racial discrimination. (b) Perceptions of racial discrimination are influenced by a myriad of factors (e.g., Ethnic Identity, Discrimination Prototypes, and Social Costs). (c) Also, perceived racial discrimination that is cognitively appraised as harmful/threatening is (d) directly related to adverse psychological outcomes (e.g., low self-esteem, life satisfaction, and increased anxiety/depressive symptoms). (e) The harmful effects of perceived racial discrimination are mediated/moderated by reactive coping strategies. (f/g) The perceived efficacy of the coping strategy can be defined by the mitigation of adverse psychological outcomes, thereby informing which coping strategies are employed.
This may be a reflection of the fact that operationalization of perceived coping efficacy for specific strategies can be difficult to capture. Unlike the delineation of adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies by Clark and colleagues [22], Folkman and Moskowitz [40] assert that coping efforts alone are not necessarily good or bad, but rather their effectiveness remains contingent upon the contextual demands placed on the individual. Moreover, it is proposed that a two pronged approach best captures the complexity of coping effectiveness, which first includes the identification of appropriate outcomes (or goals) and then based upon these desired outcomes, the quality of coping depends on the fit between coping strategies and the contextual demands of the situation.[40] Desired outcomes are defined by “personally significant” goals selected by the individual and can be differentiated within the context of proximal goals as well as distal goals. Notably, the complexity of determining the effectiveness of coping is most evident when a coping strategy does not equally achieve all desired goals. For example, an African American male may frequently encounter racial discrimination in the form of microaggressions from his colleagues at work. If he utilizes confrontive coping, it may help assuage his anger towards his colleague (a more proximal outcome) yet jeopardize his job security if others perceive his confrontation as unacceptable (a more distal outcome; [4]). On the other hand, if he were to utilize avoidant coping, it may help achieve the immediate goal of maintaining peace within one’s social interactions; however, the cumulative nature of the stress may generate chronic exposure to adverse emotional (e.g., anger, frustration) and psychological (e.g., anxiety, depression, overall distress) responses [4]. As demonstrated by this example, coping strategies may not ubiquitously fulfill all desired outcomes, especially when available coping resources may be limited and achievable outcomes/goals are conflicting [27].

Given the paucity of literature providing a nuanced assessment of perceived coping efficacy, it is proposed that future research explore this construct within the context of reactivity coping with discriminatory experiences. More specifically, future definitions of coping efficacy should explore the relationship between coping strategies and the achievement of immediate and/or distant goals (e.g., managing emotional arousal; protecting against lasting psychological consequences). A slight methodological adaptation to the daily reporting procedure utilized by Hoggard et al. [24] would provide more evidence clarifying this selection-evaluation process among African Americans. In addition to providing participants with a checklist of potential coping strategies implemented in the stressful event [26], future studies should include assessment items that capture the function of the coping strategy (e.g., what was the intended target or purpose of the coping strategy), the perceived efficacy of specific strategies (e.g., do you feel that the coping strategy was effective in managing the stressful event), and how African Americans gauged the efficacy of the strategy (e.g., why was the coping strategy effective versus ineffective). In addition, Brondolo and colleagues [27] highlight other factors that may affect perceived coping efficacy, which include the intensity of the stressor, the anticipated outcomes related to the stressor, and the accessibility of resources to cope. By including any combination of these items on a daily report, it would provide an opportunity to better characterize individual and situational factors that influence the selection and evaluation process, as shown in Fig. 1.

**PRE-STRESSOR COPING AND RACIAL DISCRIMINATION**

Recent literature has begun to emerge beyond the study of reactive coping strategies and attend to the pre-stressor coping efforts that may be employed to manage stressful life events. Mallet and Swim [25] assert that “given its post hoc nature, reactive coping cannot explain how individuals approach potentially stressful situations or use strategies to reduce or eliminate negative consequences before or during a potentially stressful event”[p 414] Thus, it is important that research about perceived discrimination shift from focusing on its post hoc effects to exploring how African Americans are proactive in their approach to potential race-based stress; a process often entitled proactive coping. Mallet and Swim [26] found that 83% of their African American college sample endorsed engaging in proactive coping behaviors when anticipating discrimination, which importantly establishes a base-rate for proactive coping and warrants further exploration of this pre-stressor coping process in this population. Although they did not specifically address racial discrimination, in their seminal paper on proactive coping, Aspinwall and Taylor [41] utilized core tenets of the stress and coping theory to propose a multi-step model of proactive coping: 1) Resource Accumulation, 2) Attention Recognition, 3) Initial Appraisal, 4) Preliminary Coping Efforts, and 5) Elicit Feedback. These processes are theorized to represent processes occurring prior to engaging with the Environment Stimuli. We have applied this model to racial discrimination as illustrated in Fig. 2, and elaborate on each of the stages.

**Resource Accumulation and Attention Recognition**

Regarding Resource Accumulation, it is proposed that individuals must have adequate resources available (e.g., time, money, organization and planning skills, and social support networks) to engage in proactive coping. Specifically, Aspinwall and Taylor [41] note that these resources may also include anticipatory skills learned during upbringing to detect and cope with stress. For example, Fig. 2 illustrates that African Americans may acquire such anticipatory skills from their past experiences by vicariously learning from the experiences of others (e.g., family, friends, and neighbors; [4]), through exposure to racial socialization practices [42], and by having a strong ethnic/racial identity [25-27]. Notably, evidence suggests that African Americans high in ethnic identity are more likely to engage in proactive coping efforts [26], which may suggest that identifying highly with one’s stigmatized identity is a potential resource that increases the likelihood of engaging in proactive coping [25, 26]. Also, as previously noted by Clark and colleagues [22], the social networks of African Americans are important resources for coping with discrimination after it has occurred. Support networks may help by providing information salient to stressors, facilitating an accurate appraisal of ambiguous situations, providing concrete aid during times of stress, and providing emotional support [41].
Through these channels of information and learned experiences (either personally or vicariously), individuals acquire skills to identify environmental warning signs (non-verbal cues; [43]) and physiological indicators (i.e., bodily arousal) of a potential stressor, thus characterizing the Attention Recognition stage of the model. Particularly, the acquisition of such information activates a vigilance (or sensitivity) that prompts the individual to scan the environment for threatening information [41]. Following experiences with race-based stress, African Americans have been shown to develop hypervigilance for experiences of racial discrimination [43]. According to Aspinwall and Taylor [41], such hypersensitivity to future threat cues may result in a negative information bias and a chronic state of emotional arousal [44]. Although it has not been studied through the lens of hypervigilance, evidence has demonstrated that interracial interactions can exert considerable executive attentional demands on African Americans [45]. Specifically, Richeson, Trawalter, and Shelton [46] found that Africans Americans with negative implicit attitudes towards European Americans experienced a reduced performance on an inhibition task (i.e., Stroop task) following a social interaction with a European American individual, suggesting that social situations where discrimination is possible may deplete attentional abilities available for other tasks. Despite the contributions by the Richeson et al. [46] study, it remains unclear whether discrimination-based hypervigilance enhances or hinders the subsequent steps of the proactive coping process.

**Initial Appraisal Stage**

Following the detection of a potential stressor, the individual is believed to engage in the Initial Appraisal stage, which consists of ascribing meaning to the potential stressor through cognitive appraisal processes. Given the attributional ambiguity often evident in explaining past discriminatory experiences [39], it is assumed that thoughts surrounding the ambiguous nature of discrimination are also present when anticipating its potential occurrence. In order to make meaning of warning signs for discrimination, Aspinwall and Taylor’s [41] model suggests that the individual must rely on their schemas (or exemplars) of the potential stressor to aid their appraisal process. (e) When anticipated events are appraised as potentially meaningful, individuals will engage in Preliminary Coping Efforts to manage the onset and outcomes associated with the impending stressor. (f) Once the individual engages with the stressor, it provides feedback regarding the nature of the stressor and efficacy of coping efforts. (g) Based upon this feedback, the individual adjusts their appraisal of the stressor and the selection of coping efforts. Fig. (2). A hypothesized model of Proactive Coping for African Americans who anticipate and prepare for experiences of racial discrimination. Model is based on an existing model by Aspinwall and Taylor [41]. (a) Resource Accumulation represents a reservoir of information that can be used to aid in the detection of potentially discriminatory events (Attention Recognition). (b) Following the detection of a potential stressor, the individual will ascribe meaning to the potential stressor (Initial Appraisal). (c) Cognitive appraisal process may include challenge-oriented or threat-oriented appraisals. (d) When anticipated events are perceived as threatening or harmful, the individual will experience anxiety. An individual’s anxious arousal will influence their detection abilities and overall appraisal of the potential stressor. (e) When anticipated events are appraised as potentially meaningful, individuals will engage in Preliminary Coping Efforts to manage the onset and outcomes associated with the impending stressor. (f) Once the individual engages with the stressor, it provides feedback regarding the nature of the stressor and efficacy of coping efforts. (g) Based upon this feedback, the individual adjusts their appraisal of the stressor and the selection of coping efforts.
Preventing for Racial Discrimination and Moving Beyond Reactive Coping

Aside from simply defining an environmental cue as potentially discriminatory, it is also important to determine the likelihood that a warning sign will develop into an actual stressor. Aspinwall and Taylor [41] propose that the individual must engage in the mental simulation of the potential implications or consequences of the stressor, which aids in their development of an action plan. Based upon this notion, individuals who perceive a potential stressor more favorably (e.g., as reflecting a challenge rather than a feared threat; more optimism) and view the stressor as amenable (e.g., high perceived control) are theorized to be more likely to engage in proactive coping. Contrarily, the intense emotional arousal resulting from feared and unfavorable threat appraisals are believed to interfere with the information processing (e.g., attentional narrowing for negative environmental cues) and restrict one’s ability to engage in proactive coping (e.g., leading to the avoidance of the stressor). Altogether, the authors suggest that the threat appraisal-coping effort relationship may be curvilinear in that both low and high perceived threat result in minimal preliminary coping efforts whereas moderate perceived threat (possibly where the stressor is viewed more favorably and representative of a challenge) is theorized as most promoting for the engagement in pre-stressor coping.

Although Aspinwall and Taylor’s [41] foundational model highlights the relevance of the Initial Appraisal stage within proactive coping, subsequent literature has contested some of the core assumptions regarding how future stressors are cognitively appraised. Proactive coping is posited by some to be a form of positive coping where future stressors are cognitively appraised as challenges and surmountable obstacles (or challenge appraisals) that provide opportunities for personal growth and a sense of mastery [48, 49]. Contrarily, Aspinwall and Taylor’s [41] model describes proactive coping as a preparatory process wherein future stressors are appraised along a continuum of perceived threat [50]. The disagreement regarding the primary appraisal process (i.e., challenge vs. threat appraisal) in proactive coping is conceptually important given that it identifies different motivations for the implementation of preliminary coping efforts [49]. For instance, challenge appraisals are believed to inspire coping efforts that reflect optimism and a sense of control in one’s ability to manage the impact of a future stressor. As demonstrated by Greenglass and Fikszenbaum [48] and others [51, 49], coping efforts motivated by challenge-oriented appraisals promote positive affective states and are associated with better psychological outcomes (e.g., less depressive symptoms in a predominately European American sample). Regarding threat-based appraisals, it appears the underlying assumption is that coping efforts motivated by perceived threat are not promoting (at least to the degree of challenge-oriented appraisals) of positive psychological outcomes (e.g., positive affective, mental states, and overall well-being).

A recent article by Sohl and Moyer [50] provided evidence demonstrating that the challenge-oriented (and not the threat-based) conceptualization of proactive coping best captures the coping efforts of 300 college students (49.1% European American) preparing for a future stressor. To provide such evidence, Sohl and Moyer [50] utilized a reconfigured version of Aspinwall and Taylor’s [41] multi-step model. More specifically, in an attempt to design an education program that inspired elderly adults to invest in their future (e.g., set financial goals for the future), Bode, de Rijder, Kuijzer, and Bensing [52] operationalized coping as a set of trainable skills rather than a general dispositional trait (e.g., coping style). Based upon this perspective, Bode and colleagues [52, 53] developed a set of ‘proactive competencies’ based upon the Aspinwall and Taylor [41] model, which broadly describes an individual’s aptitude to detect warning signs, set attainable goals, and select adequate coping strategies to attain goals. Sohl and Moyer [50] examined which proactive coping conceptualization (measured in the form of a dispositional coping style) was most related to students’ proactive competencies and their overall well-being (i.e., affect, subjective well-being, and physical symptoms) prior to taking a college exam. Results indicated that proactive competencies only mediated the relationship between the challenge-oriented coping style and psychological well-being. Sohl and Moyer [50] argued their findings demonstrate that aspiring for a positive future outcome (challenge appraisal) is more characteristic of the proactive coping process rather than preparing/minimizing the likelihood of a negative outcome (threat appraisal).

Aside from the lack of any replication of Sohl and Moyer’s [50] findings, there are two pivotal limitations of their study that restrict the generalizability of these findings to race-based stressors. First, this study utilized a college exam to operationalize a future, anticipated stressor. Inherently, college exams are isolated events, easily anticipated, and offer a greater degree of control given that one is offered instruction leading up to the exam that is intended to bolster a sense of preparation. Given these characteristics, the appraisal of exams becomes less comparable to more discrete, unexpected, and ambiguous stressors, such as discrimination. This limitation raises the question of whether a challenge-based conceptualization of proactive coping would exhibit a similar relationship with proactive competencies and psychological well-being if a race-based stressor was utilized in the Sohl and Moyer [50] study. Also, the challenge-based conceptualization suggests that proactive coping is done to achieve certain goals. When taking an exam, there is a clear and objective desired outcome (i.e., best grade possible); however, the goal definition becomes less objective when encountering a more ambiguous stressor where one has to consider both proximal and distal goals [40]. With this said, the Sohl and Moyer [50] study suggests that the underlying motivation for proactive coping lies in the pursuit of goals (challenge appraisals), but the use of a college exam to define their stressor does not explain which primary appraisal process will motivate an individual’s preliminary coping efforts when anticipating stressors that provide less clarity regarding attainable goals/outcomes. Given these limitations, an important question remains unanswered (as illustrated in Fig. 2): Are future race-based stressors best captured by challenge or threat appraisals in African Americans?

Among the few studies that have examined proactive coping within the context of discrimination, it appears that threat-based appraisals, as originally proposed by Aspinwall
and Taylor [41], do characterize the Initial Appraisal process among stigmatized individuals, like African Americans. For instance, Mallet and Swim [26] found that African Americans who appraised potential race-based stressors as threatening (e.g., being concerned the stressor may cause negative affect, impede goal attainment, or inflict personal harm) engaged in more proactive coping behaviors (see Table for more details). Moreover, a threat-based appraisal projecting that discrimination is likely to occur (e.g., high anticipation) is a particularly salient predictor of proactive coping behaviors [23, 54, 55]. For example, although not within an exclusively African American sample, Shelton et al. [55] found that first-year ethnic minority college students (50% African American) with higher prejudice expectations tended to use more proactive coping when interacting with their European American roommates, thereby further illustrating a positive relationship between threat appraisals and proactive coping efforts within discriminatory situations.

Preliminary Coping Stage

Regarding the Preliminary Coping stage, Aspinwall and Taylor [41] propose that individuals engage in pre-stressor coping efforts as long as the stressor is perceived as likely to exist, note that there will be an attempt to preserve resources if possible. Thus, the degree of coping efforts is proportionate to the severity of the stressor with more coping effort expended as the stressor becomes more severe; however, this resource conservation theory has not been validated in the context of discrimination. In terms of the types of coping efforts, Aspinwall and Taylor [41] suggest that greater perceived optimism and control is associated with more active coping efforts whereas less perceived optimism and control (as well as neuroticism) is related to more avoidant coping.

Although the mediating effects of perceived optimism were not found to be related to proactive coping within the context of discrimination [26], several studies have found evidence describing common types of proactive coping strategies employed by African Americans (see Table 2). For example, Mallett and Swim [26] found that self-focused proactive coping (e.g., attempting to maintain self-control by attending to one’s own thoughts, behaviors, or emotions during situations where racism is suspected) was more commonly used among their African American sample relative to situation-focused coping (e.g., using accumulated resources, attentional awareness, and information seeking to regulate the environment where the stressor is possible) and avoidant coping. Additionally, several studies have explored the use of compensatory behaviors (e.g., openly acknowledging one’s stigmatized identity, self-disclosing information to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors/Date</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Proactive Coping Strategy</th>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mallet &amp; Swim (2005)</td>
<td>101 college women with BMI of ≥ 25 (no ethnicity breakdown provided)</td>
<td>Primary Control</td>
<td>Participants told to create virtual reality video for an attractive male.</td>
<td>(POS) Threat Appraisals and Primary Control</td>
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<tr>
<td>Study 1</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Primary Control measured by time spent preparing for video (e.g., planning introduction, grooming)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mallet &amp; Swim (2005)</td>
<td>62 college women with BMI of ≥ 25 (no ethnicity breakdown provided)</td>
<td>Primary Control</td>
<td>Daily Diary Forms</td>
<td>(POS) Anticipated Discrimination and Primary Control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study 2</td>
<td></td>
<td>Information Seeking</td>
<td>Rate the use of these strategies on a 6-point scale</td>
<td>(POS) Anticipated Discrimination and Secondary Control</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Self-presentation</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Attention to situation</td>
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<td>Attention to interaction</td>
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<td>Secondary Control</td>
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<td>Attention to self</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mallet &amp; Swim (2009)</td>
<td>77 AA college students</td>
<td>Self-focused coping</td>
<td>Retrospective Reports of Proactive Coping: Rated the use of 14 proactive coping strategies on a 7-point scale.</td>
<td>Self-focused coping reported more than other coping strategies on both types of measurement.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Situation-focused coping Avoidance</td>
<td>Reports of Daily Proactive Coping: When anticipating discrimination, rated the use of 14 proactive coping strategies on a 7-point scale.</td>
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<td>McGonagle &amp; Hamblin</td>
<td>332 adults who work at least 30 hrs. and endorsed at least one chronic illness (No ethnicity breakdown provided)</td>
<td>Concealing Behaviors</td>
<td>(POS) Previous Discrimination and Compensatory Behaviors.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Rated the use of 3 concealing behaviors (i.e., managing appearance, minimizing importance of illness, trying to hide symptoms) on a 4-point scale</td>
<td>(POS) Anticipated Discrimination and Concealing Behaviors.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Rated the use of 3 compensatory behaviors (e.g., working longer hours/extra to prove oneself) on a 4-point scale.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shelton et al.</td>
<td>54 ethnic minority college students (27 AA)</td>
<td>Self-disclosure</td>
<td>(POS) Expectation of prejudice and self-disclosure when interacting with a White roommate.</td>
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<td>(2005)</td>
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Note: AA = African Americans; POS = Positive Linear Relationship indicating there is a main effect such that higher coping behavior is associated with more of the outcome variable; NEG = Negative Linear Relationship indicating a main effect such that higher coping behavior is associated with less of outcome variable.
disconfirm stereotypes and enhance individuation, or changing one’s behavior to promote positivity and likability) as a means of managing the onset or intensity of discrimination [45, 55, 56].

Feedback and Reappraisal

Finally, Aspinwall and Taylor [41] assert that the implementation of initial coping efforts represents an educated guess of what will effectively mitigate the effects of the potential stressor. Given that preliminary coping attempts may be based on false appraisals that were formed prior to having experience with the stressor, the expending of initial coping efforts provides important information for the reappraisal of the stressor and subsequent changes in the coping strategies utilized, as indicated by the feedback loop in Fig. 2. For example, individuals may initially perceive a situation as amenable by personal efforts; however, following exposure to the stressor, an individual’s perceived control may be altered and potentially more effective coping strategies employed. Though the feedback-reappraisal process has yet to be studied in the discrimination literature, the evidence does suggest that proactive coping is associated with outcomes that can be used in the reappraisal and coping refinement process. For example, Singletary and Hebl [56] randomly assigned college students to a stigmatizing (wearing ‘Gay and Proud’ attire) or nonstigmatizing identity (wearing ‘Texan and Proud’ attire) and asked them to enter stores to inquire about job availability. Participants were asked to engage in different types of compensatory behaviors while interacting with store employees. These researchers found that engaging in compensatory behaviors for stigmatized individuals resulted in more positive nonverbal cues from the store employees (e.g., more smiling, eye contact, and less standoffish behavior which are indicators of a positive impression). Such nonverbal cues can theoretically be utilized to reevaluate whether the situation poses a threat and possibly validate that the implemented pre-stressor coping strategies are effective in managing the onset of discrimination.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Despite the aforementioned advances in our understanding of the proactive coping processes utilized by African Americans to manage discrimination, there are several future directions for research to continue expanding our knowledge of this coping process. We offer recommendations for future research from three perspectives: 1) the Initial Appraisal process of discrimination, 2) the role of cognitive factors and negative affect in motivating pre-stressor processes, and 3) the relationship between pre- and post-stressor processes.

Future-oriented Appraisals of Discrimination: Threat vs. Challenge

Although the generalizability of their findings are limited by their use of a college exam to operationalize a future stressor, the main objective of the Sohl and Moyer [50] study is valid in that there still appears to be an inconsistency regarding which appraisals most accurately describe an individual’s motivation to engage in proactive coping efforts. Though evidence suggests that the challenge-based conceptions best characterizes proactive coping [48, 50], the available research primarily supports the relevance of threat-based proactive coping within the context of discrimination [25, 26, 45]. In light of this inconsistency, future research is warranted to better understand the significance of each appraisal type when proactively coping with discrimination.

A potential avenue for examining this inconsistency can be gleaned from Schwarzer and Taubert’s [49] description of three different types of pre-stressor coping (i.e., anticipatory, preventative, and proactive coping) that differ based upon the perceived imminence of the stressor and perceived control. Anticipatory coping is intended to manage ‘known risks;’ the individual feels quite certain the stressor is imminent and perceives the impending stressor as threatening. For preventative coping, the potential stressor is appraised as threatening thereby motivating efforts to lessen the impact or likelihood of the stressor occurring. Contrarily, proactive coping is described as a challenge appraisal. The authors highlight that coping efforts implemented when engaging in preventative or proactive coping may be similar, but once again, the motivation behind these efforts are different (e.g., threat-based vs. challenge-based).

Based upon this conceptualization of pre-stressor coping, it seems that the discrimination literature has mostly defined Preliminary Coping Efforts (as shown in Fig. 2) as the anticipatory and preventative coping approaches. Future research can further distinguish these forms of threat-based coping as well as explore the relevance of proactive coping by including items that prompt for the one’s emotional state, perceived imminence of stressor, and perceived control prior to engaging with the anticipated discriminatory situation. Importantly, the inclusion of these dimensions can be used to characterize possible pre-stressor mindsets precluding the implementation of different types of coping efforts, thereby offering a dimensional model of how challenge and threat appraisals may differ in their relation to proactively coping with discrimination.

Although less comprehensive, another recommendation would be to utilize the harm appraisal dimensions from the Eccleston and Major [23] study as an assessment procedure to better understand the relevance of threat appraisals to the Initial Appraisal stage. As noted previously, Eccleston and Major [23] found that global, stable, and severe harm appraisals are utilized to define the stressfulness of past discrimination among Latino Americans. It seems reasonable that these dimensions (e.g., perceiving the stressor as severe, unlikely to change, and likely to affect multiple areas of life) might be analogous to the mental simulation process described by Aspinwall and Taylor [41] and would also provide a dimensional model of how threat appraisals are related to engaging in proactive coping.

Altogether, in using the recommended dimensional assessment procedures, it conceptualizes the appraisal process as occurring on a continuum, which advances beyond an ‘either/or’ approach where proactive coping is forcefully considered a challenge or threat-oriented process. This recommendation draws upon the curvilinear model described by Aspinwall and Taylor [41] by implying that different levels along appraisal dimensions are differentially related to pre-stressor coping behaviors. Importantly, the implementation
of dimensional assessment procedures would provide an opportunity to better comprehend how African Americans appraise the stressfulness of discrimination before its onset, which offers a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between perceived discrimination and psychological outcomes.

Anxiety and Proactive Coping

In line with the assertion that pre-stressor appraisals interact with affective states [41, 57], future research should more intentionally seek to elucidate the impact of affect as a motivator for preemptively coping with discrimination in African Americans. Though discrimination literature has not explored the role of affect in pre-stressor coping, it has been hypothesized that the activation of negative affective states (e.g., anxiety) when anticipating discrimination causes African Americans to allocate substantial attentional resources to manage the onset of discrimination [46], thereby depleting their attentional control abilities for other tasks.[45] In support of this hypothesis, the clinical anxiety literature has identified distinctive attentional patterns among anxious individuals [58-60]. Specifically, anxious individuals actively search for and experience difficulty disengaging from threat cues (i.e., attentional bias for threatening stimuli; [61]). This attentional bias is typically automatic and influenced by anxiety level, perceived severity of threat, and attentional control [61]. To explore the relevance of this attentional narrowing process, future research should utilize measures of anxiety and experimentally-induced attention biases to examine whether higher levels of anxiety are in fact related to attentional biases among African American who anticipate they will experience racial discrimination. For example, given that Mallett and Swim [26] found that African Americans proactively use more self-focused coping (e.g., attention on personal thoughts, emotions, and behaviors), research may begin to address this gap in the literature by examining how anxiety interacts with this self-focused attention.

Additionally, the relevance of threat appraisals in the discrimination literature warrants the assessment of negative affect (particularly anxiety) within the Initial Appraisal stage of proactive coping. Theories of pre-stressor coping propose that threat appraisals interact with anxiety to influence the likelihood and quality of the proactive coping process [41, 45, 49]. Despite the theorized significance of anxiety during the Initial Appraisal stage, the discrimination literature has yet to validate the role of anxiety when preemptively preparing to encounter discrimination. In conjunction with the aforementioned recommendation, future research should examine whether varying levels of pre-stressor anxiety are associated with both attention allocation and threat appraisals for discrimination among African Americans. Such an empirical contribution would better characterize the pre-stressor cognitive and emotional experience of African Americans prior to engaging with discrimination.

Proactive Coping and Post-Stressor Psychological Outcomes

Though challenge-oriented proactive coping has been shown to predict favorable psychological outcomes when encountering nonracial stressors [48, 49], the discrimination literature has yet to fully test the usefulness of pre-stressor coping in managing psychological outcomes. Although it introduces an array of new variables (e.g., pre-stressor attention allocation, initial appraisals, and coping behaviors), the clarification of how proactive coping processes fit into the model of perceived racial discrimination and psychological outcomes would offer opportunities to more comprehensively understand the harmful effects of race-based stress. For example, an individual may engage in preliminary coping efforts (e.g., attending to clothing or speech to avoid fulfilling stereotypes that may lead to differential treatment) yet still encounter race-based stress (e.g., microaggressions; [62]). Given the salience of low perceived control to the appraisal process, an awareness of the inevitability of discrimination, despite one’s initial coping efforts, may be an emotionally damaging realization or reminder. Contrarily, proactive coping is also conceptualized as efforts to minimize the impact or severity of a potential stressor. As such, if the individual perceives that their pre-stressor coping has minimized the intensity of the stressor, then a sense of control and optimism may be preserved, thus buffering against the psychological effects of the stressor. Different Initial Appraisals of discrimination (primarily perceived control) might be influenced by pre-stressor coping processes, which in turn may differently impact the psychological outcomes. Currently, no study to date has explored this link between pre-stressor processes and post-stressor outcomes within the context of discrimination. However, such a study would move beyond solely describing how African Americans are psychologically impacted by racial discrimination and subsequently explain how their pre-stressor cognitive, emotional, and behavioral experiences mitigate, or possibly exacerbate, psychological outcomes following experiences of racial discrimination.

Connecting Pre- and Post-Stressor Coping Behaviors

Given that reactive coping strategies are proposed to be important mediating and/or moderating factors, future research should also explore how pre-stressor coping processes influence the implementation of coping efforts after discrimination has occurred. Preliminary coping represents the individual’s best-guess approach to managing the onset or impact of the stressor. Once the individual engages with the stressor, the person can obtain feedback that should aid in the reappraisal of the stressor (e.g., is this as threatening as I thought?; do I have personal agency in controlling the outcome?) and the subsequent refinement of coping strategies (e.g., would a different strategy be more effective?) Future research should acknowledge the existence of pre-stressor processes within conceptualizations of racial discrimination and examine the link between pre- and post-stressor coping behaviors to provide evidence supporting this feedback relationship. Such research would help to identify more comprehensive assessment methods that measure how African Americans select specific coping strategies based on the efficacy of the pre- and post-stressor coping efforts in managing racial discrimination.

CONCLUSION

Racial discrimination can be a stressful experience for African Americans and provoke the use of various coping
strategies to manage the onset of adverse psychological consequences. Despite improvements in understanding reactive coping processes among African Americans, an area for further investigation includes clarifying how specific coping behaviors are selected and subsequently evaluated within this population. By expanding our knowledge of this selection-evaluation process, it can help inform interventions for assisting African Americans to utilize the most optimal reactive coping strategies for their environment. Moreover, beyond the study of reactive coping, it is necessary for the discrimination literature to continue the study of how African Americans anticipate and prepare themselves for potentially discriminatory situations. Future research should continue to explore these pre-stressor coping processes in this population, as it will provide a comprehensive description of how psychological consequences can be effectively (or ineffectively) managed by coping behaviors before or after discriminatory events. Altogether, these advancements in the study of racial discrimination can contribute to the empowerment of African Americans by helping them become more effective in their management of the harmful effects of race-based stress.

CONSENT FOR PUBLICATION

Not applicable.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise.

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