Racial Identity Matters: The Relationship between Racial Discrimination and Psychological Functioning in African American Adolescents

Robert M. Sellers  
*University of Michigan*

Nikeea Copeland-Linder  
*Johns Hopkins University*

Pamela P. Martin  
*North Carolina State University*

R. L’Heureux Lewis  
*University of Michigan*

This study examines the interrelationships among racial discrimination, racial identity, and psychological functioning in a sample of 314 African American adolescents. Racial discrimination was associated with lower levels of psychological functioning as measured by perceived stress, depressive symptomatology, and psychological well-being. Although individuals who believe that other groups hold more negative attitudes toward African Americans (low public regard) were at greater risk for experiencing racial discrimination, low public regard beliefs also buffered the impact of racial discrimination on psychological functioning. More positive attitudes about
African Americans were also associated with more positive psychological functioning. The results further illustrate the utility of a multidimensional framework for understanding the role of racial identity in the relationship between racial discrimination and psychological outcomes among African American adolescents.

Adolescence is a pivotal stage in which to examine the impact of racial discrimination on the psychological functioning of African Americans. As African American adolescents begin to traverse beyond their immediate familial environment, many encounter societal institutions that often covertly and overtly discriminate against them because of phenotypical characteristics such as race. For instance, adolescence is a developmental period in which African American youth may increase their risk for exposure to racial discrimination as they begin to spend more of their free time outside of the home and in public places (e.g., malls, restaurants, and schools) where they may become targets of racial discrimination (Fisher, Wallace, & Fenton, 2000). The risk for experiencing racial discrimination is especially acute for African American adolescents compared with adolescents of other race or ethnicity (Fisher, Wallace, & Fenton, 2000; Romero & Roberts, 1998). Although African American adolescents are at greater risk for discrimination, recent research suggests that certain racial identity attitudes and beliefs may influence how individuals experience racial discrimination and serve as protective factors to mitigate the risk (Sellers, Morgan, & Brown, 2001). To date, most of this research has been conducted with African American adults (Neblett, Shelton, & Sellers, 2004; Sellers & Shelton, 2003; Sellers, Caldwell, Schmeelk-Cone, & Zimmerman, 2003; Williams, Brown, Sellers, & Forman, 1999). This dearth of research on African American adolescents is surprising given that the formation of a healthy identity appears to be an important developmental life task during adolescence (Erikson, 1968; Phinney, 1989).

The little research that has focused on adolescents’ experiences with racial discrimination suggests that experiencing racial discrimination is not an uncommon experience for African American adolescents. For example, a significant number of African American adolescents report being victims of racial discrimination in the classroom from both classmates and teachers (Fisher et al., 2000). These self-reports of racial discrimination are supported by observational data that suggest race differences in the disciplinary practices of teachers and school administrators (Gregory, 1995). In the Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) model, Spencer, Dupree, and Hartmann (1997) take a risk and resilience approach to understanding the normative development of African American adolescents. The PVEST model argues that experiences with racial
discrimination are chronic stressors that occur and must be dealt with as part of the normative developmental process of African American adolescents (Spencer et al., 1997). These stressors are experienced at a number of different ecological levels. According to the PVEST model, a number of important psychological and behavioral outcomes are dependent upon the way in which the adolescent copes with society’s racism and other adolescent developmental tasks (Spencer et al., 1997). One set of positive coping responses by the PVEST model is the adoption of healthy racial identity beliefs. These beliefs include a positive view of one’s racial group and an understanding of the role that racism plays in society.

The present study utilizes a risk and resilience framework to address the dearth of research on the association between African American adolescents’ experiences with racial discrimination and their psychological well-being. In using a risk and resilience framework, the present study examines both race-relevant\(^1\) risk factors (racial discrimination) and race-relevant protective factors (racial identity) in predicting the psychological functioning of African American adolescents. In doing so, the present study illuminates some of the unique challenges African American adolescents face because of their race and some of the unique strengths that they possess in facing these challenges.

**PROBLEMS AND OUTCOMES**

**Discrimination and Psychological Functioning**

Much of what is known about the impact of racial discrimination on psychological functioning has been gleaned from research on adults. Recent research suggests that experiencing racial discrimination is common, particularly among Black populations. In a large-scale national survey of 25–74 year olds, approximately 49% of Black respondents reported experiencing one major racist event (e.g., hassled by police, denied/received inferior service, discouraged by teacher from seeking higher education) in their lifetime (Kessler, Mickelson, & Williams, 1999). In terms of day-to-

---

\(^1\)In our discussion of race in this paper, we refer to race as a socially constructed classification system in which individuals are dubiously placed based on phenotypic characteristics that are presumed to correspond to differences in genotype. Regardless of the questionable validity of the classification system, it is impossible to argue that being classified as a member of a particular racial group does not have important implication on the life chances and experiences of the individual. As a result, the present paper focuses on the impact that being classified as being a member of the Black race has on the experiences of African Americans. Thus, race-relevant phenomena such as racial discrimination and racial identity are conceptualized and discussed in this context.
day experiences of discrimination (e.g., being treated as inferior, called names or harassed, responded to with fear), 81% of Black adults reported that they have experienced at least one incident of day-to-day discrimination. These findings are consistent with a number of other studies that indicate that racial discrimination is common and pervades many aspects of life for Blacks (D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Landrine & Klonoff, 1996; Sanders-Thompson, 1996).

There is also a growing body of research documenting the adverse effects of racial discrimination on the psychological functioning of adults. African Americans who experience discrimination report lower levels of subjective well-being (e.g., Williams, Yu, Jackson, & Anderson, 1997) and lower levels of mastery and higher levels of psychological distress (Broman, Mavaddat, & Hsu, 2000). Experiencing racial discrimination is also associated with increased nonspecific psychological distress (e.g., Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Fischer & Shaw, 1999; Kessler et al., 1999), specific psychiatric symptoms such as somatization, depression, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsion (Klonoff, Landrine, & Ullman, 1999), mood disorders (Kessler et al., 1999), and anxiety disorder (Kessler et al., 1999). Recent longitudinal research by Sellers and Shelton (2003) suggests a causal link between the frequency of perceived racial discrimination and subsequent psychological distress. Despite the growing literature on the impact of racial discrimination on psychological functioning of African American adults, relatively few studies have examined the impact of racial discrimination on the developing psyches of African American adolescents.

Research suggests that adolescents are cognizant of discrimination and they can provide descriptions of incidents of discrimination (Verkuyten, Kinkett, & van der Wielen, 1997). In addition, Fisher et al. (2000) found that a large proportion of African American and Hispanic youth in their sample reported that they had personally experienced incidents of discrimination, such as being harassed by store personnel and police, and being perceived as not smart. In a sample of over 6,000 middle school students of various ethnic groups, African Americans adolescents were significantly more likely than their White, Mexican American, and Vietnamese classmates to report that they had experienced discrimination and that other members of their racial/ethnic group had experienced discrimination (Romero & Roberts, 1998). Romero and Roberts (1998) also found evidence that ethnic identity was associated with more racial discrimination in their sample. Unfortunately, it is unclear whether the association between ethnic identity and racial discrimination exists for the subgroup of African American participants because the authors did not report their analyses for each ethnic group separately.
Some of the research on the impact of racial discrimination on adolescents has been conducted outside of the United States. Research conducted with adolescents from immigrant groups in Finland indicates that experiencing discrimination has an adverse impact on self-esteem (Jasinskaja-Lahti & Liebkind, 2001; Liebkind & Jasinskaja, 2000; Verkuyten, 1998). Other research with immigrant adolescents in Finland also found a link between experiencing racial discrimination and increased acculturative stress, behavior problems, and lower levels of life satisfaction (Liebkind & Jasinskaja, 2000).

Findings from the few studies conducted in the United States that examined the relationship between racial discrimination and psychological functioning among adolescents are consistent with the findings from Finland (Clark, Coleman, & Novak, 2004; Fisher et al., 2000; Scott, 2003, Simons, Murray, McLoyd, Lin, Cutrona, & Conger, 2002; Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003). In a sample of African American adolescents, Clark, Coleman, and Novak (2004) found that perceived discrimination was positively related to externalizing and internalizing symptoms. Fisher et al. (2000) found that distress, as the result of peer and educational discrimination, was associated with lower self-esteem for a sample of ethnic minority adolescents. In one of the few longitudinal studies in the area, Wong et al. (2003) found that perceived discrimination at school (i.e. peers and teachers) was negatively related to adolescents’ reports of achievement motivation, self-competency beliefs, psychological resiliency, and self-esteem in their sample of African American junior high school students. Also, they found that reports of discrimination at school were positively related to anger, depressive symptomatology, perceptions of friends’ negative characteristics, and adolescents’ involvement in problem behaviors. Recently, Scott (2003) explored the relationship between adolescents’ experiences of discrimination and their specific coping behaviors. His results revealed that experiencing discrimination was related to externalizing (e.g. “curse out loud”) coping strategies.

**Racial Identity and Psychosocial Outcomes**

One of the fundamental goals of adolescence is to begin to investigate and develop one’s identity (Erikson, 1968). According to Tatum (1997), adolescents grapple with the questions of “Who am I?” and “Who can I be?” This involves the integration of different dimensions of an adolescent’s life such as religious beliefs, racial/ethnic identities, and vocational plans (Phinney, 1992; Phinney & Rosenthal, 1992; Tatum, 1997). Therefore, in
their search to acquire an optimal racial identity, African American adolescents attempt to successfully integrate the values of their culture and the values of the larger society. Tatum (1997) asserts that this integration involves asking the questions “Who am I racially?” and “What does it mean to be African American?” These questions are significant because they illustrate the process that African American adolescents have to contend with to understand that their experiences may be different because of prejudice, discrimination, and structural barriers that frequently limit aspirations and hinder their achievement (Tatum, 1997).

Racial identity has consistently been conceptually linked with the psychological functioning of African Americans (Azibo, 1983; Baldwin, 1984; Cross, Parham, & Helms, 1998; Parham, 1989; White & Parham, 1990). Racial identity has been conceptualized as having both a direct and an indirect link to psychological well-being. With respect to a direct link, Baldwin (1984) has argued that a strong identification with being Black and embracing a definition of Blackness that focuses on a specific African value orientation is a necessary component of healthy psychological functioning among African Americans. The empirical evidence for a direct link between racial identity and psychological functioning is inconclusive. Cross (1991) summarized 45 studies from 1961 to 1984 examining a direct relationship between reference group orientation (RGO) (i.e., racial identity) and indicators of personal identity such as self-esteem, anxiety, introversion–extroversion, and depression. Some studies reported a marginally to highly significant relationship between racial identity and self-esteem (e.g., Stephen & Rosenfield, 1979) whereas other studies reported no significant relationship between racial identity and self-esteem (e.g., Rosenberg, 1979).

More recent studies have been equivocal regarding a direct link between racial identity and psychological well-being. Some studies have found that individuals for whom race is less salient and who have anti-Black attitudes reported higher levels of anxiety, paranoia, and depressive symptomatology (Carter, 1991; Pyant & Yanico, 1991). For instance, using the Racial Identity Attitudes Scale to operationalize racial identity attitudes, Munford (1994) found that pre-encounter, encounter, and immersion/emersion attitudes were associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms and internalization attitudes were associated with fewer depressive symptoms. Pre-encounter, encounter, and immersion/emersion attitudes are associated with lower levels of racial identity development in Cross’ (1971) original model of Nigrescence, whereas immersion attitudes represent a mature state of racial identity development. In contrast to Munford’s (1994) findings, Sellers and Shelton (2003) found that racial identity attitudes were not significantly related to indicators of
depression, anxiety, and perceived stress in a sample of African American college students. Sellers et al. (2003) also found little support for a direct link between racial identity attitudes and psychological distress in a longitudinal study of African American young adults. Taken together, the findings from these studies underscore the impossibility to draw firm conclusions regarding the association between racial identity and psychosocial outcomes.

Racial identity is a component of RGO, the part of the self-concept which focuses on the ethnic and cultural lens an individual uses to interpret the world. Cross (1991) asserted the investigation of RGO will provide a more comprehensive understanding of how an individual incorporates the different aspects of culture and ethnicity into his or her daily experiences. Through examining racial identity, the indirect relationship between psychological well-being and experiences with racial discrimination can be more fully explained (Cross et al., 1998; Sellers et al., 2001). For example, Sellers et al. (2003) reported evidence that the relationship between racial identity and psychological distress may be mediated by the experience of racial discrimination. They found that individuals who believed that race was a more central identity and who felt that other groups had more negative attitudes toward African Americans reported experiencing more discrimination, which in turn was associated with greater perceived stress and higher levels of psychological distress.

Racial identity has also been proposed to have an indirect effect on psychological well-being through its role as a buffer against the impact of racial discrimination (Anderson, 1991; Cross et al., 1998; Terrell & Taylor, 1980). Unfortunately, very few studies have empirically investigated the proposed buffering ability of racial identity to protect African Americans from negative psychological consequences associated with experiencing racism. This is due, in large part, to the scarcity of studies that include measures of experiences of racism, racial identity, and psychological functioning within African American populations. Wong et al. (2003) conducted one of the few studies that includes measures of discrimination, racial identity, and various academic and socioemotional outcomes (Wong et al., 2003). The results of their study revealed that having a greater connection to one’s ethnic group buffered the negative impact of school discrimination on self-concept of academic ability, school achievement, engagement in problem behaviors, and involvement with friends who had fewer positive qualities. Wong and colleagues focused exclusively on discrimination experienced at school. Additional studies are needed that examine adolescents’ everyday experiences of discrimination across multiple contexts and situations.
Multidimensional model of racial identity (MMRI). Recently, Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous (1998) have proposed the MMRI as a framework for studying African American racial identity. The model defines racial identity in terms of the significance and meaning that African Americans place on race in defining themselves. The model proposes four dimensions of racial identity attitudes. Two dimensions seem to be particularly relevant to understanding the potential impact of racial discrimination on psychological well-being. Racial centrality refers to the extent to which a person normatively defines her/himself with regard to race. Racial regard refers to a person’s affective and evaluative judgment of his/her race. The regard dimension consists of both a private and a public component. Private regard refers to the extent to which individuals feel positively or negatively toward African Americans and their membership in that group. Public regard refers to the extent to which individuals feel that others view African Americans positively or negatively.

Recent work using the MMRI suggest that both the centrality and regard dimensions may be important in understanding African American adults’ experiences with racial discrimination and the impact of these experiences on their psychological well-being. Shelton and Sellers (2000) found evidence that individuals with higher levels of racial centrality are more likely to interpret racially ambiguous derogatory events as being the result of racism. Other research has also found that racial centrality was associated with greater reports of experiencing racial discrimination (Neblett et al., 2004; Sellers et al., 2003; Sellers & Shelton, 2003). These same studies also suggest that centrality and regard attitudes may also act as buffers against the psychological impact of experiencing racial discrimination in African American young adults. Sellers et al. (2003) found that the association between racial discrimination and perceived stress was weaker for individuals for whom race was a more central identity. Sellers and Shelton (2003) found that individuals who felt that other groups had more negative attitudes toward African Americans (public regard) were less bothered by experiences of discrimination that they encountered.

Risk and Resilience Model

Several researchers in the prevention sciences have proposed a risk and resilience framework for understanding social problems (Zimmerman & Arunkimar, 1994). Such a framework focuses on identifying both those factors that are associated with a particular undesirable outcome and those factors that allow individuals to be resilient against the risk. The risk
and resilience approach provides a framework for understanding why individuals with the same level of exposure to risk do not necessarily have the same outcomes (Zimmerman & Arunkimar, 1994). Several models have been proposed for understanding risk and resiliency (Garmezy, 1991; Zimmerman & Arunkimar, 1994). The compensatory model and the protective factor model are two of the most prevalent models used in resilience research. The compensatory model focuses on factors an individual possesses that equalize negative outcomes (Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Notaro, 2002). The compensatory model argues that the resilient factor is associated with a positive outcome across all levels of risk. As such, from an analytic perspective, the model is interested in the direct influence of the resilient factor on the outcome after controlling for the effect of the risk factor. On the other hand, the protective factor model suggests that some factors may buffer the relationship between exposure to risks and negative outcomes (Zimmerman et al., 2002). In other words, the association between level of risk and negative outcome is stronger for individuals with lower levels of the resilient factor than for those with higher levels. From an analytic perspective, the protective factor model calls for an analysis of the moderating effects of the resilient factor.

The Present Study

Using a risk and resilience approach as a conceptual framework, the present study investigates whether the frequency of African American adolescents’ perceived experiences with racial discrimination is a significant risk factor for lower levels of psychological functioning (as measured by higher levels of perceived stress and depression and lower levels of psychological well-being). The present study also investigates whether racial identity attitudes (as measured by centrality, private and public regard beliefs) serve as resilient factors against the impact of racial discrimination on psychological functioning. The study tests both a compensatory model (direct relationships of racial identity) and a protective factor model (buffering effects of racial identity). In addition, we examine whether African American adolescents’ racial identity attitudes are associated with the frequency in which adolescents perceive experiencing racial discrimination.

Based on previous research (e.g., Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Sellers & Shelton, 2003, Shelton & Sellers, 2000), we hypothesize that African American adolescents who feel that race is a more central identity and who believe that other groups have more negative attitudes toward African Americans are likely to report experiencing racial discrimination.
more frequently. Also based on previous research (e.g., Kessler et al., 1999; Landrine & Klonoff, 1996; Noh, Beiser, Kaspar, Hou, & Rummons, 1999), we predict that more frequent reports of racial discrimination will be significantly related to lower levels of psychological functioning. Because of the equivocal nature of the literature regarding the relationship between racial identity attitudes and psychological functioning, we make no a priori prediction regarding a direct association between adolescents’ racial identity attitudes and psychological functioning. Finally, consistent with other findings in the research literature (Sellers et al., 2003; Sellers & Shelton, 2003), we predict that African American adolescents for whom race is more central and who believe that other groups hold more negative attitudes toward African Americans will be buffered against the negative impact of racial discrimination.

METHOD

Sample

The participants in the present study were part of a cross-sequential longitudinal study examining racial identity, racial socialization, and well-being among African American adolescents and their primary caregiver. The data presented in this study are from the initial wave and cohort of the study. The present sample consisted of 314 African American adolescents whose ages range from 11 to 17 years old (mean = 13.8; SD = 1.21). One hundred ninety-two (61%) of the sample were females. The participants in the sample were enrolled in the seventh grade (24%), in the eighth grade (36%), in the ninth grade (22%), and (18%) in the tenth grade at the time of the data collection. The participants reported that 25% of their primary caregivers had obtained a high school diploma or less, 70% had received a college degree or less, and 8% had received a doctoral level degree.

African American students enrolled in grades 7–10 in the fall of 2001 and their primary caregiver were recruited from the public school system in a medium-sized city in the mid-western United States. The majority of the school district is comprised of White students (57%). African American students (15.1%) comprise the second largest group of students in the school district. Participants in the present study were recruited from 10 different middle schools and high schools within the district. There was significant variation in the racial make-up of the schools that they attended. The percentage of African Americans in the student bodies of the 10 schools ranged from 7.2% to 64.9%.
Procedure

Initial contact information was obtained from the school system for all students in grades 7–10 who were identified by the school system as being African American. Letters were sent to students’ legal guardians requesting their permission for the student and a primary caregiver to participate in the study. Follow-up phone calls were made to all households to ensure that the contact information was correct and to answer any questions regarding the study. Once informed consent was obtained from the parents and informed assent obtained from the adolescent, the adolescent was scheduled for a data collection session after school. Only one adolescent and one primary caregiver per household were permitted to participate in the study. Of the 512 households that were initially contacted to participate as part of the first cohort of the study, a total of 329 adolescents from 302 households participated and completed the first wave of the survey in the spring of 2002 yielding a household participation rate of 58.9%. Because of an error in our sampling procedure, 27 siblings with different last names but who lived in the same household participated in the study. Of the 329 adolescents who were surveyed, 15 had significant missing data on the variables of interest in the present study and were excluded, resulting in a working sample of 314 adolescents. Participants were administered a paper and pencil survey in small groups ($n = 5–10$) by African American research assistants who remained in the room until the surveys were completed. Participants were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary and that their responses would be kept confidential. The survey administrations lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. Participants received a gift certificate to a local mall in the amount of $30 for their participation.

Measures

**Racial identity.** Participants’ racial identity attitudes were assessed using three subscales from the multidimensional inventory of Black identity-Teen (MIBI-T). The MIBI-T (Scottham, Sellers, & Nguyen, 2005) is an adolescent version of the MIBI (Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997). The MIBI-T was developed based on adolescent focus group data. The focus groups with African American adolescents were conducted to examine whether the concepts associated with the MMRI were accessible to adolescents. Focus groups were also used to test the appropriateness of existing items from the MIBI and generate new items for adolescents to be used in the MIBI-T. After a lengthy item selection and
deletion process, the 21-item MIBI-T was constructed for use with adolescents. Confirmatory factor analysis was used to determine whether the structure of the data fit the proposed model based on the original MIBI using a sample of adolescents that included participants from the present study. The results of the data suggest that the proposed model had an adequate fit to the data (see Scottham, Sellers, & Nguyen, 2005 for more details).

The MIBI-T measures the three stable components of racial identity (centrality, regard, and ideology) proposed in the MMRI. Like the MIBI, the MIBI-T is comprised of seven three-item scales and subscales—a centrality scale, two regard subscales (private and public), and four ideology subscales (assimilation, humanist, minority, and nationalist). Participants were asked to use a five-point Likert response scale to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with several statements representing racial identity attitudes. For the present study, only participants’ scores on the centrality, private regard, and public regard subscales were used. The centrality scale (α = .63) consists of three items including, “I feel close to other Black people” and “I have a strong sense of belonging to other Black people.” Higher centrality scores suggest that race is a more significant feature in one’s self-concept. The Private Regard subscale (α = .72) contains three items that assess participants’ positive or negative feelings toward being African American. The private regard subscale includes items such as, “I am happy that I am Black” and “If I could choose my race, I would choose to be some other race instead of Black.” Items are reverse-coded such that a higher scale score represents more positive attitudes toward African Americans. The public regard subscale (α = .73) contains three items that assess the extent to which participants view others as holding positive views toward Blacks on the whole. The public regard scale includes items such as, “People of other races don’t expect Blacks to accomplish much” and “A lot of people don’t expect Blacks to do well in life.” Items are reverse-coded such that a higher scale score represents the belief that other groups hold more positive attitudes toward African Americans.

**Racial discrimination.** Participants’ experiences with racial discrimination were assessed using the daily life experiences (DLE) scale. The DLE is a self-report measure that assesses the frequency and impact of 17 “microaggressions” because of race in the past year (Harrell, 1994). “Microaggressions” refer to daily life hassles that can be attributed to racial discrimination. The DLE measures both the frequency and impact of discrimination on a five-point scale. In the present study, only frequency of discrimination (α = .94) was used to measure everyday racial hassles.
Response categories were “never = 0” to “once a week or more = 5.” Higher scale scores indicate greater experiences with discrimination.

**Perceived stress.** Participants’ level of stress was measured using the perceived stress scale (PSS). The PSS is a 14-item scale designed to measure general distress (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983). Participants used a five-point scale ranging from never to very often to indicate the frequency in which they had experienced each of the items ($\alpha = .72$). Sample items for the PSS include, “In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?” and “In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and “stressed”? Items were coded such that higher composite scores indicate higher levels of perceived stress.

**Depressive symptomatology.** The Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression Scale (CES-D) assesses the presence and frequency of clinical symptoms associated with depression (Radloff, 1977). The 20-item inventory ($\alpha = .89$) allows participants to rate the frequency of specific feelings such as loneliness in the past week, ranging from less than 1 day to 5–7 days. Items were coded such that higher scores on the composite scale indicate higher occurrences of depressive symptomatology.

**Well-Being.** Psychological well-being was measured using a shortened 24-item version of the psychological well-being scale (Ryff, 1989). The psychological well-being scale ($\alpha = .85$) assesses an individual’s level of well-being along six dimensions: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. Participants indicated their agreement with a series of items using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Sample items include, “In general, I feel I am in charge of my life” and “I feel that I have developed a lot as a person over time.” A single composite well-being scale was constructed such that higher scores suggest higher levels of psychological well-being.

**RESULTS**

**Univariate and Bivariate Statistics**

Overall, the results indicate that experiencing a racial hassle is not an infrequent event for most of the participants. Sixty-three participants (20%) reported experiencing each of the 17 racial hassles within the past
year, whereas only 19 participants (6.1%) reported that they had not experienced any of the 17 racial hassles in the past year. There was significant variation in the prevalence of each racial hassle. The two most frequent hassles experienced by the participants were: “Being accused of something or treated suspiciously” and “Being treated as if you were stupid, being talked down to.” The two racial hassles that were least frequently reported were: “Being insulted, called a name or harassed” and “Others expecting your work to be inferior (not as good as others).” Table 1 presents the percentage of participants who experienced each of the four least frequent and most frequent racial hassles in the past year.

With regard to racial identity attitudes, participants, on average, reported that race was a central identity (see Table 2). On average, participants also reported more positive attitudes toward being African American. The sample’s mean public regard scores were at the mid-point of the response scale. On average, the sample reported low levels of depression, perceived stress and relatively high levels of psychological well-being based on their scores relative to the mid-point of the response scale.

Pearson’s product–moment correlations were calculated to examine the bivariate relationships among the variables (Table 2). The racial identity variables were related such that individuals with higher levels of centrality also had more positive attitudes toward African Americans ($r = .33, p < .01$) and believed that other groups hold more negative attitudes toward African Americans ($r = -.32, p < .01$). Public and private regard attitudes were unrelated ($r = -.08; \text{NS}$). Of the three racial identity variables, only private regard was associated with the psychological functioning variables. More positive attitudes toward African Americans were related to lower levels of depressive symptoms ($r = -.26, p < .01$), lower

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1</th>
<th>The Four Least and Four Most Frequently Experienced Racial Hassle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Racial Hassles</td>
<td>Percent of Sample Reported Experiencing Hassle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being insulted, called a name or harassed</td>
<td>52.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others expecting your work to be inferior</td>
<td>54.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being ignored, overlooked, not given service</td>
<td>56.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being treated rudely or disrespectfully</td>
<td>56.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being accused of something or treated suspiciously</td>
<td>71.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being treated as if you were “stupid,” being “talked down to”</td>
<td>70.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others reacting to you as if they were afraid of intimidated</td>
<td>70.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being observed or followed while in public places</td>
<td>69.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
levels of perceived stress \( r = -0.13, p < .01 \), and higher levels of psychological well-being \( r = 0.39, p < .01 \). Centrality and public regard attitudes were both associated with racial discrimination. Individuals with higher levels of racial centrality \( r = 0.13, p < .05 \) and who believe that other groups hold more negative attitudes toward African Americans \( r = -0.27, p < .01 \) reported experiencing more racial discrimination. Racial discrimination was negatively associated with two of the psychological functioning variables. Adolescents who reported experiencing more racial discrimination also had more depressive symptoms \( r = 0.28, p < .01 \) and perceived stress \( r = 0.22, p < .01 \). All three psychological functioning variables were highly related to each other.

### Predicting Experiences of Racial Discrimination

In order to examine predictors of racial discrimination in the present sample, participants’ racial discrimination scores were regressed on participants’ age, gender, and scores on the three racial identity subscales (see Table 3). The overall model explained 9% of the variance in racial discrimination \( F(5, 299) = 5.60; p < .01 \). Only public regard had a significant multivariate association with racial discrimination \( b = -0.31; p < .01 \). Individuals who believed that other groups hold more negative attitudes toward African Americans experienced more racial discrimination.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Private</th>
<th>Public</th>
<th>Discrimination</th>
<th>Depression</th>
<th>Perceived Stress</th>
<th>Well-Being</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Centrality</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private regard</td>
<td>0.33**</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public regard</td>
<td>-0.32**</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination</td>
<td>0.13*</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>-0.27**</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>-0.26**</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.28**</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived stress</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>-0.13**</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>0.27**</td>
<td>0.64**</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well-being</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.39**</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>-0.55**</td>
<td>-0.52**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>4.48</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>1.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard deviation</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*\( p < .05 \).

**\( p < .01 \).
Testing a Compensatory Model of Risk and Resilience

Three simultaneous multiple regression models were run in order to test whether experiencing racial discrimination acted as a risk factor and the three racial identity variables acted as compensatory resilient factors for psychological functioning (see Table 4). The three regression models correspond to the three psychological functioning variables (i.e., depression, perceived stress, and psychological well-being). In each model, one of the psychological functioning variables was regressed on participants’ age, gender, experiences with racial discrimination, and racial identity scores. The first model explained 19% of the variance in depressive symptoms ($F(6, 298) = 11.74; \ p < .01$). Older adolescents ($b = -.06; \ p < .05$) and girls ($b = .20; \ p < .01$) reported higher levels of depressive symptoms. Consistent with being a risk factor, racial discrimination was associated with higher levels of depression ($b = .14; \ p < .01$). Private regard was the only racial identity variable directly associated with depressive symptoms ($b = -18; \ p < .01$). Consistent with a compensatory resilience factor, more positive attitudes toward African Americans were associated with lower levels of depression.

The second model explained 10% of the variance in perceived stress ($F(6, 298) = 5.21; \ p < .01$). Females reported higher levels of perceived stress ($b = .15; \ p < .05$). Experiencing racial discrimination was also positively associated with perceived stress ($b = .10; \ p < .01$). Private regard attitudes were associated with lower levels of perceived stress ($b = -.12; \ p < .01$). The third model explained 17% of the variance in psychological well-being ($F(6, 298) = 9.88; \ p < .01$). Of the variables in the model, only

| TABLE 3 |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| **Age, Gender, and Racial Identity Variables as Predictors of Experience with Racial Discrimination** |
| $b$ (SE) |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| Constant | 2.38 |
| Age | .03 (.05) |
| Gender | $-.17$ (.13) |
| Centrality | .11 (.10) |
| Private regard | $-.10$ (.09) |
| Public regard | $-.31**$ (.07) |
| $F(5, 299)$ | 5.60** |
| $R^2$ | .09 |

**$p < .01.$**
TABLE 4
Age, Gender, Racial Identity, and Racial Discrimination Variables as Direct Predictors of Depression, Perceived Stress, and Psychological Well-Being

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Depression b (SE)</th>
<th>Perceived Stress b (SE)</th>
<th>Well-Being b (SE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>2.82 (0.2)</td>
<td>2.09 (0.2)</td>
<td>1.87 (0.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>−0.06 (0.02) *</td>
<td>−0.02 (0.02)</td>
<td>0.03 (0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>0.20 (0.06)**</td>
<td>0.15 (0.06) *</td>
<td>0.06 (0.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centrality</td>
<td>−0.02 (0.04)</td>
<td>0.05 (0.04)</td>
<td>0.00 (0.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private regard</td>
<td>−0.18 (0.04)**</td>
<td>−0.12 (0.04)**</td>
<td>0.28 (0.04)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public regard</td>
<td>0.03 (0.03)</td>
<td>0.00 (0.03)</td>
<td>0.02 (0.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination</td>
<td>0.14 (0.03)**</td>
<td>0.10 (0.03)**</td>
<td>−0.04 (0.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(F_{(6, 298)})</td>
<td>11.74**</td>
<td>5.21**</td>
<td>9.88**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(R^2)</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05.  
**p < .01.

private regard attitudes were significantly related to psychological well-being scores (\(b = 0.28; p < .01\)). More positive private regard attitudes were associated with higher levels of psychological well-being. Experiencing racial discrimination was not significantly related to well-being (\(b = -0.04; \text{NS}\)).

**Testing a Protective Model of Risk and Resilience**

Finally, three interaction terms were created from the products of the racial discrimination scores and each of the racial identity variables and added to each of the three previous regression equations in order to test whether the three racial identity variables acted as protective resilience factors. Consistent with Aiken and West (1991), the racial discrimination and racial identity variables were centered before creating the interaction terms (see Table 5). The three regression models predicted 22% of the variance in depression, 13% of the variance in perceived stress, and 23% of the variance in psychological well-being, respectively. The public regard \(\times\) racial discrimination variable was the only significant interaction in each of the three regression models. Figures 1–3 present plots of the significant interactions. The plots suggest evidence of a moderating influence of public regard on the associations between racial discrimination and the three indicators of psychological functioning. Specifically, the deleterious relationship between racial discrimination and depressive symptoms (\(b = 0.08; p < .01\)), racial discrimination and perceived stress (\(b = 0.06; p < .05\)), and racial discrimination and psychological well-being (\(b = -0.11; p < .01\)) was
stronger for individuals who believed that other groups hold more positive attitudes toward African Americans. As such, public regard beliefs interacted with individuals’ experiences with racial discrimination in a manner consistent with a protective resilience factor.

![Figure 1](image_url)  
**FIGURE 1** The relationship between racial discrimination and depression by level of public regard beliefs.

### TABLE 5
Age, Gender, Racial Identity, Racial Discrimination, and Racial Identity × Racial Discrimination Interaction as Predictors of Depression, Perceived Stress, and Psychological Well-Being (with Racial Identity, Racial Discrimination, and Interaction Variables Centered)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Depression b (SE)</th>
<th>Perceived Stress b (SE)</th>
<th>Well-Being b (SE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>3.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>−.05 (.02)*</td>
<td>−.02 (.02)</td>
<td>.03 (.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.21 (.06)**</td>
<td>.16 (.06)**</td>
<td>.04 (.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centrality</td>
<td>−.02 (.04)</td>
<td>.05 (.04)</td>
<td>.00 (.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private regard</td>
<td>−.18 (.04)**</td>
<td>−.11 (.04)**</td>
<td>.27 (.04)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public regard</td>
<td>.04 (.03)</td>
<td>.01 (.03)</td>
<td>−.01 (.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination</td>
<td>.18 (.03)**</td>
<td>.11 (.03)**</td>
<td>−.06 (.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centrality × discrimination</td>
<td>−.01 (.04)</td>
<td>−.05 (.04)</td>
<td>.04 (.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private regard × discrimination</td>
<td>.05 (.04)</td>
<td>.04 (.04)</td>
<td>−.01 (.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public regard × discrimination</td>
<td>.08 (.03)**</td>
<td>.06 (.03)**</td>
<td>−.11 (.03)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$F_{(9, 295)}$</td>
<td>9.21***</td>
<td>4.77***</td>
<td>9.74***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05.

**p < .01.
Racial Discrimination as a Risk Factor

The findings suggest that African American adolescents, like their adult counterparts, are not strangers to racial discrimination. The vast majority of African American adolescents in the sample reported experiencing ra-

**FIGURE 2** The relationship between racial discrimination and perceived stress by level of public regard beliefs.

**FIGURE 3** The relationship between racial discrimination and psychological well-being by level of public regard beliefs.
cial hassles in their daily lives at levels that must be considered nontrivial. The frequency of these experiences did not differ by gender. For African American adolescents, the most frequent occurrences of discrimination involved others perceiving them as a threat or incompetent (e.g., being accused of something or treated suspiciously; being treated as if you were “stupid,” “being talked down to”). The least frequently reported occurrence of discrimination was being insulted or called a name or harassed. This is consistent with findings in adult investigations of racial discrimination and contemporary theories of racial discrimination, which suggest covert forms of racism are more prevalent than overt racist events (Essed, 1991; Harrell, 2000; Sellers & Shelton 2003). These more subtle forms of discrimination may take a greater cognitive toll on African American adolescents than the more blatant, directed forms of racial hassles. Whereas these more subtle forms of racial hassles require a significant amount of evaluation from the adolescent in order to make sense of the event, the more blatant forms of hassles require less evaluation of whether the hassle is racist. Therefore, African American adolescents are required to expend more cognitive energy on the interpretation of the more subtle hassles than the more blatant hassles. The fact that adolescents in the present study report experiencing more subtle forms of hassles more frequently suggest that they may be at even greater risk from the effects of discrimination.

Because the experience of any event is somewhat subjective and racial hassles require a greater amount of interpretation by adolescents, it is not surprising that adolescents’ beliefs about the way in which other groups view their group (public regard) is associated with the frequency of experiencing racial discrimination. As such, individuals who hold low public regard beliefs appear to be at greater risk for experiencing racial discrimination. There are several possible explanations for this finding. Adolescents with low public regard beliefs may have a heightened sensitivity toward racial cues. This heightened sensitivity toward racial cues is likely to be the result of having experienced (both direct and vicarious) racial hassles in the past. Sellers and Shelton (2003) found that individuals’ public regard beliefs at a previous time were predictive of later reports of experiencing racial discrimination even after controlling for previous levels of experiencing racial discrimination. This process may be reciprocal such that these new experiences of racial discrimination may serve to maintain this heightened sensitivity (Mendoza-Denton, Downey, Purdie, Davis, & Pietrzak, 2002).

Individuals’ heightened sensitivity may not be the only reason that low public regard beliefs are associated with more frequent experiences with discrimination. The higher frequencies of racial discrimination among low
public regard individuals may be a function of differences in the way they are treated by members of other racial groups. Within inter-racial interactions, the individuals’ behavior and experience are influenced by the racial attitudes and beliefs of the other individuals even when race is not the focus of the exchange (Shelton, 2000). Recent research suggests that African Americans are quite accurate in estimating the racial bias of Whites through their nonverbal behavior (Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2002; Richeson & Shelton, 2005; Sekaquaptewa, Espinoza, Thompson, Vargas, & von Hipple, 2003). It is also possible that Whites are also able to detect African Americans’ public regard attitudes in the same way. Thus, members of other racial groups may treat African American adolescents with low public regard attitudes differently than they treat African Americans who believe that other racial groups hold more positive attitudes toward Blacks. More research is needed that examines how variables such as African American racial identity influence the way in which targets of discrimination are perceived and treated by potential discriminators.

The present study revealed a relationship between experiencing racial discrimination and psychological functioning. This finding is consistent with a growing body of research demonstrating the psychologically deleterious consequences of racial discrimination for African Americans (e.g., Broman, et al., 2000; Sellers & Shelton, 2003; Williams, Yu, Jackson, & Anderson, 1997). In addition, the current findings make two important contributions to the existing research literature. First, this study extends previous research on the impact of racial discrimination to include the experiences of African American adolescents. As noted previously, most of the previous research on the impact of discrimination on psychological functioning has focused on African American college students and older adult populations (e.g., Kessler et al., 1999; Landrine & Klonoff, 1996; Sellers & Shelton, 2003; Sellers et al., 2003). The findings from the present study combined with findings from previous studies suggests that racial discrimination is an important risk factor for the psychological functioning of African Americans across the life span. Second, the results from the present study indicate that experiencing racial discrimination is not only associated with negative psychological outcomes such as psychological distress, but that it is also associated with fewer positive psychological outcomes such as psychological well-being. This finding is important because most of the previous studies have focused on negative psychological outcomes such as depression and anxiety (e.g., Kessler et al., 1999; Landrine & Klonoff, 1996; Sellers & Shelton, 2003; Sellers et al., 2003). Relatively few studies have documented the adverse impact of experiencing racial discrimination on positive psychological outcomes (Utsey, Ponterotto,
Reynolds, & Cancelli, 2000). It is an open question as to whether the same mediating processes that result in increased negative outcomes such as depression also lead to lower levels of well-being. Future research is needed to address this important question.

**Racial Identity as a Resilience Factor**

African American adolescents’ regard beliefs seem to serve as significant resilient factors against the impact of racial discrimination. The two sub-dimensions of regard beliefs act in very different ways with respect to their resilient properties. More positive attitudes toward African Americans (positive private regard beliefs) were associated with more positive psychological outcomes regardless of the level of discrimination the adolescents reported. This finding is consistent with other research that has found a link between positive attitudes toward one’s racial group and positive psychological functioning and well-being (Rowley, Sellers, Chavous, & Smith, 1998; Hughes & Demo, 1989). The present study extends these findings by demonstrating a significant relationship between private regard beliefs and psychological functioning within the context of adolescents’ experiences with racial discrimination. The adolescents’ positive feelings toward their racial group may serve as a frame of reference that may help prevent the internalization of inferiority beliefs. The internalization of inferiority beliefs has been proposed as one mechanism through which experiencing racial discrimination may influence psychological functioning (Jones, 2000).

Although beliefs that other groups hold more negative attitudes toward African Americans were associated with more frequent experiences of racial discrimination, these same low public regard beliefs also buffered the impact of racial discrimination on psychological functioning. At present, it is not clear how public regard acts to buffer the effects of discrimination. It is possible that adolescents who believe that other groups hold more negative attitudes toward African Americans have developed more effective coping strategies for dealing with racial discrimination as a result of having to use them more often. Further research is needed that specifically examines the relationships among racial identity, racial discrimination, and racial coping. It is also possible that those individuals who believe that other groups hold more positive attitudes toward African Americans are ill-prepared to combat racial discrimination once they encounter it. Because adolescents with higher levels of public regard report experiencing less racial discrimination, they may be even more surprised once they experience such an event because it is likely to be much less
expected. Negative encounters that occur unexpectedly are experienced as much more stressful than those for which the individual has some expectation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Implications of Findings

In interpreting the present findings of public regard’s buffering role, it is important to note that racial discrimination was operationalized at the level of racial hassles in the present study. As such, it is possible that the buffering effect of believing that other groups hold more negative attitudes toward Blacks may be different for more blatant forms of racial discrimination. It is possible that more blatant forms of racial discrimination are so virulent that no set of racial identity attitudes or beliefs may effectively protect individuals from their impact. Clearly, more research is needed examining the role of individuals’ racial identity attitudes in the context of experiencing more blatant forms of racial discrimination before the results of the present study can be generalized to different forms of racial discrimination beyond racial hassles.

The fact that adolescents’ low public regard attitudes buffered the psychological impact of experiencing racial discrimination has important implications for how African American parents racially socialize their children. Some African American parents report being concerned about giving their children messages about racism out of fear that such messages may lead their children to be overly vigilant against racism which may result in poorer psychological outcomes (Spencer, 1983). Research on racial socialization suggests that children who report receiving messages regarding racial biases that African Americans face tend to have more positive psychological outcomes (e.g., Fischer & Shaw, 1999). However, our results suggest a more nuanced view of the consequences of understanding the racial biases that African Americans face. Our results suggest that teaching African American adolescents that other groups may hold negative attitudes toward African Americans should lead to better outcomes for African American adolescents when they encounter racial hassles. At the same time, raising awareness of racial bias may also result in adolescents experiencing more racial hassles in their lives, which may have a number of consequences including an apprehension toward interacting with individuals from other racial groups.

A comparison of the results from the present study with findings from previous research with an older sample suggests that there may be some important developmental factors regarding the relationships among racial
identity attitudes, racial discrimination, and psychological functioning. For instance, the lack of a multivariate relationship between centrality and racial discrimination in the present findings and the direct relationship between private regard and psychological functioning in the context of experiencing racial discrimination differ from studies with African American adult populations (Sellers & Shelton, 2003). As the development of a coherent identity is a critical task of adolescence (Phinney, 1989), many of the adolescents in the present study are at various levels of exploration and commitment regarding their racial identity. It is possible that individuals’ racial identity development may influence how their racial identity attitudes are associated with their experiences of racial discrimination and their psychological functioning. Future research needs to examine the role that the level of individuals’ racial identity development plays in African American adolescents’ experiences with racial discrimination.

The present study complements the findings from Wong et al. (2003) in that it delineates the different roles that various dimensions of racial identity play in the way in which African American adolescents experience racial discrimination. In their study of the buffering effects of racial identity, Wong and colleagues used a single indicator of ethnic identity that measured the extent to which the individuals felt close to their racial group. Although the feelings of closeness toward members of one’s racial group may seem similar to the constructs of private regard and centrality, they are conceptually distinct (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLauhlin-Volpe, 2004). In their study, Wong et al. (2003) found that feelings of closeness toward one’s racial group acted as a buffer against the impact of racial discrimination on academic outcomes, whereas neither private regard nor centrality acted in such a manner in the present study. It is unclear as to how individuals’ feelings of racial closeness are related to their centrality and private regard beliefs in the context of racial discrimination. It is possible that they have a synergistic influence on the way in which African Americans experience discrimination or their influences may simply be redundant. Future research is needed that examines all of these dimensions of racial identity before the nature of the relationship is clear. The use of multiple indicators of racial identity in the present study suggests the utility of a multidimensional conceptualization of African American racial identity. Taken together, the findings from the present study and those from Wong et al. (2003) illustrate the complex role that racial identity attitudes play in the way in which African American adolescents experience racial discrimination and its potential association with their psychological functioning.
Further Issues to be Considered

In reviewing the findings of the present study, it should be noted that the cross-sectional nature of the research design makes it impossible to make any firm conclusion with regard to the direction of causality. It is possible that adolescents who have higher levels of psychological distress and lower levels of psychological well-being may be more likely to perceive experiencing more racial discrimination. Results from a study of African American adults using a longitudinal design (Sellars & Shelton, 2003), however, suggest that experiencing racial discrimination leads to higher levels of psychological distress. Although there is no reason to believe that the direction of causation is likely to be different for adolescents, future longitudinal research with African American adolescents is needed before definitive statements can be made about the direction of causation. In addition, Wong et al. (2003) utilized a longitudinal design in their analyses which indicated that experiencing racial discrimination had a negative impact on well-being and academic outcomes.

Another issue regarding the present design is the use of a self-report inventory of racial hassles. Although the self-report inventory of racial hassles is the current state of the art in the racial discrimination literature (Landrine & Klonoff, 1996), there is some concern that individuals’ responses to these measures may not be accurate (Gomez & Trierweiler, 2001). It is possible that individuals may have provided educated guesses regarding the frequency in which they experienced the racial hassles as opposed to actually recalling and counting each event. Unfortunately, it is impossible for us to know the extent to which this is the case in the present study given the methodology used. We are buoyed by the fact that our findings are consistent with findings from experience sampling procedures (see Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001).

Finally, it should be noted that, although there was significant heterogeneity within the sample, the socio-economic status of the present sample is relatively affluent in comparison with the general African American population. The little research that has investigated the relationship between racial identity and socioeconomic status has found little evidence of social class differences (Carter & Helms, 1988). There is even less evidence that there are socioeconomic differences in the role that racial identity plays in the psychological functioning of African Americans. In fact, our research examining the potential buffering implications of various dimensions suggest a similar picture for a college sample of African Americans (Neblett et al., 2004) and a similar aged sample of African Americans in which most of the participants did not attend college (Sellars et al., 2003). Such an examination is not a direct investigation of class differences,
thus it is important that future research directly investigate the role of class in the relationships found in the present study. Until then, generalizing the findings of the present study to African Americans from lower socio-economic statuses must be done with caution.

Conclusion

African American adolescents are not immune from experiences of racial discrimination. They experience discrimination at nontrivial levels and these experiences are noxious to their psychological functioning. However, African American adolescents are not uniform in their experience with discrimination and not without some protection against its deleterious effects. Our findings clearly demonstrate that racial identity matters. Both the significance and meaning attached to racial identity and racial hassles impact the psychological well-being of adolescents. The findings from the current study illuminate the ways in which different dimensions of racial identity may compensate for and protect against experiences of perceived racial discrimination. Also, our findings suggest fertile areas of inquiry for future examinations of the complex meaning of racial identity, racial discrimination and their relationship to psychological health in African American adolescents. Such investigations will help us to understand the context, challenges and assets that are a part of the lives of African Americans adolescents.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was supported by grants from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH 5 R01 MH061967-03), the National Center on Minority Health and Health Disparities and the National Science Foundation (BCS-9986101). We thank the members of the African American Family Project for their help and support with the project. Correspondence should be addressed to Robert M. Sellers, Department of Psychology, East Hall, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, 48109-1109. The first author can also be reached by electronic mail at rsellers@umich.edu.

REFERENCES


