

# Self-Reported Experiences of Discrimination and Health: Scientific Advances, Ongoing Controversies, and Emerging Issues

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discrimination, stress, psychosocial, unfair treatment, racism, sexism, prejudice, measurement, systematic review

## Abstract

Over the past two decades, research examining the impact of self-reported experiences of discrimination on mental and physical health has increased dramatically. Studies have found consistent associations between exposure to discrimination and a wide range of *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM)-diagnosed mental disorders as well as objective physical health outcomes. Associations are seen in cross-sectional as well as longitudinal studies and persist even after adjustment for confounding variables, including personality characteristics and other threats to validity. However, controversies remain, particularly around the best approach to measuring experiences of discrimination, the significance of racial/ethnic discrimination versus overall mistreatment, the need to account for “intersectionalities,” and the importance of comprehensive assessments. These issues are discussed in detail, along with emerging areas of emphasis including cyber discrimination, anticipatory stress or vigilance around discrimination, and interventions with potential to reduce the negative effects of discrimination on health. We also discuss priorities for future research and implications for interventions and policy.

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## THE ONGOING SIGNIFICANCE OF RACIAL/ETHNIC DISCRIMINATION IN A “POSTRACIAL” SOCIETY

The 2008 election of Barack Obama to the office of United States President—arguably the nation’s most prestigious post—led many to argue that America had become “postracial,” i.e., devoid of racial preference, prejudice, or discrimination. However, in the years following the election, the country experienced an 813% increase in hate groups, from 149 groups in 2008 to 1,360 groups in 2012 (South. Poverty Law Cent. 2013), and recent polls suggest that discrimination on the basis of race and ethnicity remains a significant problem for many racial/ethnic minorities in the United States. According to a 2011 report titled “Americans and Race in the Age of Obama,” 56% of African Americans and 27% of Latinos believe that there is “a lot” of discrimination in America today, compared to only 16% of whites (Byrd & Mirken 2011).

In addition to subjective accounts of discrimination, numerous empirical reports have documented post-2008 discrimination against both African Americans and Latinos across multiple domains. For example, a 2012 study sponsored by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (US Dep. Hous. Urban Dev. 2013) found that racial/ethnic minority candidates who were seeking housing were told about and shown fewer homes and apartments than whites were, even when their credit histories and incomes were the same. Similarly, a 2014 report from the New York Civil Liberties Union on “stop and frisk” patterns of New York police officers found that black and Latino New Yorkers were more likely to be frisked than were white New Yorkers, and among those frisked, blacks and Latinos were less likely to be found with a weapon (N.Y. Civ. Lib.

Union 2014). In addition, studies of emergency rooms across the country have found that among patients with long bone fractures or kidney stones (conditions for which standards of care exist for pain management), African Americans and Latinos were less likely to receive adequate pain medication than were their white counterparts (Pletcher et al. 2008). Thus, considerable objective evidence suggests that discrimination remains a significant problem in the United States today.

A large and growing body of research suggests that self-reported experiences of discrimination are a form of psychosocial stress that has an adverse impact on both mental and physical health outcomes across a range of racial/ethnic groups. The primary aim of this article is to summarize the current state of the science on discrimination and health and to expand upon prior reviews (Brondolo et al. 2011b, Paradies 2006, Williams & Mohammed 2009) and meta-analytic findings (Dolezsar et al. 2014, Pascoe & Richman 2009, Schmitt et al. 2014), with a particular emphasis on ongoing controversies, gaps in knowledge, and emerging areas of interest.

## RESEARCH ON DISCRIMINATION AND MENTAL HEALTH

Prior reviews on discrimination and health have documented strong and consistent associations between self-reported experiences of discrimination and a variety of indicators of mental health and psychological well-being (Paradies 2006, Schmitt et al. 2014, Williams & Mohammed 2009). In fact, Paradies (2006) asserted that the impact of discriminatory experiences on outcomes was much more pronounced for mental than for physical health. But a meta-analysis by Pascoe & Richman (2009) contradicted this assertion, concluding that although the overall effect of discrimination on mental health appeared to be slightly stronger than the effect on physical health, the difference was not statistically significant.

One limitation of prior work on discrimination and mental health has been an overreliance on scales that measure psychological distress or poor well-being rather than actual clinically diagnosed mental illness. Although both distress and well-being are important in daily life, they do not have the same sustained and long-lasting impact on human functioning that a psychiatric disorder has. Furthermore, some scales that measure symptoms of psychological distress often include items that are confounded with experiences of discrimination. For example, the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression (CESD) Scale (Radloff 1977) includes two items that measure interpersonal mistreatment—"I felt that people disliked me" and "People were unfriendly"—which may tap more into feelings of discrimination than into symptoms of major depressive disorder. But not all scales include such overlap, and studies that have utilized the CES-D after removing the two interpersonal items also have found significant associations between reports of discrimination and depressive symptoms (Barnes et al. 2004). Thus, it is important to note that despite their limitations, studies of discrimination and psychological distress have provided an important foundation for more recent work on discrimination and clinically diagnosed mental disorders.

## DISCRIMINATION AND MENTAL DISORDERS

Research on discrimination and psychiatric disorders diagnosed via criteria established by the third, fourth, or fifth editions of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) has increased in the past five years principally due to large-scale epidemiologic cohort studies of psychiatric disorders in racial/ethnic minority populations funded by the National Institute of Mental Health. Select findings from the National Survey of American Life (NSAL) (Jackson et al. 2004), the National Latino and Asian American Study (NLAAS) (Alegria et al. 2004), and other studies of DSM-IV established mental disorders are summarized in **Table 1**. Although longitudinal research on reports of discrimination and psychiatric disorders has been limited, at

**Table 1** Select studies on discrimination and mental disorders

Study	Sample	Design	Exposure	Outcome(s)	Covariates	Findings
McLaughlin et al. (2010)	Black ( $N = 6,587$ ); Hispanic ( $N = 6,387$ ); lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB) ( $N = 577$ ); females from all groups ( $N = 20,089$ )	Cross-sectional	Experiences of Discrimination Scale, past 12 months	DSM-IV 12-month mood, anxiety, and substance use disorders	Gender, race/ethnicity, age, income, education, region, urbanicity, marital status	Positive associations for major depression; mania/hypomania; posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD); generalized anxiety disorder (GAD); and social phobia for blacks, Hispanics, and women but not LGB groups
Soto et al. (2011)	African Americans ( $N = 3,570$ ), Afro Caribbeans ( $N = 1,438$ ), non-Hispanic whites ( $N = 891$ ) from the National Survey of American Life (NSAL)	Cross-sectional	Detroit Area Study Lifetime Discrimination Scale (racial versus nonracial attributions)	DSM-IV generalized anxiety disorder	Gender, age, poverty index	Positive association between nonracial discrimination and GAD for all three groups; positive association between racial discrimination and GAD for African Americans only
Levine et al. (2014)	African Americans ( $N = 3,570$ ), Afro Caribbeans ( $N = 1,621$ ), non-Hispanic whites ( $N = 891$ ) from the NSAL	Cross-sectional	Everyday Discrimination Scale, Lifetime Discrimination Scale	DSM-IV social anxiety disorder (SAD)	Sex, age, poverty index, marital status, education, employment status	Positive association between everyday discrimination and SAD for all three groups. No association between lifetime discrimination and SAD
Gee et al. (2007)	Asian Americans ( $N = 2,047$ ) from the National Latino and Asian American Study (NLAAS)	Cross-sectional	Everyday Discrimination Scale	Any DSM-IV disorder within the past 12 months, DSM-IV 12-month anxiety disorder, DSM-IV 12-month depressive disorder	Age, gender, education, ethnicity, region, employment, marital status, generation, family cohesion, poverty, acculturative stress, self-reported physical health, social desirability	Positive association with any DSM-IV disorder within the past 12 months Positive association with DSM-IV 12-month depressive disorder Positive association with DSM-IV 12-month anxiety disorder
Lau et al. (2013)	US- and foreign-born Asian American women ( $N = 1,030$ ) from the NLAAS	Cross-sectional	Everyday Discrimination Scale	DSM-IV lifetime depression DSM-IV lifetime anxiety	Age, income, education, social desirability	Positive associations for both DSM-IV lifetime depression and DSM-IV lifetime anxiety

Leong et al. (2013)	Latino ( $N = 1,458$ ) and Asian American ( $N = 1,594$ ) immigrants from NLAAS	Cross-sectional	Everyday Discrimination Scale	DSM-IV lifetime and 12-month anxiety and depressive disorders	Age, sex	Positive association for Latino immigrants with anxiety and depressive disorders Negative association for Asian American immigrants with lifetime anxiety and 12-month and lifetime depressive disorders
Pilver et al. (2011)	Asian, Latina, and black premenopausal women ages 18–40 ( $N = 2,718$ ) from NLAAS and NSAL	Cross-sectional	Everyday Discrimination Scale, “main reason” for experiences, and subtle versus blatant subfactors of the scale	Premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD)	Race, age, employment status, education, income, self-rated physical health, self-rated mental health, smoking status, history of oral contraception, past-month DSM-IV diagnosis, social desirability	Positive association between everyday discrimination and PMDD Positive association between attributing discrimination to race, gender, or any other reason and PMDD Only subtle discrimination was associated with PMDD
Oh et al. (2014)	8,990 Latino, Asian, African American, and Afro Caribbean adults from NLAAS and NSAL	Cross-sectional	Everyday Discrimination Scale, main reason for experiences	Lifetime and 12-month prevalence of psychotic experiences (e.g., auditory hallucinations, visual hallucinations, delusions) using DSM-IV symptoms	Age, gender, income-to-poverty ratio, education, immigrant status, race, substance use or PTSD diagnosis, social interactions, and region	Positive association between reports of everyday discrimination and increased prevalence of both lifetime and 12-month psychotic experiences
Durso et al. (2012)	381 participants ages 18–76 years	Cross-sectional	Everyday Discrimination Scale, Lifetime Discrimination Scale, overall impact of discrimination scale	Eating Disorder Diagnostic Scale (EDDS)-assessed binge eating over the past 3 and 6 months Eating Disorder Inventory (EDI)-assessed bulimia subscale	Childhood weight, parental weight, Perception of Teasing Scale because of weight, perceived stress, institutional discrimination, discrimination impact	Positive association between everyday discrimination and binge eating in past 6 months but not past 3 months

(Continued)

**Table 1 (Continued)**

Study	Sample	Design	Exposure	Outcome(s)	Covariates	Findings
Seng et al. (2012)	Women pregnant with their first child (N = 619), 55.3% white, 33.9% black, 7.6% Asian/Pacific Islander, 9.2% Native American, Hispanic, or Middle Eastern	Cross-sectional	Everyday Discrimination Scale (9 items) and additional item inquiring about the “main reason” for experiences	National Women’s Study PTSD (NWS-PTSD) module-assessed PTSD symptoms using DSM-IV criteria	Poverty, education, residence in high-crime area, minority racial/ethnic status in neighborhood, lifetime trauma, sum of attributions for discrimination	Positive association between everyday discrimination and PTSD symptoms in minimally and fully adjusted models The number of different attributions for everyday discrimination was significant in unadjusted analyses but was no longer significant after taking into account the frequency of experiences of everyday discrimination
Ellis et al. (2008)	Somali adolescents, ages 12–19 (N = 135) living in the United States for at least 12 months	Cross-sectional	Everyday Discrimination Scale	PTSD measured with the UCLA PTSD Index	Age, gender, war trauma, years in the United States, arrived with parent, caregiver fluency, housing adequacy, postwar hardships, acculturative hassles	Positive association between everyday discrimination and PTSD symptom severity
Moomal et al. (2009)	4,351 South African adults (black, colored, Indian/Asian, and white)	Cross-sectional	Detroit Area Study Major Discrimination Scale, Everyday Discrimination Scale, “main reason” for experiences	DSM-IV lifetime and 12-month mood and anxiety disorders	Age, sex, race, education, income, employment status, marital status, wealth, urban/rural location, natural resources, social stressors, social desirability, self-esteem	Positive association between major and everyday nonracial discrimination and lifetime and 12-month mood and anxiety disorders No significant association between major or everyday racial discrimination and outcomes in fully adjusted models

Abbreviations: DSM-IV, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, fourth edition.

least one prior study has examined these associations. In a sample of 799 African Americans from the National Survey of Black Americans, Brown and colleagues (2000) found that greater reports of discrimination at one wave of data collection predicted higher levels of depression at follow-up one year later. Conversely, greater levels of depression at the earlier wave did not predict higher reports of discrimination at follow-up (Brown et al. 2000), providing some evidence of temporal ordering, with reports of discriminatory experiences preceding elevated rates of depression. More recent studies have been primarily cross-sectional but have greatly expanded upon the psychiatric outcomes studied. In addition to depression, studies have found remarkably consistent associations between various indices of interpersonal discrimination and a range of DSM-IV psychiatric illnesses, such as anxiety disorders, eating disorders, and even psychotic disorders (Table 1).

## RECENT RESEARCH ON DISCRIMINATION AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

Some of the most compelling data linking discrimination to health have emerged over the past decade. Of particular note is the increased emphasis on objective physical health outcomes rather than subjective, self-reported health. Studies have found prospective associations between reports of discrimination and a variety of objective clinical disease outcomes, including all-cause mortality (Barnes et al. 2008), hypertension (Dolezsar et al. 2014), incident breast cancer (Taylor et al. 2007), and incident asthma (Coogan et al. 2014a). Researchers have also observed associations between self-reported discrimination and silent, preclinical endpoints with established linkages to later disease such as carotid intima media thickness (Troxel et al. 2003), coronary artery calcification (Lewis et al. 2006), nighttime blood pressure (Beatty & Matthews 2009, Brondolo et al. 2008, Tomfohr et al. 2010), visceral fat (Lewis et al. 2011a), and inflammation (Lewis et al. 2010). Reports of discrimination have also been linked to other “silent” indicators of poor health and premature aging including higher allostatic load (Brody et al. 2014), shorter telomere length (Chae et al. 2014), increased oxidative stress (Szanton et al. 2012), and dysregulations in cortisol (Zeiders et al. 2014).

Both prospective studies and studies of silent disease have been critically important in advancing the science of discrimination and health because they provide evidence against reverse-causality arguments, which posit that individuals who are ill may also recall more negative experiences (i.e., poor health leading to greater reports of discrimination). Research linking discriminatory experiences to early, preclinical indicators, as well as other studies that have found significant associations between discrimination and lifestyle factors (obesity) (Cozier et al. 2014, Hunte 2011, Hunte & Williams 2009) and health behaviors (poor sleep, smoking) (Borrell et al. 2010, 2013; Lewis et al. 2013; Slopen & Williams 2014; Thomas et al. 2006), also provides useful preliminary evidence on potential pathways through which these experiences might “get under the skin” to impact later disease.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR RACIAL/ETHNIC DISPARITIES IN HEALTH

Although a large body of research documents the negative impact of discriminatory experiences on the mental and physical health of racial/ethnic minorities, relatively few studies have examined the extent to which discrimination accounts for racial/ethnic disparities in health (Albert & Williams 2011). The few studies that have examined this issue have largely focused on psychological distress or self-reported health (as reviewed by Williams & Mohammed 2009), and findings indicate that in the United States, Australia, South Africa, and New Zealand, reports of discrimination do account for some of the racial/ethnic disparities observed in these outcomes. Research on more objective health indicators has documented similar results. Mustillo and colleagues (2004)

examined data from 352 African American and white female participants in the Coronary Artery Risk Development in Young Adults (CARDIA) study and found that self-reported experiences of racial discrimination were significantly associated with higher rates of both preterm births and low-birth-weight babies. Moreover, black-white disparities in these outcomes were partially explained by reports of racial discrimination (Mustillo et al. 2004). More recently, a study of everyday discrimination (a measure of overall mistreatment) and 24-hour blood pressure in 78 African American and white adults (Tomfohr et al. 2010) found that discrimination was significantly associated with higher levels of nocturnal nondipping in both racial/ethnic groups and fully explained black-white disparities in nondipping. Similar results were found in two separate studies examining associations between ethnic discrimination and polysomnography-assessed sleep architecture in African Americans and whites (Thomas et al. 2006, Tomfohr et al. 2012). Although not all studies have observed this pattern of results (for an exception, see Lewis et al. 2013), taken together these findings provide preliminary support for the notion that discrimination may be a key contributor to racial differences in several important indicators of poor health and disease.

## ONGOING CONTROVERSIES AND GAPS IN KNOWLEDGE

Despite the numerous inroads that have been made in the science of discrimination and health, a number of controversies and unresolved issues remain. Many of these issues center around (*a*) factors related to perceiving and/or reporting discrimination; (*b*) the relative importance of racial/ethnic discrimination versus overall discrimination and the best way to measure these constructs; (*c*) the need for a better understanding of how “intersectionalities,” or multiple group identities, shape the experiences and consequences of discrimination; (*d*) the importance of capturing multiple aspects of discrimination across the life span; and (*e*) the need to control for other important variables that might impact the association between discrimination and health, including other stressors resulting from social disadvantage, and in studies of physical health outcomes, depression and other mental disorders that could either confound or potentially mediate associations between reports of discrimination and clinical disease. These issues are summarized briefly below.

### Qualities of Perception: Challenges for Measuring and Assessing Health Effects

**Perception bias.** Self-reports of discrimination depend on the motivation and willingness of research participants to report discrimination. Moreover, research needs to guard against two types of perception bias in self-reports (Kaiser & Major 2006): First, some individuals may perceive less discrimination than actually exists (a minimization bias), and second, some may perceive more discrimination than actually exists (a vigilance bias).

Minimization bias in self-reports of discrimination occurs when individuals underreport their actual experiences because of not attending to, underestimating, or even denying having been a target of such experiences (Kaiser & Major 2006). This minimization may occur because (*a*) some perpetrators deny that discrimination occurred, (*b*) reporting discrimination can be psychologically costly, and (*c*) discrimination is sometimes subtle and ambiguous. The larger stress literature indicates that some people cope with stress by denying its occurrence. Denial can range from a single passive escape strategy to multiple active distractive strategies that seek to reduce the levels of distress (Vos & de Haes 2007). The emotional pain of racism may also affect recall, contributing to the inability of some individuals to recall specific events (Carter 2007). Future research on discrimination needs to more clearly delineate the triggers, levels, and consequences of denial and how denial relates to the broad range of coping strategies used in responding to discrimination (Brondolo et al. 2009, Noh & Kaspar 2003).

Bias linked to vigilance is evident when the prior history of an individual and/or his/her group experiences with discrimination leads to attributing ambiguous experiences to discrimination. Such vigilance can protect the individual from physical harm and can foster feelings of self-worth in the face of negative evaluations because the individual can attribute these experiences to external causes rather than personal failure. We do not have a clear picture of the social contextual triggers of this perceptual bias. Some evidence indicates that vigilance for discrimination increases when the threat of discrimination increases (Kaiser & Major 2006). Cultural worldviews may also affect the likelihood of reporting discrimination. Individuals belonging to low-status social groups but who endorse a meritocratic worldview may be less likely to report that they had personally been a victim of discrimination (Kaiser & Major 2006). These persons appear to be more willing to blame negative outcomes on themselves than on discrimination. In contrast, members of high-status groups who favor individual mobility beliefs, or the view that advancement is possible for all people in America, are more likely to report personally being a victim of discrimination. Thus, a positive association exists between individual mobility beliefs and reporting reverse discrimination among whites (Kaiser & Major 2006). A need remains for more systematic evaluation of the extent to which responses to questions about discrimination are subject to systematic biases linked to culture, nationality, age, and other social and psychological factors. A review of this literature indicates that the current evidence is unclear with regard to whether vigilance or minimization biases predominate (Kaiser & Major 2006). Some studies have found that subordinate group members are more likely than dominant ones (women and blacks compared to men and whites, respectively) to interpret critical feedback as discriminatory, whereas other studies find no differences in the perceptions of rejections as bias among nondominant versus dominant group members (for a review, see Kaiser & Major 2006).

**Addressing the challenge of perception bias.** A significant innovation in the assessment of discrimination is the development of a measurement instrument that does not rely on self-report and thus circumvents perception bias issues. Krieger and colleagues (2011) have created a version of the Implicit Association Test that seeks to assess the extent to which respondents view themselves and their racial/ethnic group as a target versus a perpetrator of discrimination. The goal is to overcome some of the limitations of self-reported data by measuring experiences of racial bias that individuals are unable or unwilling to report. These implicit measures in their current form demonstrate weak-to-modest associations with health behaviors and indicators of health status (Krieger et al. 2010, 2011). Thus, despite the enormous promise of this approach, many questions remain (Williams & Mohammed 2013). It is unclear exactly what aspects of racial discrimination are being tapped by these measures (actual prior exposure, severity of prior exposure, vigilance regarding discrimination, perceived threat, or other dimensions of racial discrimination or race-related experiences). The very low correlations between these new implicit measures of racial discrimination and the more commonly used validated explicit measures of discrimination have also been raised as a concern, as has the question regarding the ability of implicit measures of racial discrimination to capture psychological stress appraisal processes that could be a central component of the stress process (Williams & Mohammed 2013). Future research is needed to enhance our understanding of what the current implicit measure of discrimination is capturing and to continue to explore the feasibility of accurately measuring at least some aspects of discrimination with measures that are independent of self-report.

**The potential role of personality characteristics.** Studies that continue to utilize self-reported measures of discrimination also need to carefully consider the role of personality characteristics, which could impact the tendency to perceive and/or report discriminatory treatment.

Well-documented associations exist between poor health and personality traits such as hostility, neuroticism, pessimism, and extraversion (Cohen et al. 2003, Tindle et al. 2009, Turiano et al. 2012, Wilson et al. 2005); however, few studies have examined associations among personality characteristics, discrimination, and health. Studies of discrimination and health that have chosen to include personality traits have focused primarily on hostility (Beatty et al. 2011; Brondolo et al. 2011a; Lewis et al. 2006, 2013) and other anger-related constructs (Beatty & Matthews 2009, Gibbons et al. 2010, Steffen et al. 2003). Less is known about how other personality characteristics impact associations between reports of discriminatory treatment and health.

In a small study of 31 African American and 31 white adults, Richman and colleagues (2010) examined the role of neuroticism in addition to hostility as a potential confounder of the association between discriminatory experiences and ambulatory blood pressure dysregulation throughout the day and night. Findings revealed a significant association between discrimination and blood pressure dysregulation even after controlling for a range of biobehavioral and psychological confounders, including both neuroticism and hostility (Richman et al. 2010). Similarly, Wagner et al. (2013) found independent associations between discrimination and endothelial reactivity to stress after adjusting for neuroticism in a laboratory study of 113 women with type II diabetes. Additionally, in one of the few studies to examine the role of pessimism, Hunte and colleagues (2013) observed a main effect of discriminatory treatment on depressive symptoms in a sample of 3,105 adults that persisted even after controlling for pessimism as well as hostility and other anger-related constructs.

To our knowledge, only one study has examined the interactive effects of discrimination and personality traits on health. In a study of discrimination, neuroticism, and cognitive function in 296 older African Americans, Barnes and colleagues (2012) found that although reports of discrimination were significantly associated with higher levels of neuroticism, neuroticism did not explain the inverse association between discrimination and cognition. Furthermore, in analyses examining the interaction between discrimination and neuroticism, results revealed that the association between discrimination and poor cognitive function was observed only for older adults who were low—rather than high—in neuroticism (Barnes et al. 2012), providing additional evidence that personality factors may not play a significant role in the association between reports of discrimination and health outcomes. Thus, to date, findings suggest that associations between discrimination and health are largely independent of personality. However, studies in this area have been small, with a limited range of personality characteristics, and predominantly cross-sectional. Additional prospective studies are needed to fully disentangle the relationships among discrimination, a range of personality characteristics, and health.

### **Racial/Ethnic Discrimination Versus Overall Discrimination**

A major unresolved issue in the field of discrimination and health is the extent to which racial bias has effects on health that are distinct from other forms of unfair treatment (Krieger 2012, Williams et al. 2012). This is a key consideration in the ongoing controversy over whether “race” needs to be made salient in the assessment of self-reported experiences of racial discrimination or whether researchers should opt for the use of more neutral terminology.

**How to best ask the question: In one stage or two?** Many questions that assess discrimination utilize what has been termed the one-stage approach, in which respondents are explicitly instructed to report on “racial discrimination” or experiences of discrimination “because of your race” (Krieger et al. 2005, Landrine & Klonoff 1996). A limitation of questions explicitly framed about race is the potential for interviewer effects, in which participants are motivated to please

the interviewer by reporting the kind of information that they believe the interviewer is interested in (Smith 2002). Consistently inquiring about discrimination “because of your race” may create demand effects that trigger higher reports of racial discrimination. An alternative two-stage approach, largely based on the work of Williams and colleagues (Kessler et al. 1999, Williams et al. 1997), was created in part to offset these concerns. The two-stage approach inquires about discriminatory experiences as a form of unfair treatment more broadly and only asks about the attribution after a generic experience has been endorsed. This approach appears reasonable given that the most frequently used term in the social science assessment of discrimination is “unfair treatment” (Smith 2002), and across studies, African Americans in particular consistently report more of these experiences than do whites (Barnes et al. 2004, Kessler et al. 1999, Lewis et al. 2012, Richman et al. 2010, Tomfohr et al. 2010, Williams et al. 1997).

Nonetheless, concerns exist about the ability of such questions to capture racial discrimination accurately. Some evidence suggests that the one-stage approach leads to higher reports of discrimination. For example, in a sample of 586 African Americans, Brown (2001) compared African Americans’ reports of discrimination using a single-item question assessing whether the respondent had “ever been treated unfairly or badly because of your race or ethnicity” to responses to six items about unfair treatment (at work, by the police, in education and housing) that were each followed by a question asking for the main reason for unfair treatment. He found that 67% of participants reported racial discrimination with the one-stage question compared to 50% with the two-stage approach. In contrast, Chae and colleagues (2008) examined these issues in a study of discrimination and smoking in 2,073 Asian Americans in the National Latino and Asian American Study. They compared results from analyses of the nine-item Everyday Discrimination Scale (assessed with no attribution) to the results using a three-item scale that included items assessing how often respondents felt that they were disliked or treated unfairly because of their race or ethnicity and how often they had seen friends of their racial/ethnic background treated unfairly. The researchers found higher reports of unfair treatment compared to racial discrimination, with 74% of Asians reporting everyday discrimination and 62% reporting racial/ethnic discrimination. Chae et al. (2008) also noted patterns of association that led them to question the idea that racial discrimination was a subset of unfair treatment and whether these two sets of questions capture two qualitatively different phenomena. First, the correlation between the two measures was 0.43, and second, both measures predicted smoking even after controlling for the other. Third, 30% of respondents who reported no unfair treatment on the Everyday Discrimination Scale reported some racial discrimination. And fourth, ethnic identification moderated racial discrimination but not unfair treatment. The authors concluded that “racial/ethnic discrimination is distinct from the experience of unfair treatment” (Chae et al. 2008, p. 490). Accordingly, some have argued that the assessment of discrimination with the one-stage approach is a superior and more valid measure of racial discrimination (Brown 2001, Chae et al. 2008, Krieger 2012) than is the two-stage approach. However, it is important to note that studies comparing these approaches have largely compared apples to oranges because the items compared, as detailed above, differed in aspects other than the explicit reference to race and ethnicity.

Experimental studies have found that the one-stage approach yields higher reports of racial discrimination, but these studies also raise important questions about validity. Gomez & Trierweiler (2001) found higher reports of both racial and gender discrimination among African American students and women when asked explicitly about “racism and race discrimination” and “sexism and gender discrimination,” respectively, than when first asked about their college experiences and subsequently asked a follow-up question that ascertained the reasons for mistreatment. Similarly, a comparative analysis of 7,505 African American, white, Latino, American Indian, Asian American, and multiracial adults from the California Health Interview Survey found that across

racial/ethnic groups, reports of discrimination differed depending on whether the question was asked in one stage or two (Shariff-Marco et al. 2011). For each racial/ethnic group, the overall unattributed unfair treatment with the two-stage approach was higher than racial discrimination with the one-stage approach, but reports of racial discrimination specifically were higher with the one-stage approach (Shariff-Marco et al. 2011). Although some have used this as an argument in favor of the one-stage approach (Shariff-Marco et al. 2011), these findings have been interpreted by others to mean that making race (and gender) salient in the assessment of discrimination, compared to using neutral terminology, could lead to a vigilant response bias (Gomez & Trierweiler 2001, Williams & Mohammed 2009).

The need is clear for future research that uses careful experimental designs, in multiple contexts, with multiple racial/ethnic groups in which there is direct comparison of these alternate approaches (Smith 2002). If reliable differences emerge from these tests, research would need to identify why the levels of reported discrimination differ and which approach yields more valid data. Open-ended follow-up questions after reports of perceived unfair treatment may prove useful (Williams et al. 2012), as Bobo & Suh (2000) found that some initial reports of racial discrimination did not appear to be racially motivated in the supplemental details provided by a follow-up open-ended question. Thus, more in-depth cognitive interviewing that interrogates how respondents understand the terms “discrimination” and “unfair treatment” may also be important and would provide rich qualitative detail about these experiences that could help to elucidate the extent to which question wording can elicit reports of different phenomena.

**Implications for health outcomes.** Despite the abundance of arguments on the relative importance of assessing racial/ethnic discrimination in one stage versus two (Brown 2001, Chae et al. 2008, Gomez & Trierweiler 2001, Krieger 2012, Krieger et al. 2011, Shariff-Marco et al. 2011, Williams et al. 2012, Williams & Mohammed 2009), to date there is limited evidence that racial discrimination (as currently assessed) has effects on health that are substantively different from other types of discrimination. Results from prior reviews and meta-analyses indicate that reports of racial and nonracial discrimination have similar associations with health (Pascoe & Richman 2009, Williams & Mohammed 2009), suggesting that common processes may underlie both. Neuroimaging research has found that the perception of unfairness is linked to negative emotional responses and activation of brain regions associated with emotion regulation (Tabibnia et al. 2008). This provides support for the notion that the quest for justice and fairness could be a core human drive, and violation of this drive may have important physiological consequences.

Some evidence suggests that irrespective of attribution, experiences of unfair treatment lead to negative psychological and physiological reactions. For example, research conducted in the United Kingdom on more than 5,000 individuals from the Whitehall II study cohort has documented associations between a generic measure of perceived unfairness and the metabolic syndrome (De Vogli et al. 2007a), incident psychiatric morbidity (Ferrie et al. 2006), and incident coronary events (De Vogli et al. 2007b). Similarly, Lewis and colleagues (2006) found that self-reported experiences of overall everyday discrimination (a combination of both racial and nonracial forms of mistreatment) were positively associated with coronary artery calcification among African American women; however, attributing discrimination to race/ethnicity alone was not. Conversely, Gyll et al. (2001) observed greater diastolic blood pressure reactivity to stress in African American women who attributed everyday discrimination to race/ethnicity compared to those who attributed discrimination to other causes, whereas yet another study in African American women using the same scale found that nonracial attributions were more strongly associated with hypertensive status than were racial attributions (Roberts et al. 2008). Additionally, as noted previously, Chae and colleagues (2008) found comparable main effects of everyday discrimination

(without attributions) and a measure of racial/ethnic discrimination on self-reported smoking in Asian Americans. Thus, although the majority of studies in this domain indicate that the experience of unfairness or mistreatment may be more important for health than what the mistreatment is attributed to, additional research is needed to more comprehensively examine this notion as well as the extent to which the approach to capturing the attribution impacts any observed associations.

**The inherent limitations of self-report data for accurate attributions.** It is important to note that studies that ask explicitly about racism, and studies that inquire about overall mistreatment more broadly, rely solely on self-reported data about discriminatory events. This assumes that the individual reporting the experience has all available information about a given interaction and is able to accurately distinguish between racial discrimination and other types of interpersonal mistreatment. Although at least one study has found that participants report feeling highly certain about their attributions (Williams et al. 2012), it is also possible that these attributions are shaped by factors other than the interpersonal interaction itself. For example, in a study of 3,466 participants from the CARDIA cohort, Dutton and colleagues (2014) found that even at the highest levels of BMI—class I and class II obesity—African American women reported less weight discrimination than did their white female counterparts. This result could be due to differences in actual exposure: Experimental data have shown that obesity is less stigmatizing for African American women, with both African Americans and whites demonstrating a greater acceptance of larger body sizes for African American, compared to white, women (Hebl & Heatherton 1998, Hebl et al. 2009). However, it could also be due to differences in sensitivity, such that obese white women may be more sensitive to and therefore more likely to attribute interpersonal mistreatment to weight. For African American women, perhaps across levels of obesity, discriminatory treatment due to race may be more salient (i.e., the ethnic prominence hypothesis) (Levin et al. 2002), which might contribute to a higher likelihood of attributing unfair treatment to racism even under circumstances where it could be due to weight. Thus, it is possible that even when individuals are entirely certain about their attribution for interpersonal mistreatment, the actual underlying reason for mistreatment in a given situation is largely unknown.

### **The Importance of Intersectionalities in the Study of Discrimination and Health**

Another potential limitation of research on discrimination and health that focuses on a single attribution for discriminatory experiences (i.e., race/ethnicity alone) is that this practice ignores the fact that individuals frequently occupy more than one socially disadvantaged status and that these statuses may interact to shape their experiences (Cole 2009). For example, 25 years ago Crenshaw argued that “Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women’s experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Yet often they experience double discrimination—the combined effects of practices [that] discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women—not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women” (Crenshaw 1989, p. 149). Although the term describing this combination of effects, intersectionality, has been most frequently utilized to characterize the experiences of African American women (Crenshaw 1989, Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach 2008), researchers have noted the advantage of this approach for understanding the unique experiences of HIV-positive gay African American men, low-income Latina lesbians, and others at the intersection of two or more disadvantaged statuses (Bowleg 2012).

Although it is useful for understanding the complexity of exposure to discrimination across a diverse range of population subgroups, the concept of intersectionality focuses largely on qualitative

differences in experiences and exposures. Thus, researchers have discussed the inherent difficulties in modeling intersectionality quantitatively (Cole 2009, Seng et al. 2012). However, some headway has been made. In recent analyses of 2,647 middle-aged adults from the Midlife Development in the United States cohort, Grollman (2014) found that participants who were multiply disadvantaged on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, and/or weight also reported more types of discrimination (e.g., discrimination on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation). Individuals who reported more types of discrimination were, in turn, more likely to report higher levels of psychological distress, poorer health, and greater functional limitations (Grollman 2014). Future studies are needed in this area in order to further understand how multiple types of discrimination combine to affect health.

Finally, although the intersectionality framework is often used to conceptualize the experiences of multiply disadvantaged groups, it is also helpful in thinking about the intersections between disadvantaged and privileged statuses. For example, middle-class African Americans occupy at least one disadvantaged and one privileged status, but they may be unable to adequately access their privileged socioeconomic status because of the constraints of their race (Jackson & Williams 2006). With respect to discrimination, research suggests that race and socioeconomic status (SES) interact for this group, such that across studies, higher-SES African Americans consistently report more discrimination than do their lower-SES counterparts (Borrell et al. 2006, Dailey et al. 2010, Hunt et al. 2007, Krieger et al. 2011, Taylor et al. 2004). There is also preliminary evidence that the effects of discrimination on cortisol may be more harmful for higher-SES than for lower-SES African Americans (Fuller-Rowell et al. 2012). Although these associations are provocative, they have not yet been replicated; thus, future studies with adequate representation of both low- and middle-class African Americans are needed to determine whether these findings would generalize to other cohorts and other outcomes.

### **The Need for a More Comprehensive Assessment of Racism and Discriminatory Experiences**

Research on psychosocial stress more broadly suggests that failure to measure stress comprehensively could lead to a dramatic underestimation of the association between stress and health (Thoits 2010). Much of the earliest work on discrimination and health utilized scales that focused on acute, one-time instances of discriminatory treatment, conceptually similar to life events in the stress literature (Bastos et al. 2010). Life events are experiences that are readily observable and discrete, with a clear onset and ending. Examples of discriminatory life events include job loss and being denied a bank loan. However, other important types of experiences identified in the stress literature have relevance for the study of discrimination, including chronic stressors, traumatic stressors, and macrostressors. These exposures span the life course, often beginning early in life and continuing throughout old age.

Chronic stressors are stressful experiences that are ongoing or recurrent. These problems or difficulties can occur in major domains (for example, parenting or work), or they can be more minor day-to-day hassles and irritations (for example, being stuck in traffic or misplacing or losing things). Although measuring chronic stressors can be a challenge, chronic stressors are generally more strongly linked to disease onset and course than acute stressors are (Cohen et al. 1995). In the discrimination literature, the Everyday Discrimination Scale (Williams et al. 1997) has emerged as a widely used instrument in recent years that is designed to measure more chronic aspects of interpersonal discrimination. Items range from generally minor—somewhat analogous to the assessment of daily hassles in the stress literature (items related to being treated with less respect or courtesy)—to more consequential occurrences (questions about being insulted or harassed).

Attractive properties of the scale include its brevity, good psychometric properties (Taylor et al. 2004), and its utility across multiple racial/ethnic groups in the United States (Lewis et al. 2012) and in international contexts such as South Africa (Williams et al. 2008). An emerging drawback in the literature is that in many studies, the Everyday Discrimination Scale is utilized as the only measure of discrimination (Williams & Mohammed 2009). This is potentially problematic because although this scale captures an important dimension of discrimination that had been historically neglected, it is nonetheless only one aspect of the phenomenon of discrimination.

Traumas are life events that are extreme and overwhelming. These types of stressors (such as having been in a life-threatening accident, kidnapped, sexually assaulted, or tortured) can have a long-term negative impact on health outcomes (Pearlin et al. 2005, Stam 2007). Traumas are different from life events in that they assess experiences that are potentially life threatening in addition to being extreme and overwhelming in impact. To date, traumas have not received much attention in the discrimination literature. However, a recently developed scale, the Race-Related Events Scale (Waelde et al. 2010), includes items designed to assess a wide range of traumatic discriminatory events. Items ask respondents whether they were chased, beaten, or hurt; threatened with a knife, gun, or other weapon; or threatened to be killed because of their race/ethnicity. It also inquires about several vicarious discriminatory events of a traumatic nature such as witnessing someone of “your same race/ethnicity” seriously injured or killed (Waelde et al. 2010). In a sample of 408 college students, greater exposure to events on the Race-Related Events Scale was associated with more posttraumatic stress disorder symptomatology in racial/ethnic minority, but not white, students (Waelde et al. 2010). Although additional research in this domain, across a wider range of populations, is needed, initial findings suggest that discriminatory experiences that are severe, life threatening, or dangerous could have great potential for psychological injury.

Macro stressors are large-scale stressors such as natural or man-made disasters or economic recessions. The larger stress literature has documented that incidents such as the onset of war, earthquakes, and terrorist attacks are positively associated with hospital admissions, incident heart disease, and heart disease mortality (Bhattacharyya & Steptoe 2007). However, less attention has been given to understanding the health impact of large-scale race- or ethnicity-related traumatic events, such as race riots or highly publicized instances of police brutality. Limited evidence suggests that such events have the potential to harm health. For example, in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, there was a well-documented increase in discrimination and harassment of Arab Americans that remained markedly elevated for several months. In an examination of birth outcome data for California in the six months following the attack, Lauderdale (2006) found that low-birth-weight and preterm birth rates were significantly higher for Arab American women from October 2001 to March 2002 than during the same period the prior year (October 2000 to March 2001). No other racial/ethnic group experienced an increase in adverse birth outcomes during the same period (Lauderdale 2006).

The Duke University lacrosse team incident in 2006 is another example of a race/ethnicity-related macro stressor. In this instance, an African American woman accused several white male athletes of rape, violence, and racial derogation (Richman & Jonassaint 2008). African American students at the university reported feeling stressed and also expressed concerns for their safety as a result of the extensive and racially divisive media coverage of the incident. Data from an ongoing experimental study on the Duke University campus allowed researchers to compare students who participated in the experiment before the lacrosse team incident with those who took part following the event. The researchers found that African American students, particularly females, who participated in the experiment following the incident had higher levels of cortisol and were less responsive to the experimental task compared to those who participated before media coverage of the lacrosse scandal (Richman & Jonassaint 2008). Thus, both sets of findings provide

evidence that macro-level discriminatory stressors may have an impact on health. Future research that capitalizes on emergent opportunities to further examine the health consequences of these types of events is needed.

Finally, although many discrimination measures seek to assess the lifetime occurrence of discriminatory events, inadequate attention has been given to capturing exposure to discrimination over the life course. A growing body of research on discrimination in children (Cogburn et al. 2011, Coker et al. 2009, Pachter & Coll 2009, Sanders-Phillips 2009) indicates that exposure to discriminatory events actually begins in childhood, which has important consequences for health in childhood and adolescence (Beatty & Matthews 2009, Brody et al. 2014, Matthews et al. 2005, Priest et al. 2013, Zeiders et al. 2014) and may also be linked to adverse health in later life. As one example, a small study of pregnant African American women found that witnessing discrimination as a child—i.e., against a parent or other adult—was associated with increases in diastolic blood pressure during pregnancy (Hilmert et al. 2014) as well as poorer birth outcomes (Dominguez et al. 2008).

As outlined by Gee and colleagues (2012), taking a life course lens seriously in research on discrimination and health will require studies that explicitly examine early life experiences, potential sensitive periods, interdependence in exposures among persons, latency periods, stress proliferation processes, and historical periods and birth cohorts (Gee et al. 2012). In addition to research on children and/or early life exposures, studies of discrimination in elderly populations may prove particularly useful in examining some of these effects. For instance, studies consistently have found that elderly African American and Hispanic adults report lower levels of discrimination compared to their middle-aged and young adult counterparts (Kessler et al. 1999, Perez et al. 2008, Sims et al. 2009). It is unclear whether this is (*a*) merely a result of selective survival; (*b*) an effect of aging, such that experiences and/or perceptions change across the life course; or (*c*) indicative of a cohort effect, with older racial/ethnic minorities having experienced more traumatic or more severe instances of discrimination than most recent scales are designed to assess. Additional qualitative as well as quantitative research on cohort effects as well as changes in discriminatory experiences over the life course is warranted.

### **The Importance of Assessing Additional Psychosocial Stressors Related to Social Disadvantage**

In addition to assessing discriminatory stressors comprehensively, it is also necessary to assess other psychosocial stressors related to social disadvantage. Self-reported experiences of discrimination are an important and, until recently, neglected form of psychosocial stress. However, assessing these experiences alone does not capture all of the health-relevant aspects of racism and does not take into account other psychosocial stressors driven by racism-related factors that might also contribute to disparities in health. The stress of discrimination should be measured and analyzed in the context of larger societal forces, including institutional racism, that initiate and sustain differences in exposure to a wide range of stressors (Williams & Mohammed 2009). Thus, there is a need to examine racial differences in stressors that may be shaped by institutional discrimination, including neighborhood conditions, violence, criminal victimization, financial stress, and relationship stress.

An example of the comprehensive assessment of stressors comes from the Chicago Community Adult Health Study. This study adapted some of the best available measures to identify stress in eight domains that reflect key arenas in which people operate (e.g., home, job, neighborhood) and the major roles/statuses they assume. Stressors included acute life events, work stressors, financial stress, life discrimination (everyday discrimination and major experiences of discrimination), work

discrimination, relationship stress, childhood adversity, and neighborhood stress (Sternthal et al. 2011). The authors observed a graded association between the number of stressors and poor self-reported health outcomes. Moreover, for African Americans and US-born Latinos, stress exposure explained a substantial portion of the health gap even after adjusting for socioeconomic status. Additional analyses of the same sample found that discrimination made a unique contribution to accounting for racial differences in self-reported sleep even after adjustment for income, education, and other stressors (Slopen & Williams 2014). Studies of objective physical health outcomes have found similar associations. In a reanalysis of data on discrimination and visceral fat, Lewis and colleagues (2011b) found that after taking additional psychosocial stressors such as financial strain, negative life events, and perceived stress into account, discriminatory stressors were the *only* stressors significantly associated with visceral fat, consistent with findings observed by Troxel et al. (2003) in a study of discrimination, other psychosocial stressors, and carotid atherosclerosis. Although the analyses led by Lewis and Troxel (Lewis et al. 2011b, Troxel et al. 2003) used less extensive measures of psychosocial stress than did the Chicago Community Adult Health Study (Slopen & Williams 2014, Sternthal et al. 2011), findings from all four studies underscore the importance of examining discrimination and health associations in conjunction with other stressors related to social disadvantage.

### **The Importance of Controlling for Depressive Symptoms in Studies of Discrimination and Physical Health**

In addition to examining other psychosocial stressors related to social disadvantage, research on discrimination and health needs to fully consider the role of depression and depressive symptoms. As previously noted, a number of studies have documented strong and consistent associations between reports of discriminatory treatment and depressive symptoms as well as major depressive disorder (Barnes et al. 2004, Brown et al. 2000, Gee et al. 2007, Lau et al. 2013, McLaughlin et al. 2010). Both major depression and elevated depressive symptoms have been implicated in the development of a wide range of clinical disease outcomes including, but not limited to, cardiovascular disease (Henderson et al. 2013, Vaccarino et al. 2007, Whooley & Wong 2013), diabetes (Golden et al. 2008, Holt et al. 2014), HIV (Ickovics et al. 2001), and asthma (Brunner et al. 2014, Coogan et al. 2014b). Depression and elevated depressive symptoms have also been linked to several important health behaviors such as smoking (Breslau et al. 1998), inadequate physical activity (Roshanaei-Moghaddam et al. 2009), and sleep (Hall et al. 2000, Tsuno et al. 2005). Although it is possible that depression merely functions as a “third variable” that confounds the association between reports of discrimination and indicators of physical health, prospective studies indicate that experiences of discrimination may temporally precede the development of depression and elevated depressive symptoms (Brown et al. 2000, Schulz et al. 2006), suggesting that depressive symptoms may be one pathway through which discrimination impacts later clinical disease.

The larger literature on discrimination and health often ignores the potential role of depression and depressive symptoms as a means of further understanding discrimination and health associations (Cozier et al. 2014, Cunningham et al. 2012, Hunte 2011, Krieger et al. 2013, Sims et al. 2012). However, most studies that have controlled for depressive symptoms find that associations between discrimination and physical health are independent of (Barnes et al. 2008; Friedman et al. 2009; Gee et al. 2008; Lewis et al. 2010, 2011a, 2013; Mustillo et al. 2004), or partially mediated through (Barnes et al. 2012, Earnshaw et al. 2013), depressive symptoms, and at least one study found that discrimination and depressive symptoms interacted to predict self-reported cardiovascular disease (Chae et al. 2012). Still, in order to more accurately estimate the independent effect of self-reported experiences of discrimination on physical health outcomes,

more consistent control for depression and depressive symptoms is needed. Additionally, given the strong associations observed between reports of discrimination and other types of mental disorders (e.g., generalized anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder) (see **Table 1**) and the emerging literature linking these disorders to disease states (Farvid et al. 2014, Goetz et al. 2014, Lambiase et al. 2014, Vaccarino et al. 2013), future studies should also consider the role of psychological disorders outside of depression in order to further our understanding of psychological pathways through which discriminatory experiences impact clinical disease.

## EMERGING AREAS OF INTEREST

As recent reviews and meta-analyses demonstrate (Brondolo et al. 2009, 2011b; Dolezsar et al. 2014; Schmitt et al. 2014; Williams & Mohammed 2009), the body of research on discrimination and health has grown exponentially over the past two decades. To date, much of this work has focused on examining the main effects of interpersonal discrimination alone on mental and/or physical health outcomes, in traditional community-based or laboratory settings. Less is known about (a) the health effects of discrimination in less-traditional arenas, such as commonly frequented online contexts; (b) the role of anticipatory stress, or vigilance, around discrimination and its potential impact on health; (c) traditional and/or novel stress buffers that might attenuate the effects of discrimination on health; and (d) effective interventions that might ultimately reduce the impact of discrimination on health outcomes. Emerging research in each of these areas is presented below.

### Cyber Discrimination

Eighty-seven percent of American adults and 93% of teens access the Internet in some form (Fox & Rainie 2014, Lenhart et al. 2010), spending nearly nine hours a day online (Fox & Rainie 2014). This widespread adoption of Internet use has fundamentally altered the way people share, work, socialize, and communicate (Fox & Rainie 2014), which may have important implications for the ways in which we understand and assess exposure to discrimination and its subsequent effects on mental and physical health. Several characteristics of online social environments may distinguish online experiences with discrimination from offline encounters. Online or virtual social environments expand social networks and access to information but can also provide a sense of anonymity that transforms the way individuals choose to communicate (Fox & Rainie 2014). Kang's (2000) cyber-race theory predicts that online social interaction improves understanding across racial groups and thus predicts a reduction in racial discrimination experiences. Other scholars, however, suggest that the anonymity provided by online social environments promotes disinhibited and impersonal interactions that increase the likelihood of prejudice and discrimination being expressed (Glaser & Kahn 2005, McKenna & Bargh 2000).

Although few studies have examined the prevalence of online discrimination and its effects on health, evidence indicates that online experiences with racial discrimination may be both common and meaningful (Tynes et al. 2004, 2008). In an analysis of content from monitored and unmonitored popular teen web sites, Tynes and colleagues (2004) found that race was a common feature of online interactions. Tynes and colleagues (2008) further examined exposure to cyber discrimination in a separate study of 264 adolescents and found that 20% of whites, 29% of blacks, and 42% of multiracial/other-race youth reported that they had experienced discrimination in online contexts, including text messaging, chat rooms, discussion forums, and social network sites. Moreover, approximately 7 out of 10 adolescents had witnessed online racial discrimination that was not targeted at them personally (vicarious discrimination). The authors found that after adjustment for

demographic factors, other adolescent stress, and offline discrimination, online individual racial discrimination was positively associated with both depressive and anxiety symptoms (Tynes et al. 2008). However, online vicarious discrimination was not related to mental health.

Thus, although an emerging body of research is examining the effects of online victimization more broadly (e.g., bullying) on psychological functioning (Moessner 2007), a great deal is not yet understood about online social environments as a context for experiencing racial and other forms of discrimination (Tynes et al. 2008). Virtual spaces represent a potentially unique social context that may transform the dynamics of discrimination. But additional empirical evidence is needed regarding the prevalence of online racial and other types of discrimination, the locations of victimization (e.g., social media sites versus gaming sites), and whether the effects of online discrimination on health differ from those of offline experiences. Further, because the bulk of research in this area has focused on adolescents and mental health outcomes, almost nothing is known about how online experiences of discrimination impact objective physical health outcomes or the mental and physical health of adults. A comprehensive research agenda examining the effects of discrimination in online contexts across age groups and across outcomes would make an important contribution to future research on discrimination and health.

### Vigilance and Anticipatory Stress

In addition to research on the effects of exposure to discrimination on health, several recent studies have also examined how anticipating discrimination might impact health. Measuring anticipatory stress or vigilance related to the threat of discrimination allows for a fuller understanding of the impact of stress generated by discrimination. Brosschot and colleagues (2006) use the term “perseverative cognition” to capture worry, rumination, and anticipatory stress. Their review indicates that repeated or chronic activation of the cognitive imagery of a stressor can serve to prolong the stress and exacerbate the negative effects of stress on health. This anticipatory stress, reflected in chronic or sustained vigilance, can lead to dysregulation of both emotional and physiological functioning that can increase risks for multiple diseases. Researchers had long speculated that a heightened vigilance and a failure to ever completely relax because of the constant threat of discrimination and other dangers linked to living in hostile residential contexts was a contributor to the elevated risk of disease in African Americans (Myers et al. 2003, Williams et al. 1994). Growing evidence suggests that heightened vigilance related to the threat of discrimination has pathogenic effects on health. In a national sample of adults in Sweden, Lindström (2008) found that a single-item indicator of anticipatory ethnic discrimination was associated with lower levels of psychological health. Similarly, a study of Latina college students found that the anticipation of being discriminated against led to greater concern and threat emotions before an encounter with the potential perpetrator and more stress and greater cardiovascular responses after the encounter (Sawyer et al. 2012).

In addition to developing the Everyday Discrimination Scale in the 1995 Detroit Area Study, David Williams and colleagues developed a six-item scale to capture heightened vigilance (Clark et al. 2006, Williams et al. 1997). After respondents reported experiences of everyday discrimination, they were asked, “In dealing with the experiences that you just told me about, how often do you a) think in advance about the kind of problems that you are likely to experience?, b) try to prepare for possible insults before leaving home?, c) feel that you always have to be careful about your appearance (to get good service or avoid being harassed)?, d) carefully watch what you say and how you say it?; e) carefully observe what happens around you?, and f) try to avoid certain social situations and places?” (Clark et al. 2006). Recent studies with this scale or abbreviated versions of it highlight the importance of assessing the health consequences of vigilance related to discrimination. In a study of African American youth (mean age 12 years), Clark et al. (2006) showed

that vigilance was inversely related to large arterial elasticity (a preclinical index of cardiovascular function) for boys but not girls. A study of adults in Baltimore found that African Americans had higher levels of vigilance than whites had and that vigilance was both positively associated with depressive symptoms and contributed to the black-white disparity in this outcome (LaVeist et al. 2014). Similarly, a study of 3,105 adults in Chicago found that vigilance predicted an elevated risk of self-reported sleep difficulties, independent of income and education, and that racial differences in sleep difficulty were completely attenuated when adjusted for vigilance (Hicken et al. 2013). Another analysis with this same sample found that vigilance was associated with increased odds of hypertension for African Americans and Hispanics but not whites (Hicken et al. 2014). Moreover, vigilance remained predictive of hypertension in African Americans after adjusting for hypertension risk factors and discrimination. Taken together, these findings suggest that independent of actual experiences of racism or overall discrimination, the threat of discrimination alone may have important health consequences. Additional research that furthers our understanding of how and in what contexts discrimination-related vigilance impacts health is warranted.

### **Potential Moderators or Discrimination Buffers**

As research continues to explore the impact of discrimination on health, there is a real need for increased attention to factors that serve to reduce or exacerbate health effects in order to inform future interventions. A review on discrimination and coping (Brondolo et al. 2009) found mixed results for racial/ethnic identity, generic coping strategies, accepting discrimination as a fact of life versus talking about it, and social support as potential buffers against the effects of discrimination on health. More recent studies have explored how other factors, such as religious involvement and mindfulness, might attenuate the negative effects of racial and other forms of discrimination on health.

**Religious involvement and the potential role of prayer.** Recent national data point to the continued significance of religious involvement in the lives of blacks, with both African Americans and Caribbean blacks reporting similar levels of religious engagement, both higher than levels in whites (Chatters et al. 2009). Research has long shown that religious beliefs and behavior can buffer or moderate some of the negative effects of chronic and acute stressors on health (Ellison et al. 2001, Williams et al. 1991, Wink et al. 2005). Most of the research on discrimination as a psychosocial stressor has not examined the potential effects of religious participation or specific religious behaviors (i.e., prayer) as buffers; however, available evidence suggests that this may be a promising area of research inquiry. Prospective analyses of the National Survey of Black Americans found that multiple aspects of religious engagement (attendance, church-based social support, and seeking religious guidance in everyday life) reduced the negative effects of recent experiences of racial discrimination on mental health (Ellison et al. 2008). Similarly, in the national survey of Midlife Development in the United States, religious attendance (but not religious comfort) buffered the positive association between discrimination and negative affect (Bierman 2006). This effect was evident for African Americans but not for whites. Most recently, in a small laboratory study of 81 African American women, Cooper and colleagues (2014) found that women who reported using prayer as a coping strategy for racist events were buffered against the negative effects of a racism-related anger recall task on negative affect and cardiovascular reactivity (Cooper et al. 2014). These findings provide some preliminary support for the notion that religious involvement and religious behaviors may attenuate the effects of discrimination on outcomes, particularly for African Americans. However, it is unclear whether these associations would generalize to other racial/ethnic groups, and much remains to be learned about the conditions under which particular aspects of religion might reduce the negative impact of acute, chronic, and traumatic discriminatory stressors on physical and mental health.

**Mindfulness.** Another coping strategy that may have utility for the study of discrimination and health is mindfulness. Mindfulness, or nonjudgmental attention and awareness, has been identified as a successful coping strategy with wide-ranging benefits for mental health and greater well-being (for a review, see Brown et al. 2007). The benefit of mindfulness is generally thought to occur through the improvement of emotion regulation, the ability to separate experience from self-worth, and reduced emotional reactivity (Brown et al. 2007). In a recent study of 605 adults from a wide range of racial/ethnic backgrounds, Brown-Iannuzzi and colleagues (2014) found that the adverse effects of discrimination on depressive symptoms were less pronounced for individuals high in trait mindfulness. The buffering effect of mindfulness on depressive symptoms was maintained even after accounting for the influence of positive emotions (e.g., amusement, awe, love), suggesting a unique benefit of mindfulness (Brown-Iannuzzi et al. 2014). Although to date limited research has been conducted in this area, this work provides some preliminary evidence to support the use of mindfulness as a potential strategy for reducing the negative effects of discrimination on mental and perhaps physical health.

**Emotional support.** Although Brondolo and colleagues (2009) found mixed evidence for social support as a buffer of cross-sectional associations between discrimination and health, a recent study suggests that emotional support from family members and peers might play a role in prospective associations between discrimination and health. In a sample of 331 African American late adolescents, Brody and colleagues (2014) identified two classes of racial discrimination trajectories assessed over a three-year period: (a) high and stable and (b) low and increasing. Although the low and increasing profile exhibited the lowest levels of allostatic load across levels of emotional support, individuals in the high and stable trajectory with high levels of emotional support had allostatic load levels at age 20 that were comparable to the low and increasing category. Additional longitudinal studies are needed to determine whether these effects can be replicated in other cohorts with a wider range of demographic characteristics.

## Interventions

As an extension of research on potential stress buffers of discrimination, an emerging body of research is beginning to focus on identifying, developing, and rigorously evaluating effective interventions to reduce the negative effects of discrimination on health. Three types of interventions may have promise for studies of discrimination and health: values affirmation, forgiveness, and antiracism countermarketing.

**Values affirmation interventions.** Values affirmation exercises provide an opportunity for individuals to write briefly about their most important value and why it is important to them. The exercise is designed to enhance an individual's sense of adequacy and self-worth and appears to have stress-buffering properties. Research suggests that although self-affirmation does not reduce the perception of threatening stressors, it enhances an individual's psychological resilience such that functioning is enhanced and the potential negative effects of stressors are reduced (Cook et al. 2012, Sherman & Hartson 2011). Findings from randomized double-blind experiments indicate that values affirmation interventions may reduce some of the effects of negative racial stigmatization on academic performance (Cohen et al. 2006, 2009), and there is growing interest in the potential of values affirmation interventions to affect health outcomes. Research reveals that this simple exercise can reduce hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis and sympathetic nervous system reactivity to stress (Creswell et al. 2005, Sherman et al. 2009).

A variation of the values affirmation intervention, a social belonging intervention, has also shown remarkable results with racial/ethnic minority college students (Walton & Cohen 2011).

The short intervention—a two-hour procedure implemented once during the students' freshman year—was designed to neutralize the psychological perception of threat that many minority college students contend with. It did so by informing students that social adversity on campus was common to all incoming freshman, but temporary, and sought to help them internalize this message. Using a double-blind randomized field experiment, this study found that the social belonging intervention reduced health-care visits and improve self-reported health over a three-year observation period among African Americans but not whites (Walton & Cohen 2011). The intervention also improved African Americans' academic performance, reducing the black-white achievement gap in this sample by 50%. These results are particularly promising, and the extent to which such interventions can reduce the negative effects of discrimination on a broader range of health outcomes will be important to determine in future research.

**Forgiveness interventions.** In the rapidly emerging literature on forgiveness and health, transgressions (either wrongful behavior by others toward oneself or one's own wrong actions) are viewed as stressors and forgiveness as an emotion-focused coping strategy that can reduce the negative effects of stress and promote health (Worthington & Scherer 2004). Forgiveness is defined as choosing to give up resentment in the face of injustice or unfair treatment and offering mercy and compassion toward the offender (Baskin & Enright 2004). Research in the United States finds that blacks and Mexican Americans report higher levels of forgiveness than do whites (Krause 2012, McFarland et al. 2012). Research reveals that interventions that encourage forgiveness can be effective in promoting mental and physical health (Baskin & Enright 2004, Hui & Chau 2009, Reed & Enright 2006, Waltman et al. 2009) in adults and children dealing with interpersonal wrong, conflict, or emotional abuse. The role of forgiveness has also been of interest in the context of ethnic and civil conflicts in places such as Rwanda and Sierra Leone (Doran et al. 2012). In Rwanda, for example, a forgiveness intervention was associated with reduced trauma symptoms and a more positive orientation toward members of the other group (Staub et al. 2005). However, little attention has been given to the potential of forgiveness interventions to reduce the negative effects of racial discrimination on health. Additional research in this area is warranted.

**Racism countermarketing.** Finally, community-based interventions may also have the potential to counteract the effects of racism on health. In the Racism Still Exists campaign, over a period of six months Kwate (2014) used outdoor advertising media at bus stops in predominantly black neighborhoods in New York City to disseminate statements about the presence of racism in the United States. These advertisements included messages such as "Fast Food Companies Don't Target Black People—They Just Don't Have Any Restaurants in White Neighborhoods" and "Don't Want to Get Stopped by the NYPD? Stop Being Black." Compared to residents in a demographically similar neighborhood in New York that did not receive the advertisements, residents in the treatment neighborhood reported significant declines in psychological distress. Although the study did not find differences in self-reported health status or health behaviors, the intervention represents a promising community-based approach for reducing the effects of racism on mental health and potentially addressing health inequalities (Kwate 2014).

## FINAL THOUGHTS

The overwhelming body of research on discrimination and health indicates that self-reported experiences of discrimination are an important risk factor for poor mental and physical health. Studies have found remarkably consistent associations between reports of discrimination and health across cohorts and across outcomes. Importantly, these associations are independent of potential threats to validity in terms of personality characteristics, and they have been observed with both subjective and objective outcomes and in cross-sectional as well as longitudinal studies.

The goal of this review was to summarize the current state of the science on discrimination and health, with a particular emphasis on both ongoing and emerging issues. Presently, very little controversy exists over whether researchers should include measures of discrimination in studies of health disparities. Rather, recent discussions center on how to best measure these experiences, including whether to ask about racism specifically or general mistreatment more broadly, and whether to use implicit along with explicit measures of discrimination to obtain more accurate information. More attention needs to be given to understanding how these different measurement strategies and different forms of discrimination impact associations with health.

For example, despite the current debates over making race salient versus not salient in the assessment of discrimination for African American and other racial/ethnic minority groups, research suggests that racial and nonracial forms of interpersonal discrimination have similar associations with health. However, it is less clear why this might be and whether the underlying mechanisms (e.g., neural, cognitive, cellular) associated with discriminatory experiences due to race are similar to those of other forms of mistreatment. It is also unclear how these similar associations impact research on racial/ethnic disparities in health. That is, in a world where everyone is impacted by interpersonal mistreatment, what are the implications for how researchers think about the effects of race and the historical legacy of racism on health?

These questions are difficult to answer, but they provide a strong rationale for the importance of assessing discrimination comprehensively (acute, chronic, and traumatic), at multiple levels (micro and macro), across the life course, and in a range of contexts (e.g., online)—particularly in studies of health disparities. It is important to recognize that interpersonal discrimination is not a magic bullet that explains all of the stress associated with racial/ethnic minority status. Thus, it should be examined in the context of other macro-level forms of discrimination as well as other stressors associated with social disadvantage. Furthermore, studies that focus on interpersonal forms of discrimination alone need to move beyond examining only a sole aspect of identity (e.g., “race”) and understand how intersectionalities shape exposure to discrimination and health outcomes for individuals who occupy multiple statuses simultaneously (e.g., African American and female, gay and Latino).

The field needs more well-designed observational studies that are longitudinal in nature, that have objective outcomes, and that take into account factors that might influence reports of discrimination (vigilance or minimization biases, personality characteristics). Most importantly, these studies should begin to identify mechanistic pathways through which experiences of discrimination get under the skin to ultimately influence health outcomes. Identification of potential psychological and physiological pathways will contribute to our understanding of where and when to intervene to counteract the negative effects of discrimination on health. As one very relevant example, understanding the ways in which depression and depressive symptoms contribute to associations between reports of discrimination and physical disease may prove useful in designing interventions for depression that include modules on coping with experiences of discrimination.

Studies that examine factors that promote resilience to discrimination are also greatly needed. To date, most studies of discrimination and health—particularly those with physical health outcomes—have focused on examining main effects. Research on coping with discrimination has yielded mixed results, but as detailed in this review, recent studies have found that religiosity, mindfulness, and emotional support show some promise as potential stress buffers. Studies examining other individual-level coping strategies or dispositions that might foster resilience to discrimination will be important priorities for future research. Furthermore, we know very little about contextual or environmental factors that could ameliorate the effects of discrimination on health. It is possible that there are specific neighborhoods (e.g. ethnic enclaves) or other aspects of the physical or social environment (e.g., ethnic minority-owned businesses) that might promote

feelings of empowerment and reduce the negative effects of discriminatory treatment on mental and physical health for specific groups.

Additionally, the overwhelming majority of research suggests that health policies need to take into account the legacies of racial and ethnic inequality and levels of incivility, intolerance, and anti-immigrant sentiment. We also need more research on individual-, community-, and institutional-level interventions that might be effective in reducing the negative impact of discrimination on health in affected populations. The individual- and community-level interventions reviewed here show some promise, but additional research in this area is greatly needed. Finally, significant inroads need to be made in order to dismantle the institutional policies, structures, and processes that underlie societal inequality and race-related discrimination. As research documenting the adverse effects of discrimination on health continues to grow, these efforts will become critically important as a means of improving health in societies shaped by racism and other forms of discrimination.

### SUMMARY POINTS

1. Despite decades of progress, particularly in the United States, empirical data indicate that discrimination persists in the Obama era and impacts several major life domains, including housing, employment, health care, and interactions with law enforcement.
2. Self-reported experiences of discrimination have emerged as an important psychosocial stressor with demonstrated linkages to a wide range of mental disorders as well as objective, clinically relevant markers of physical disease. Additionally, some—but not all—studies have found that self-reported experiences of discrimination partially explain racial disparities in health.
3. Although relatively understudied, personality characteristics represent an important threat to the validity of discrimination and health associations, potentially impacting both reports of discrimination and health outcomes. Yet studies controlling for personality characteristics such as neuroticism, pessimism, and anger-related constructs have found that associations between discrimination and health persist even after adjustment for these factors.
4. Currently, considerable controversy remains over whether or not to make “race” salient in the assessment of discrimination. However, to date evidence suggests that racial and nonracial forms of discrimination have similar associations with health.
5. Assessing only one aspect of identity (e.g., race) ignores the fact that many individuals occupy multiple statuses simultaneously (e.g., African American and female). These multiple statuses, or intersectionalities, could potentially shape both experiences with discrimination and the impact of discriminatory experiences on mental and physical health outcomes.
6. Similar to other forms of psychosocial stress, discriminatory stressors can be acute, chronic, and/or traumatic and can occur at both micro and macro levels as well as across the life span. Most studies of discrimination and health have focused primarily on acute discriminatory events, or, more recently, chronic forms of discrimination—at the micro level and usually at only one point in time. Some studies suggest that traumatic forms of discrimination, macro-level discriminatory events, and exposure to discrimination across the life span might also impact health outcomes, but research in these areas has been limited.

7. In studies seeking to better understand racial disparities in health, it is important to note that assessing discriminatory experiences alone may not capture all of the health-relevant aspects of racism. Other psychosocial stressors are driven by racism-related factors and might also contribute to health disparities, including neighborhood conditions, interactions with the criminal justice system, financial stress, exposure to violence, and relationship stressors. The stress of discrimination should be measured and analyzed in the context of these other stressors, which are shaped by social disadvantage.
8. Both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies have documented strong and consistent associations between self-reported experiences of discrimination and depression/depressive symptoms. Depression and depressive symptoms, in turn, have been linked to several clinical disease outcomes. Consequently, it may be important to consider the role of depression/depressive symptoms (as well as other psychiatric disorders) as potential mediators or confounders in studies of discrimination and physical health outcomes.

### FUTURE ISSUES

1. Exposure to discrimination in online contexts, i.e., cyber discrimination, is an emerging area of scientific interest; however, studies have focused primarily on mental health outcomes in adolescents. Additional research is needed to fully understand how exposure to cyber discrimination is associated with mental health in adults and with physical health among individuals of all ages.
2. Preliminary evidence from a few studies suggests that anticipatory stress and vigilance around discrimination may be associated with poor mental and physical health outcomes, independent of actual exposure to discrimination. Longitudinal studies that further our understanding of how and in what contexts discrimination-related vigilance impacts health are warranted.
3. Prospective studies designed to elucidate the psychological and physiological mechanisms through which discriminatory experiences influence mental and physical health are an important priority for future research.
4. Identifying best practices for quantifying and analyzing multiple group statuses (e.g., gay and Latino, African American and female) may prove useful for future research on intersectionalities.
5. In order to more effectively inform interventions, future studies should focus on identifying a range of individual and/or contextual factors that promote resilience and attenuate the effects of discrimination on poor health.
6. Studies that emphasize the design and implementation of individual-, community-, and/or policy-level interventions that could potentially reduce the negative impact of discrimination on health are greatly needed.

### DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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