Coping Strategies for Distinct Discrimination-Related Stressors

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The preregistered design is accessible at <https://osf.io/8c7hw>

This was a thesis by Adams to meet requirements for Psychology Distinction Program.

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Abstract

Objectives: According to national data, Latinx individuals are faced with increasing rates of racial discrimination over the last few years. To reduce the negative psychological impact of discrimination, many Latinx individuals engage in coping behaviors. Although research shows that coping can buffer against discrimination-related stress, few studies have examined if individuals' coping strategies vary across various forms of discrimination experiences. The present study examined Latinx individuals' self-reported coping strategies in response to everyday racial discrimination, racial microaggressions, and police and law enforcement discrimination. **Method:** Latinx American adults living in the Texas community ($N = 427$, 52.0% women, $M_{age} = 34.05$) completed survey questionnaires on three forms of discrimination experiences, and their coping strategies in each form of discrimination. **Results:** Participants reported microaggressions to be the most frequent form of discrimination, followed by everyday discrimination and then police and law enforcement discrimination. It was most common for participants to use secondary control engagement across forms of discrimination experiences, and the least common to use involuntary engagement and involuntary disengagement. Secondary control engagement and primary control disengagement were both used more commonly in response to everyday discrimination than in response to police discrimination. **Conclusion:** Results highlighted the possibility that individuals employ distinctive coping strategies in response to discrimination experiences. Future research directions are discussed.

Keywords: coping, Hispanic, racism, resilience, unfair treatment

Coping Strategies for Distinct Discrimination-Related Stressors

Racism reflects the belief that people of certain group memberships are inferior (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2006). In the United States, racial group memberships reflect socially constructed categorizations based on phenotypic characteristics such as skin color and group membership (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2006). Often an explicit act of racism, discrimination marks the experience of being treated differently—and typically negatively—by virtue of one's race (Clark et al., 2013). Racism- and discrimination-related experiences have been shown to be associated with poor mental health (e.g., symptoms of depression and anxiety) and physical health (Paradies et al., 2015). Research has focused on three main forms of racial discrimination experiences: everyday discrimination, microaggression, and police and law enforcement discrimination. Americans of Latinx backgrounds comprise the largest ethnic minority population in the U.S (Brenes, 2019). Despite an increase of racism- and discrimination-experiences facing Latinx individuals in recent years (Brenes, 2019), research has shown that people in this community are resilient (Castellanos et al., 2018). To the extent that coping can reduce the negative mental health consequences associated with discrimination (Barnes & Lightsey, 2005), more strength-based research is needed to examine individual differences in coping behaviors that respond to discrimination.

Studies have documented the buffering role of coping in response to racial discrimination (Castellanos et al., 2018; Polanco-Roman et al., 2016). Yet, few studies have examined whether individuals' coping strategies vary across distinctive forms of discrimination in the Latinx population. Flexibility in coping behaviors may be adaptive in navigating discrimination-related experiences. For example, African Americans were shown to use different coping strategies across racially stressful and non-racially stressful events (Brown et al., 2011). Therefore, we aim

to examine whether Latinx individuals engage in different coping strategies in response to different forms of discrimination.

Discrimination Stressors and Mental Health Outcomes

Everyday discrimination, microaggression, and police and law enforcement discrimination are three forms of discrimination experiences that are the most prevalent, hence they have been examined frequently in psychological science (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2017). Everyday discrimination reflects ongoing and routine experiences of unfair treatment; examples of everyday discrimination include receiving less courtesy than others, being threatened and/or harassed, and being treated less respectfully (Williams et al., 1997). Everyday discrimination has been shown to be a risk factor for mental health problems among Latinx adults (Kwon & Han, 2019). Additionally, chronic everyday discrimination has been linked to physical illnesses like diabetes and cardiovascular disease (Brenes, 2019).

Relative to everyday discrimination, microaggressions have been considered to be less overt in racism. Microaggression is defined as verbal and nonverbal subtle, automatic, and offensive remarks against people of color (Pierce et al., 1977). Individuals facing microaggressions often are left wondering if the racist event was meant to be offensive or if they are nearly overreacting to innocent comments (Sue et al., 2007). Microaggressions have been linked to internalizing problems, psychological distress, and negative affect (Lui and Quezada, 2019). Microaggressions also have shown associations with heightened traumatic stress symptoms, and in turn greater likelihood of depression and poorer physical health (Anderson and Finch, 2017).

Police and law enforcement discrimination is when police treat individuals differently and unfairly. This form of discrimination involves racial profiling, police assault, and stop and

frisk (Fox, 2018). Experiences with police discrimination differ from everyday discrimination and microaggressions because the unfair treatment comes from an authority figure, whose job is supposed to be to protect citizens' safety. When African Americans experienced police discrimination, they reported anger, negativity, and depressive symptoms (Perkins et al., 2014; Rich & Grey, 2005). Police discrimination also was associated with high blood pressure and health-risk behavior such as smoking and alcohol use (Krieger, 1996; Williams 2003). Police and law enforcement discrimination has primarily been studied with African Americans; little is known about Latinx individuals' experiences. With the recent trends of undocumented immigration persecution, it is important to research the types of coping strategies that Latinx individuals might use to manage experiences with police discrimination.

Coping

When faced with difficult situations, many individuals use various emotional, behavioral, and other strategies to cope. There has been little research to determine if people employ different coping resources across forms of discrimination. According to stress and coping theory, coping behaviors vary by people's appraisal of the threat of the event and perceived ability to manage it (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping behaviors are multifaceted. A nomological network indicated that coping included voluntary coping, involuntary coping, engagement coping, and disengagement coping (Tobin et al., 1989). Voluntary coping is when someone has conscious awareness of controlling his or her cognitive, behavioral, emotional, or physiological responses to a particular stressor. Involuntary coping consists of reactions that the individual may or may not be acutely aware of. These involuntary coping responses include automatic emotional and physiological responses. Coping can be further organized into engagement and disengagement strategies. Engagement (active) coping involves approaching the problem; often,

engagement coping is associated with problem solving. Therefore, in some studies engagement coping is called problem-focused coping. Disengagement (passive) coping involves avoiding the problems—including denying or escaping from the situation (Tobin et al., 1989).

Existing research has focused on examining the possible influence of coping styles on stressful situations. Coping style usually represents dispositional, individual differences in coping across contexts (Moos & Holahan, 2003; Haan, 1969). In contrast to coping styles, situational coping reflects behavioral responses in which individuals engage to meet the demands of specific life stressors (Carver & Scheier, 1994). Examining how people may use different forms of coping can enhance scientific understanding of the stress appraisal and responses to various types of discrimination-related experiences. Building on these findings, future research can explore how coping strategies may be maladaptive in certain situations but appropriate in other situations.

Research on coping strategies showed that individuals' responses may vary across racially stressful situations as well as non-racially stressful situations. One study was conducted with African American participants that examined if coping varies depending on everyday hassles or discriminatory stress (Brown et al., 2011). Researchers found that in racially stressful situations, the participants tended to use active coping, religion, emotional support, and instrumental support. By contrast, in everyday (non-race) stressful situations, participants used active coping, planning, positive reframing, and acceptance (Brown et al., 2011). In another study with African Americans, researchers found no difference in how African Americans appraised various stressful events (Hoggard et al., 2012). Participants were shown to engage in less planning and problem solving and more confrontational and avoidance coping strategies across racially and non-racially stressful events. Situational differences in coping strategies

might be because racially stressful events were unexpected and hence engagement coping would be adaptive (Brown et al., 2011).

In the context of discrimination, active/engagement coping has been shown to be linked positively to mental health adjustment (Castellanos et al., 2018, Polanco-Roman et al., 2016). By contrast, disengagement coping was shown to be linked positively to reported greater psychopathology symptoms (Polanco-Roman et al., 2016). To the extent that discrimination tends to reflect chronic experiences, individuals with the agency to alleviate the stress might find it helpful to confront the challenge directly. For example, research suggested that engagement coping gave participants a greater sense of control in response to discrimination (Scott & House, 2005).

Coping in response to microaggressions has not been studied as extensively as general discrimination. Emerging studies suggested that engagement coping could be the most beneficial for mental and physical health (Torres et al., 2010). Coping with police and law enforcement has also been understudied, especially in Latinx groups. A study by Bryant-Davis (2017) showed that using engagement coping strategies and social support were associated with better mental health outcomes. Having social support might be helpful because individuals felt validated about their discriminatory experiences with the police. Nevertheless, it is important to understand individual differences in coping across discrimination scenarios.

The Present Study

The study was aimed to examine (1) which of these discrimination events (everyday discrimination, microaggression, police and law enforcement discrimination) was encountered most frequently, and (2) determine what coping strategy was used most frequently in each of the discrimination events. To the extent that coping strategies in response to different discrimination-

related stressors have been understudied, especially among Latinx Americans, we did not have a specific directional hypothesis.

Method

Participants

Latinx Americans ($N = 427$, 52.0% women, 47.3% men, 0.7% who did not identify as a man or woman, $M_{age} = 34.05$, $SD_{age} = 12.30$, age range = 18-69 years; 66.5% U.S born, 33.5% foreign born) community adults living in Texas participated in this study. Participants reported a median annual household income in the range of \$60,001 – \$80,000. Among foreign-born participants, the average amount of time living in the United States was 17.33 years. Individuals were eligible to participate in the study if they were at least 18 years old, of Hispanic descent, and lived in Texas. Participants who were recruited on sites other than Qualtrics received an electronic gift card. Participants who had been recruited through Qualtrics received payments commensurate with their agreed rates for the Qualtrics Panel.

Measures

Discrimination

Everyday Racial Discrimination (EDS; Kim et al., 2014). The EDS measures chronic discrimination in everyday life. There were a total of 10 questions. Participants were asked how frequently they experienced racial discrimination on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*often/frequently*) with higher scores indicating more persistent experiences of racial discrimination. Items include, “You are treated with less courtesy than other people because of your race or ancestry,” “You receive poorer service than other people at restaurants or stores because of your race or ancestry.” The EDS scores have demonstrated reliability among Hispanic samples in previous research (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .94$; Kim et al., 2014). In the present study, the

Cronbach's α is .97. This range indicates that the items have demonstrated high internal consistency reliability.

Revised 28 Item-Racial Ethnic Microaggression scale (R28REMS; Forrest-Bank & Jenson, 2015; Nadal, 2011). The R28REMS was used to measure participants' experiences of microaggressions and consists of 28 questions. Racial microaggressions are racist statements that can happen unconsciously or indirectly. These statements are discriminatory to people of color and usually said in a subtle way (Nadal, 2011). Participants were asked to rate how frequently they experienced racial microaggressions; each item was scored on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*often/frequently*). Items include, "I was ignored at school or at work because of my race," "Someone assumed that I would not be intelligent because of my race," and "Someone told me that they do not see race." Scores on this measure have demonstrated reliability across racial and ethnic groups (Cronbach's α = .96, Forrest-Bank et al., 2015). In the present study, the Cronbach's α is .98. This indicates that the items have demonstrated high internal consistency reliability.

Police and Law Enforcement Scale (PLE; English et al., 2017). The PLE was used to measure the frequency of race-related personal interactions with police or law enforcement. The scale consists of 5 questions, on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*often/frequently*). Items include, "Has a police officer been physically abusive to you due to your race?" and "Has a police officer accused you of selling drugs due to your race?" The PLE scores have shown to be reliable among ethnic minority populations (Cronbach's α = .97, English et al., 2017). In the present study, the Cronbach's α is .96. This score indicates that the items have demonstrated high internal consistency reliability.

Coping

Response to Stress Questionnaire (RSQ; Connor-Smith et al., 2000). The Response to Stress Questionnaire was used to measure the type of coping strategy that a participant uses in a specific stressful situation. There are a total of 57 questions. The RSQ has six coping sub-scales, and each question is scored on a Likert scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*a lot*). The subscales are as follows. Control engagement coping strategies include primary control engagement coping (e.g., “I try to think of different ways to change or fix the situation”) and secondary control engagement coping (e.g., “I tell myself that I can get through this, or that I’ll do better next time”). Control disengagement coping strategies include primary control disengagement coping (e.g., “I try not to feel anything”) and secondary control disengagement coping (e.g., “I wish that I were stronger, smarter, or more popular so things would be different”). Lastly, involuntary coping strategies include involuntary engagement (e.g., “When I experience... I can’t stop thinking about how I am feeling”) and involuntary disengagement (e.g., “When...occur, I don’t feel any emotions at all, it’s like I have no feelings”).

The RSQ was designed to fit multiple distinct scenarios; therefore, it can be adapted to assess coping strategies across different types of stressful situations. Participants were instructed to take the RSQ three times. Each time, participants were instructed to think about different situations: racial discrimination, microaggressions, and police related discrimination. The RSQ scores have been shown to be reliable in past research with the Hispanic population (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .72-.89$; Rodríguez et al., 2019). In the present study, the Cronbach’s α for all three race-related stressful situations was .97.

Procedure

Prior to participant recruitment and data collection, the University Institutional Review Board approved this study. Participants were recruited through four different platforms:

Facebook, Craigslist, InfoUSA, and a Qualtrics Panel. Participants recruited from Facebook, Craigslist, and InfoUSA commercial vendor were informed of the goal of the research project and the monetary incentives. The goal stated in the advertisement was to, “Help psychology researchers understand the type of stresses that affect Hispanic/Latinx Americans and strategies that people use to cope.” Participants from Qualtrics Panel were informed of the opportunity to enroll in a psychology survey study. All participants completed an online survey via Qualtrics. Upon completion the participants received the agreed amount of compensation based on their recruitment method.

Data Analytic Plan

The data analytic plan was preregistered on the Open Science Framework. We first conducted a repeated measures univariate ANOVA for each discrimination scale score (EDS, R28REMS, PLE) in order to determine the frequency of discrimination scenarios (everyday discrimination, microaggression, and police and law enforcement discrimination). In the second analysis, we examined what coping strategy was most frequently used in each discrimination scenario individually. We computed a repeated measures univariate ANOVA for each RSQ and its associated stressor (everyday discrimination, microaggressions, and police and law enforcement discrimination). The independent variables were the three discrimination variables, and the outcome variables were the six RSQ coping strategies. This test would tell us what coping strategy was used most often in a certain discrimination scenario. Lastly, to examine if there were differences between how our participants coped across the three types of discrimination scenarios, we conducted another series of repeated measures univariate ANOVAs. This third set of repeated measure ANOVAs would allow us to see if there was a coping strategy

used more frequently in a certain discrimination scenario when compared to the other discriminatory scenarios.

For each analysis, to test if the variances of the differences between all combinations of related groups are equal, we ran the test of sphericity. If the test failed, meaning that $p > .05$, it would increase the probability of having a type one error. If the test fails, then corrections can be done to combat the violation of sphericity. Violation of sphericity is when the variances of the differences between all combinations of related groups are not equal. The correction that we used was the Greenhouse-Gesser condition. When conducting the repeated measures univariate ANOVAs, we first examined the multivariate test to see if there was a statistically significant difference between any of the outcome variables. If the multivariate test was statistically significant, we then examined the pairwise comparisons to see which variables had statistically significant mean differences.

Results

Preliminary analysis

All data analyses were conducted in SPSS v. 25. We identified eight multivariate outliers using Mahalanobis distance. We conducted analysis with and without the outliers and the pattern of results did not change. To maintain a large sample size and have greater generalizability, we retained all cases in our analyses.

Frequency of the three discrimination stressors

A repeated measure ANOVA showed that there was a statistically significant difference between mean scores of the frequency of each form of discrimination (everyday discrimination, microaggression, and police and law enforcement discrimination), $F(2,634) = 62.50, p < .001$. Participants reported that they experienced microaggressions ($M = 2.09, SD = .74$) more

frequently than everyday discrimination ($M = 2.00$ $SD = .79$, $p < .001$) and police and law enforcement discrimination ($M = 1.75$, $SD = .83$, $p < .001$). Everyday racial discrimination ($M = 2.00$, $SD = .79$) was more frequently reported than police and law enforcement discrimination ($M = 1.75$, $SD = .83$, $p < .001$).

Frequency of coping strategies used in three types of discrimination

To examine what coping strategy was most frequently used in each individual discrimination scenario, we conducted three repeated-measure univariate ANOVAs that test the frequency of each coping strategy in relation to each discrimination scenario. We examined the following coping strategies: primary control engagement coping, secondary control engagement coping, primary control disengagement coping, secondary control disengagement coping, involuntary engagement, and involuntary disengagement. Mauchly's test indicated a violation of the sphericity assumption in all three ANOVAs, therefore Greenhouse-Geisser corrected results are reported (See Table 1).

In response to everyday discrimination, we observed differences in participants' use of coping strategies, $F(3.71, 1247.42) = 71.70$, $p = 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.18$. Participants reported using secondary control engagement most frequently. Involuntary engagement and involuntary disengagement were used the least frequently compared to all of the other coping strategies.

Similarly, we found differences in participants' coping in response to microaggressions, $F(3.53, 1186.54) = 70.08$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.17$. Secondary control engagement was reported as being the most frequently used coping strategy in response to microaggressions. Participants also reported using primary control engagement frequently as well. Involuntary engagement and involuntary disengagement were used least frequently compared to all of the other coping strategies.

Finally, participants reported different levels of coping strategies in response to police and law enforcement discrimination, $F(3.97, 1346.79) = 61.81, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.15$. Secondary control engagement was used the most frequently, followed by primary control engagement coping. Involuntary engagement and involuntary disengagement were used least frequently.

Comparison of Coping Strategies across Discrimination Scenarios

As noted above, there was variation in the frequency of coping strategies used in response to the three discrimination experiences. To explore whether coping strategies varied depending on the discrimination experience, six repeated-measures ANOVAs were conducted.

Engagement Coping

There were no significant differences in the use of primary control engagement coping in response to everyday discrimination, microaggressions, and police discrimination, $F(2, 636) = .21, p = 0.81, \eta^2 = 0.001$. There also were no variations in when secondary control engagement was used, $F(2, 634) = 2.89, p = 0.06, \eta^2 = 0.01$. We found a statistically significant difference in the use of secondary control engagement in situations of everyday discrimination compared to police and law enforcement discrimination. Participants were more likely to use secondary control engagement when experiencing everyday discrimination, as opposed to police and law enforcement discrimination. Lastly, there was a no statistically significant difference in the use of involuntary engagement coping across the three discrimination situations, $F(2, 636) = .27, p = 0.76, \eta^2 < 0.01$.

Disengagement Coping

There was within-person variations in when primary control disengagement was employed, $F(2, 636) = 3.05, p = 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.01$. There was a statistically significant difference in the use of primary control disengagement in situations of everyday discrimination compared

to police and law enforcement discrimination. Participants reported to use primary control disengagement more during instances of everyday discrimination compared to police discrimination. There was no statistically significant differences in the use of secondary control disengagement coping across the three discrimination situations, $F(2,636) = .25, p = .78, \eta^2 < 0.01$. There also were no differences in the use of involuntary engagement coping across the three discrimination situations, $F(2,636) = .96, p = 0.38, \eta^2 < 0.01$.

Discussion

We sought to examine which type of discrimination was experienced most frequently and the types of coping strategies that individuals used in response to these discrimination experiences. Participants reported experiencing microaggressions most commonly followed by everyday discrimination, with police and law enforcement discrimination being experienced the least regularly. As for coping in the discrimination scenarios, secondary control engagement and primary control engagement were used the most frequently across all forms of discrimination. For all three discrimination scenarios, involuntary engagement and involuntary disengagement were the least frequently used coping strategies, this finding corroborated prior research documenting their ineffectiveness in relieving stress (Yao et al., 2010, Epstein-Ngo et al., 2013).

Given the definition of microaggressions, it is not surprising that microaggressions were experienced most often by our participants. Police discrimination and everyday discrimination are more overt than microaggressions. Police and law enforcement discrimination being the least frequent is logical as experiences with the police are not an everyday occurrence for most people. In 2015, the U.S Bureau of Justice statistics found that 16.8% of Latinx Americans aged 16 or older had contact with police sometime during that year (Davis et al., 2018).

Based on our findings, when faced with a discriminatory event, our participants used secondary control engagement in which they would actively try to adapt to the problem, rather than use a disengagement strategy. Our participants might have used secondary control engagement coping to have a greater sense of control of their situation or to be able to adapt to the problem (Scott and House, 2005). For all three discrimination scenarios, involuntary engagement and involuntary disengagement were the least frequently used. One study by Scott and House (2005) concluded that when engagement coping was used, participants felt a greater sense of control in their stressful situations. Hence, relative to engagement coping, participants might find involuntary coping behaviors to offer less control over the situations.

Our study was the first to show that secondary control engagement and primary control disengagement were both used more commonly in response to everyday discrimination than in response to police discrimination. Perhaps secondary control engagement coping is more difficult to achieve in times of police and law enforcement discrimination, given the power hierarchies between civilians and police officers. Whereas an individual might try to adapt to the situation, they could run the risk of escalating the situation when engaging with the police. By contrast, disengaging from the situation and negative emotions might be more appropriate for police-related discrimination situations.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite advancing the literature by testing if coping varies based on discrimination, the present study should be interpreted with the following limitations in mind. First, the present self-report data might be affected by recall bias. Second, we only assessed three racial discrimination experiences. Therefore, it is possible that our participants encountered a discrimination stressor that we did not assess. An individual might cope differently to a different type of racial

discrimination experience that we did not account for. Future studies should consider other salient forms of discrimination in specific settings such as work and healthcare discrimination. Lastly, we did not examine if different types of discrimination have different mental health outcomes. Our participants were relatively healthy; in general, they did not experience high levels of discrimination and they used effective coping strategies. Hence, the present findings may not generalize to individuals who were particularly marginalized.

As instances of discrimination persist or increase among Latinx Americans (Brenes, 2019), there is a timely and important need for understanding individuals' coping strategies in response to these experiences. Whereas engagement-oriented strategies are generally more common across discrimination situations, individuals may find disengagement strategies to be more feasible and effective in response to police-related discrimination. Future research should examine individual differences in efficacy for practicing these coping responses, and their perceived utility across time and contexts.

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Table 1
Discrimination Scenarios and Associated Coping Strategy

Variable	<i>M (SD)</i>			<i>F(df)</i>
	Everyday Racial Discrimination	Racial Microaggressions	Police and Law Enforcement Discrimination	
Primary Control Engagement	2.32 (.68) ^{e,f}	2.33 (.73) ^{c,e,f}	2.31 (.71) ^{c,d,e,f}	.207 (1.98)
Secondary Control Engagement	2.53(.64) ^{a,c,d,e,f***}	2.51 (.66) ^{a,c,d,e,f}	2.45 (.64) ^{a,c,d,e,f}	2.89 (1.99)
Primary Control Disengagement	2.28 (.68) ^{e,f***}	2.24 (.71) ^{e,f}	2.19 (.72) ^{b,e,f}	3.06 (1.98)*
Secondary Control Disengagement	2.30 (.70) ^{e,f}	2.31 (.74) ^{c,e,f}	2.29 (.73) ^{c,e,f}	.25 (2)
Involuntary Engagement	2.07 (.72)	2.04 (.73)	2.05 (.72)	.27 (1.94)
Involuntary Disengagement	2.07 (.73)	2.09 (.75) ^f	2.09 (.74)	.96 (1.99)
<i>F(df)</i>	71.70 (3.71)*	70.08 (3.53)*	61.81 (3.97)*	

Note. When read vertically the coping strategies show what is used most frequently in that individual discrimination scenario. When read horizontally, the coping strategy is compared to the three discrimination scenarios.

Superscripts indicate a positive statistically significant mean difference between a certain coping strategy ^aPrimary Control Engagement. ^bSecondary Control Engagement. ^cPrimary Control Engagement. ^dSecondary Control Disengagement. ^eInvoluntary Engagement. ^fInvoluntary Disengagement.

* $p < .05$